

# REPORT OF RIC CONFERENCE, 26.10.19

**This was held at the Radisson Blu Hotel, Glasgow**

The conference consisted of three plenaries, each including a series of speakers but without time for questions, interspersed with two sets of four breakout forums. The main hall was well-filled: around 500 people had registered, and there were not far short of that present. A number of organizations had stalls in the foyer outside the main hall. My overall impression was that the event was a considerable success: well-organized, well attended, with a good range of speakers (the speeches ranging from competent to inspirational), and an engaged audience. However, I would have preferred somewhat fewer speakers, and more time for open discussion. Below, I've mostly tried just to report as much as I could of what was said – this document is based very closely on notes made at the time; occasional clarifications and editorialising by me in the reports of speeches and discussion are in square brackets.

**Nick Gotts**

## **Opening Plenary**

**Chris Stephens (SNP MP)**

[I missed much of Stephens' speech owing to a problem on the Edinburgh-Glasgow train line. He was politely received – he was clearly from the left of the SNP.]

We need to persuade the 10% who thought independence would mean continued austerity, and EU citizens, to vote “Yes” in a second independence referendum.

**Aamer Anwar (lawyer and political campaigner)**

**[Anwar got lots of applause throughout his speech, and a partial standing ovation at the end.]**

The content seemed to me a bit disconnected; it can best be expressed as a series of bullet points]:-

- The inclusion of Priti Patel and Sajid Javid in the UK government makes no difference to the asylum seekers who are deported.
- Anwar fights for independence as an internationalist not a nationalist.
- Child mortality and suicide rates are increasing.
- the UK is a rogue state.
- Spanish state violence contrasts with the exhumation of Franco, and is greeted by silence from the EU.
- The justice system is devolved but broken – look at the cases of William Lindsay and Sheku Bayou.
- There is hope from the young such as Greta Thunberg.

- Fight for independence and a true alternative!

### **Clara Ponsati (ex- Catalan minister for education under threat of extradition)**

Ponsati was enthusiastically received. And later joined Catalan solidarity demonstration in George Square

Repression in Catalonia is a death sentence for Spanish democracy. The independence movement is stronger than ever, with youth out on the street. The reaction: violence and arbitrary arrests. Scotland has been very supportive; “Scots – don’t fail us now”. The independence movement’s immediate demands are:- an end to Spanish police in Catalonia, all political prisoners home, and an independence referendum under international supervision.

### **Robin McAlpine (Commonweal)**

[McAlpine speaks extremely fast! His topic in this speech: What do we have to do to gain independence?]

The Independence campaign is failing to inspire, failing from the top – as in 2012. People have forgotten how much RIC did – we created the campaign. We have to get back to organising, building, preparing.

The Radical Indy movement must not be captured by centrists and right-wingers. At the moment, the SNP is campaigning on the basis of a contraction of public spending. Commonweal’s Green New Deal has just gone off to the printer. Work on banking, the financial system etc. is needed to turn that into a programme, against the Growth Commission approach.

Politicians on TV are not saying the word “independence”. Salmond’s trial [not mentioned by name but the reference was clear] is going to cause a lot of problems.

Campaign strategy for delivering independence:

- We need to prepare answers to the questions that will be asked of the pro-Indy campaign.
- The biggest barrier is giving confidence to people who want to believe in this project, but don’t at present.
- Apart from *How To Start A New Country*, almost nothing has been produced from the top.
- Need to set up a national committee for Scottish independence – with a workable transition plan.
- There’s at least 24 months to go before IndyRef2.
- Don’t campaign with political party rosettes – we need a civic voice.
- SIC is the place to do this:- ”Voices for Scotland” is very effective. We need a peer-to-peer campaign: 250,000 advocates controlling the conversation.

Finally, we cannot just wait to be given a referendum. We do need a referendum, for international recognition. After we ask and are refused, we have to make it harder to

withhold than to give – committee for defence of democracy. Protest, then non-cooperation, then NVCD.

