

RIC NATIONAL SPRING CONFERENCE, 10.3.18

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<http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2018/03/15/ric-spring-conference/>

The Radical Independence Campaign held its Spring Conference in Edinburgh on Saturday, 10th March. The conference was designed as one where the Left could take a strategic overview of the situation the Scottish Independence Movement is in. Over a hundred and twenty attended and the level of discussion was very good.

When IndyRef1 was launched in 2012 Yes campaigners were in the driving seat. The initiative had come from the Scottish government, and the UK government was constantly put on the back foot in the run-up to September 18th, 2014. Starting with 28%, support for independence rose to 45%. RIC was particularly pleased with the contribution we made to voter registration in the housing schemes long abandoned by the mainstream parties. The 85% voter participation was truly historic. The massive engagement of people throughout Scotland amounted to a 'democratic revolution'. In some ways the defeat felt more like a victory for Yes campaigners, and more like a defeat for Cameron's government. The SNP's landslide victory in the 2015 general election seemed to underscore this.

Cameron's next attempt to shore up the existing UK set-up was to concede another referendum, this time over continued EU membership. The outcome has made things far more uncertain. After losing to the Brexiteers, the UK government has lost all coherence. Their options for UK survival in an increasingly crisis-ridden world include a 'cake and eat it' deal with the EU, a free trade agreement with Trump and the former the White colonies (as advocated by CANZUK), and becoming an offshore finance and tax haven – a North Atlantic Singapore. These options range from the unlikely, through the highly damaging, to pure fantasy based on a nostalgic vision of Empire 2.

Compared with 2012-14, it is this situation of uncertainty that marks the situation the Scottish Independence Movement finds itself in. Although the Scottish Independence Convention's Bridges to Indy event, held last November, was an impressive event and there is continued local campaigning going on, the Yes Movement no longer holds the initiative. We are having

to react to a world dominated by events beyond our immediate control. Furthermore, the Tories, they are not in control of the wider situation their actions have contributed to. These include the rise of the unpredictable Trump and the populist and far right in Europe. Neither do they hold a strong hand in the negotiations with the EU. And beyond these, there is the prospect of growing confrontation with Putin's Russia, whilst Trump wants to step up the pressure on China.

Two of the Conference sessions approached this situation from different perspectives. The first one directly dealt with Brexit. Maggie Chapman, co-convenor of the Scottish Greens, whilst criticising aspects of the EU, placed her emphasis on the move to the Right brought about by Brexit. This had led to mounting attacks on migrants, and the Tory government's wish to remove what EU protections exist in order to open the UK up to free trade with the USA and China. In contrast, Neil Davidson of RS21 attacked the EU as a neo-liberal entity less democratic than the UK. He said that the EU set-up represented a realisation of von Hayek's desire to have a democratically unaccountable body in overall control of the economy in order to eliminate political debate. He also feared that if Brexit was denied this would fuel the Far Right.

The second session examined the current state of the Scottish Independence Movement. We were pleased that David Jamieson of Commonsense was able to stand in at the last moment for Jonathon Shafi of RIC, who was unable to attend. David put a lot of emphasis on the wider political constraints we confront. A lot of Yes campaigners want IndyRef2 as soon as possible, but it is highly unlikely, even if the Scottish Parliament voted for one, that the current British government would concede one now.

The second speaker in this session, Lesley Riddoch, journalist and indefatigable campaigner, agreed that things were unpredictable, but this meant that a surprise opening for Scottish independence could arise at any time. She also went through the historical example of the Norwegian independence campaign, emphasising how important grassroots organising was. She pointed to the future meetings that were being organised at a local level.

RIC was aware of the controversial nature of the third session, which addressed the impact of the rise of Corbyn upon Scottish politics. Rory Scothorne, who was part of the Roch Winds Collective during IndyRef1, is now a member of the Labour Party, the Young Socialists and

Momentum. Rory was not uncritical of the Labour Party, but said that it is no longer the party of Tony Blair, or that which signed up to Better Together. Many young people have joined and are active over issues on the ground, such as the Fair Rents and Living Wage campaigns. These also involve RIC members. He thought that these were areas where we could work together.

Tommy Sheppard, SNP MP for East Edinburgh, said that he welcomed the rise of Corbyn in England. He was also quite happy to work with Labour on specific issues. However, he criticised Richard Leonard's tribalism and his attacks on the SNP government for not delivering reforms, which they did not have the powers to do, and which Labour had voted against. A debate needed to take place about the nature of the UK, and whether this provided an adequate framework for the sort of reforms we needed.

Cat Boyd, speaking for RIC, said that in many ways the rise of Corbyn in England was the political equivalent of the Yes movement in Scotland. It drew in similar people. However, the fact that so many had already been drawn into the Yes movement in Scotland limited the impact of Corbyn here. Although we shared many economic and social aims, Cat said that the strength of the Yes movement is that it provides a critique of the UK state, which Corbyn does not.

The last session looked to the international situation we face. George Kerevan SNP gave an account of the situation in Catalunya. He particularly emphasised the grassroots nature of the campaign. He also said that there had been some divergence between the social movements and the campaign to conduct the Catalan independence referendum, which tended to undermine their potential. Only the Popular Unity Candidacy emphasised the importance of this link. George also thought that the Catalan leaders should have been more prepared for the outcome, and not retreated to Brussels, in the naive belief they would get official EU support. He also pointed to the links and lessons to be drawn for Scotland. As in Spain, the current British government is very unlikely to concede an independence referendum.

We were pleased that Gerry Carroll, the People before Profit MLA at the currently suspended Stormont, was able to step in when Bernadette McAliskey was unable to attend. She sent her warm greetings. Gerry took us through the situation both North and South. PBP also has TDs in Dublin. Ireland has become a very changed place. Few people would have thought that

Ireland (except for the North of course!) would have been the first place in these islands to vote for gay marriage. The campaign to abolish Clause 8 of the Irish constitution, which illegalises abortion, is now to the forefront of campaigning. Ireland is still suffering from the impact of the austerity measures imposed by the EU. Austerity is also a major issue in the North, which PBP has emphasised. The Irish language issue has proved to be a major issue leading to the suspension of Stormont. This underscored the narrow thinking behind the Unionist vision of who belonged.

The speakers and the RIC chairs, James Foley from Dumfries, Myshelle Haywood from Aberdeen, Stewart Fairweather from Dundee and Frances Curran from Glasgow, contributed to the open and friendly nature of the day. All those speaking from the floor entered into the spirit of the meeting.

There were practical outcomes too. RIC will be asking people to support the Hands Off Our Parliament – Hands Around Holyrood demonstration at the Scottish Parliament on Friday, March 23rd from 10am. This is being organised to protest at the UK government's attempted seizure of already devolved powers following Brexit.

The Campaign for a European Republican Socialist Party had a stall, which called for the Scottish Parliament to hold a ratification referendum over the terms of the Tory Brexit, and not leave it in the hands of Theresa May or Westminster.

The Democratic Left had a stall promoting Neal Ascherson's new pamphlet, *Tom Nairn – 'Painting Nationalism Red?'* Nairn has been a pivotal figure on the Left, both in relation to Scottish independence and the EU.

There were other stalls from the SSP, Pensioners for Independence and the Edinburgh Stop the War Coalition, whilst cards were given out to send to the Catalan political prisoners