### **Breakout forum: Scotland's For Peace: The New World Disorder**

Around 30 people attended this forum. The other options were “A People’s Independence: Beyond the Growth Commission”, “Debate Self-Determination: What Should Scottish Democracy Look like”, and “Unite and Fight: Defending Migrants, Resisting Racism”. I’m told the first attracted the largest audience.

There were four speakers, followed by a Q-and-A session.

#### **Roza Salih (human rights advocate, cofounder of Glasgow Girls and Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan)**

[Salih is Kurdish, and came to Scotland as a refugee.]

Kurds have once again been betrayed by the USA and Russia, are angry about that, and that Turkey is part of NATO. Many Kurdish lives were sacrificed in fighting ISIS. Arms are being sold to Turkey, by the UK among others. Kurds will fight to the end – they will not leave their homeland. Mazloun Abdi [Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces] is going to meet Americans to discuss the Turkish invasion, despite Turkey warning the USA against it. The Kurds want autonomy; Turkey wants to ethnically cleanse Kurds from their homeland [which borders Turkey]. A boycott of Turkey is needed.

#### **Pat Smith (Stop the War coalition)**

In the 18 years since 9-11, a lot of the world has been on fire – more than 1 million deaths have occurred as a result of military action by USA, UK and allies. Many more have been injured, maybe 20 million displaced. The UK has been a loyal ally of the USA – it is still bombing Syria and Iraq. UK troops withdrew from Rojava alongside USA – odd, because we were told none were there! Massive profits are being made from arms sales, including in Scotland – which accounts for 30% of the UK’s arms trade. Scottish government subsidises it – see *The Ferret* online. Johnson is getting even closer to the USA. NATO serves the strategic interests of the USA and western elites. There is a NATO summit in London on December 3-4. Stop the War and others are working for a huge London demo, but there will also be events in Scotland. It is tremendously important to stand against NATO – MSPs John Finnie and Jean Urquhart courageously left the SNP to do so when it reversed its policy, to support NATO membership.

#### **Nathalia Urban (Brazil Resist)**

There has been extensive Tory collusion with the Far Right in Brazil. Since 2016, the British government has supported it – they plan that Brazil will be one of the UK’s closest partners post-Brexit. They will throw Scottish farms under the bus to import cheap food. British Investment has been particularly in energy sectors – notably in a large biofuels company owned by BP, which is notorious for slavery and industrial accidents [I missed the name]. Liam Fox met with the Bolsonaro government very early. The Adam Smith Institute is a member of an international “libertarian” alliance

which includes a Brazilian counterpart [again, I missed names]. Brazil is supporting the British hold on the Malvinas/Falklands, allowing military flights between Brazil and the islands. The mass extermination of indigenous and black communities in Brazil is being carried out without British objections.

### **Sarah Glynn (co-founder of Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan)**

We don't need to wait for independence to support fight against fascism and for a better world. Kurdistan is in the frontline against fascism. We must continue to demand a ban on arms exports to Turkey, economic sanctions, a boycott – particularly of the Turkish tourist trade, and an internationally enforced no-fly zone over Rojava. Keep alive the vision of a feminist, green, radical grassroots democracy!

### **Questions and contributions**

[Note: I've used "Q" to indicate both questions and contributions. I often only got parts of the panel's responses, so they appear rather disjointed.]

Q. Why did so many Brazilians vote for Bolsonaro?

A. from Nathalia Urban. Corrupt judiciary system removing the Workers' Party and Lula – see reports on *The Intercept*. A massive fake news campaign, with bots on Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook. Bolsonaro's stabbing actually helped him. [This was my question. I didn't feel the answer was entirely adequate. Bolsonaro was far from an unknown quantity in Brazil – he's been pushing his racist, misogynist and homophobic views and admiration for the military dictatorship for decades. Unfortunately, it appears those views attracted, or at least failed to repel, many Brazilians.]

Q. What should an Independent Scotland do about the attack on the Kurds?

A. Sarah Glynn: Support the Kurds, but also learn from them.

A. Pat Smith: RIC was set up for Scotland to be part of a better world. Nathalia Urban: The Global South is still living in the shadow of colonialism – work to end this.

Q. Have the Kurds been working with Israel?

A. Sarah Glynn: Israel is pretending to support the Kurds. There has been some closeness between Israel and the rulers of the Kurdish region of Iraq. Some [in Rojava] have taken in by Israel, but the politically aware majority, not.

Q. On the SNP specifically – can it be pushed to be bolder on foreign policy issues?

Q. Background to the Turkish invasion is thousands of arbitrary arrests in Turkey after the so-called coup attempt.

A. Sarah Glynn: There's a Catalan connection to the Turkish repression – journalists in prison, attacks on the pro-Kurdish opposition HDP – justified in terms of only doing what Spain is doing. There is a very good Trade Union solidarity campaign.

Q. There's a long history on the left of backing British workers against workers abroad.

A. Nathalia Urban: Association of indigenous groups in Brazil, wants sanctions against Brazilian agro-products and timber. There's a report on this [I didn't get title or source]: Lloyds, BoS are heavily involved in Brazil.

Q. There is a foreign policy crisis in USA and UK (withdrawal from Syria, Brexit) indicating splits in the capitalist elite.

A. Nathalia Urban: In Latin America, the USA is trying to put people they can trust in charge. Need to keep it as their backyard, but Latin America is rejecting their agenda.

Q. From James Foley (Chair): What's happening in Chile?

A. Natalia Urban: There's definitely a revival in Latin America. It started against Macri [right-wing President, just defeated in the election] in Argentina. The ultra-neoliberal agenda was never addressed in Chile. It was addressed to some extent in Brazil, but not enough. Brazil is very docile compared to the rest of South America. People are being killed for speaking up in Brazil. Military regimes and groups always had ties with the USA and Europe. There are groups pursuing legal action against BHP in UK over its action in Chile and Brazil

A. Pat Smith: There is a massive debt from Global North to Global South. The arms industry is huge in Scotland, but don't blame the workers.

A. Sarah Glynn: Erdogan and Trump – who knows what goes on in Trump's head? He is in awe of other bullies. A result of constant attack on anything that gives a vision of a better world – she was in Rojava last year. Capitalism is in crisis but won't let socialist forces through.

## **Middle Plenary**

### **Gerry Carroll (People Before Profit, Belfast)**

The break-up of the British state to be welcomed. Brexit has led to the return of the national question in Ireland. Peace has not brought economic improvement – but lots of multi-millionaires, and increased inequality. Finally, abortion has been decriminalised, equal marriage enacted – the decades-long local campaign, not Westminster, should get the credit. There has been solidarity across the border on these issues. Fine Gael [governing party in the republic] don't want to abolish the border. PBP wants a new constitution embodying Connolly's vision.

### **Nathalia Urban (Brazil Resist)**

Solidarity is needed with Chile, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador [She didn't actually specify with whom in each case, but we can probably guess!]. There is considerable influence of British government in Brazil. Bolsonaro was approached by the British Embassy when he was still obscure. Ricardo Sales (the environment minister) was invited to a secret meeting in London by Teresa Villiers. Pharmaceutical, mining, and financial companies are most involved. The UK is ready to sell out Scottish farmers, for the products causing disaster to people and land in Brazil. BHP, responsible for the tragedy of Mariana [the recent dam collapse], is being sued in UK. BP and Shell are involved; the UK is stealing land, water, forests – an independent Scotland will start a North-South dialog.

### **Ross Greer (Scottish Green Party, MSP)**

We are five years on from the biggest mass movement in modern Scottish history, which built a movement in all Scottish communities. It was very ideologically diverse. In the intervening period – party structures are an outlet but also a constraint. Women for Indy and local Yes groups are growing again. Yes grew from both hope and anger. Hope for transformation, not just moving from London to Edinburgh. Since then, there's been too much anger, too little hope. SNP leadership is lashing out at non-SNP independence supporters. Around 1/3 of Labour supporters are pro-Indy – Labour voters are key to winning independence. Among young people around ¾ support independence, but far fewer are activists. The Scottish Green Party in August launched its own Green New Deal. Economic transformation and ditching capitalism are a necessity but also a huge opportunity – a socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An economy that is worker and community led – we need to mobilise within unions, and to be a movement of movements.

### **Holly Rigby (Abolish Eton, Momentum)**

Rigby attended the first RIC conference in 2012. There's been a growing anti-establishment mood over the past few years. The independence movement was the precursor to the election of Corbyn. Labour voted at conference to abolish private schools. Rigby still supports independence, despite joining Labour [she now lives in England]. There is much in common between RIC and Corbynism. She's pleased Corbyn and McDonnell have supported Scotland's right to a new referendum [There was some evident scepticism in the audience at this point!]

### **Ander Larrunbe (SORTU – Basque socialist party)**

There are still 250 Basque political prisoners – and no positive engagement by the Spanish state. SORTU is the second largest party in the Basque country, after the right-wing nationalists. It is building a social majority: pensioners, feminists, cooperative movements. It is working with Catalans. At a meeting in Barcelona yesterday [i.e. 25<sup>th</sup> October], a common minimum was agreed between all pro-independence Catalan and Basque parties.

### **Cat Boyd – Glasgow RIC**

Why this event (rather than combining with right and centre)? Because a specific radical message can reach a new audience. Five years ago we campaigned for a Green New Deal, against austerity, against the racist and unstable British state, for a Scottish currency, a united Ireland. Our divisive, dangerous radical ideas are now part of the political furniture. But beneath the worthy talk, the same injustices continue. Child poverty is still increasing – it will reach 40% by 2030 unless you tax the rich, free the unions etc. Also drug deaths, NATO, Trident, the influence of the DUP. We need retrofitting of transport systems, homes, etc., and for Scottish political rhetoric to become reality. Politicians don't change from on high unless forced to by movements from below. For independence, we've got a government with a mandate to act, an opposition in total disarray, but a lack of radical leadership. [Enthusiastically received.]

## **Breakout forum: Scotland's Green New Deal: The Social and Planetary Emergency**

Around 25 people attended this forum. The other options were: “Debate Independence Strategy: What Way forward”, “Brick by Brick: Winning in Communities and Workplaces”, and “People Get ready: Art, Culture and Civil Disobedience.

There were three speakers. The first, Robin McAlpine, had to leave after 15 minutes, so questions came directly after his speech, he gave answers, then the others (Tiffany Kane of Commonweal, and Emil Carr, an organiser of the Glasgow school strikes) joined in with short contributions, with further questions then being asked.

### **Robin McAlpine (Commonweal)**

How do we get the GND out and about? How to tie it to independence movement? “Escape and Repair”. Commonweal is to launch its GND in 2 weeks. [The Arches, Glasgow, 13;00-16:00 Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> November]

The time for targets is way past; we should be focused on implementation plans for exceeding the targets. What would be the components of a GND? Commonweal is working up a coherent plan. Dozens of experts contributed. Combatting climate change is essential, but maybe only 4<sup>th</sup> in line in terms of threats – soil degradation, resource wars, loss of biodiversity, may be more urgent. Also – stop being gloomy. The Commonweal team started with seven great environmental threats to the world, translated them to Scotland, then to what we need to do, then to 10 categories of action. Decarbonising heating is a flat-out headache – anything we do will be disruptive and expensive. They are proposing district heating systems for all Scotland. There was some disagreement e.g. over food. What about free trade? It needs debate. The plan is costed. All public investment – there is no market solution. How do we make this happen? 90% of what needs to be done is domestic [i.e. within Scotland].

### **Questions and contributions**

Q. Why not use the gas grid to distribute hydrogen instead of district heating? [This was from me.]

A. Robin McAlpine. This is complicated, but it would require too much renewable capacity, the gas grid is not able to handle hydrogen – pipes would have to be plastic, not metal.

Q. War, Assange, various other issues are important.

A. Robin McAlpine. Climate change is causing war. The idea of waste is only a century old.

Q. The animal agriculture industry is insane.

A. This was one of the discussions about food. We should eat much less meat, of higher quality, but not necessarily none.

## **Tiffany Kane (Commonweal)**

We have a choice between extinction and utopia. There is a massive social agenda to the GND. Commonweal will in 2020 produce 2 books, and a fully costed plan - far ahead of anyone else. Will be touring all over Scotland and hope to link up with other organisations. COP26 in Glasgow will be crucial. Young people will vote for independence if it's voting for this.

## **Emil Carr (Organiser of Scottish Youth Climate Strike)**

We need to link up movements. Capitalism is responsible for all the problems – poverty, the climate crisis, etc. All movements are linked. Disagrees with Robin McAlpine about immediately ending the oil industry, because of the effect on the workers. Mainstream parties are not taking the need for action on climate seriously.

Q. We need to bring in trade unions, which need to back action against climate change.

A. Emil Carr. TUs have been an asset to climate strikes in Scotland. But they need to get more radical.

Q. The GND should not hurt those in the Global South. We need to reduce energy consumption.

Q. From a Unite rep in the arms industry. Has GND thought about the high-wage workers in that industry? We need to campaign for free public transport and remunicipalisation.

A. Emil Carr. There are versions of the GND that are not just to the Global South - e.g. Labour's. The mining of lithium is already poisoning people. Tiff: we need to be implementing it in Scotland now.

Q. Younger people have the lowest voting turnout. Why?

Q. How to bring more in the poorest communities into activism?

A. Tiffany Kane. GND so far has just involved experts. Communities come in on implementation. [I am very dubious about this – although experts are essential, broader participation is too, both because “non-experts” may actually contribute important insights drawn from their own experience, and because the earlier people are involved in a project, the more likely they are to commit to it.]

Q. Hazards of Grangemouth. Does GND have anything to say about chemical industry?

Q. UK is second largest manufacturer of arms in the world.

A. Emil Carr. We need to divest.

Q. The “Positive money” approach is what is needed. How to get young people interested in economics and finance?

Q. How to take GND into party policy?

Q. Scottish Green Party already has GND, free public transport, divestment already in its policy. [This was from me.]

Q. Anti-racist movement, feminist movement etc. need to be involved.

A. Emil Carr. He is a member of the SGP – it has done some great stuff. This doesn't mean other parties can't do the same. XR's – citizens' assembly idea should be part of GND.

A. Tiffany Kane: The Commonweal policy team works closely with the SGP policy team [I wonder about this – I've been on the SGP Policy Committee for three years and have not had any contact from Commonweal – but it's possible they have been dealing with the Parliamentary team.] Currently Commonweal need to focus on the SNP spring conference.

### **Final Plenary**

**Lesley Riddoch (broadcaster and campaigner)** [I missed her presentation, talking to an SSP member with a bookstall.]

#### **Jonathon Shafi (Glasgow RIC)**

The time for being bystanders is over and must come to an end. Our economic programmes must not be designed by Charlotte St. Partners [Like the Growth commission report]. We need RIC groups in every community, in universities, in unions. Resistance has emerged in Chile, Ecuador, Lebanon, Catalonia – Scotland needs to join that international uprising. we need to get back to registering people to vote, to link with people across the world – one country alone cannot take on this system. In 2020 the world's focus will be on Glasgow for COP26. we need a demo saying we want independence as part of a global uprising against failed states. Build a left movement in Scotland that will challenge the state. Another Scotland is possible! [Enthusiastically received.]

#### **Contributions from others who had taken on a role at the conference**

Pat Smith thought that the conference was a considerable success. She gave her thoughts on the sessions she had attended.

Allan Armstrong thought that the conference highlighted the best side of RIC – the ability to conduct debates and discussions involving people from a wide variety of political viewpoints in a comradely/friendly manner, which was absent from the febrile behaviour (particularly online) of the ultra-unionists, the cybernats and left sectarians. The provision for stalls for political groups and campaigning organisations was a further indication of this openness. And, as at previous RIC national conferences, the organisation before and on the day was of a high standard. Organising such an ambitious event represented a leap into the unknown as far as meeting expenses was concerned, with considerable personal pressure on those doing the organising.

Allan had been allotted two jobs at the conference. The first was to sign up new members with the intention of revitalising previously established local groups, and after debate and discussion begin to implement some of the conference suggestions at

the next RIC National Forum to be held in Perth on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup>. This was the minuted first priority of the conference.

38 new members (i.e. people who agreed with RICs 5 Principles) who had enjoyed the conference signed up. Another 8 already existing members, whose RIC activity had lapsed, also wished to become involved in RIC activities.,

Allan also chaired the break-out session on ‘Defending Migrants, Resisting Racism’. 25 people attended this. The 3 introductory speakers were Deborah Kayembe, (Avocat au Barreau de Matadi/Republique Democratique, Universal Peace Federation), Akram Salhab (Palestinian organiser, refugee, campaigns officer at Migrants Organise) and Pinar Aksu (former asylum seeker from Turkey, held at Dungavel detention centre, now involved in asylum seeker advocacy work).

Deborah provided information about her personal experience living in Scotland, to show that, despite the illusions held by many in the independence movement, racism was an everyday experience for many. She argued that individuals should take responsibility for challenging racist views whenever they were put forward. She also argued that fighting racism now was needed to ensure that the independent Scotland we wanted was very different from the UK. Akram, as well as outlining some of the advocacy work he is involved in, emphasised the need to take on state racism, e.g. the immigration laws and the Prevent strategy. Many more people from ethnic minority or migrant background suffered from state racism than fascist attacks. Fascist attacks were more visible, but most state racism occurred out of sight, much more regular and was only exposed occasionally, e.g. the Windrush Scandal. Pinar gave details of the advocacy work she has been doing in Glasgow. This was vital, and often the only point of contact for many extremely frightened people. Successful defences had been mounted. However, advocacy work was seriously underfunded with a high dependence on volunteers.

In the follow-up discussions 8 people made contributions, 6 with some ethnic minority background.

Allan had also been able to attend the afternoon Breakout Forum entitled ‘Independence Strategy: Which Way Forward?’ Michael Gray who was member of the National Collective argued for patience, but also for the SNP government to make more use of the devolved powers it already had. George Kerevan, SNP ex-MP, and columnist with *The National*, argued that now Boris Johnson was in charge, the legal referendum road was blocked, unless there was a resort to civil disobedience, and the SNP’s MPs taking a more obstructionist path at Westminster. One long-standing SNP member spoke from the floor, and argued that in the next election, SNP candidates should say if a majority of pro-independence MPs were elected from Scotland, with a majority of the vote, they would withdraw from Westminster.

Allan had also submitted an article for circulation before the conference, entitled Contradictions Underlying Brexit and Scottish Independence (<https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2019/10/24/republican-internationalism-from-below/>)

In addition, Pat and Allan had been going to make a contribution at the lunchtime session - Building RIC groups - using the Edinburgh RIC experience. However, not

surprisingly the lunchtime Catalan Solidarity Protest held in George Square, with Clara Ponsati, attracted those conference, goes (not placing a personal priority on getting a lunch!) so, this meeting did not go ahead.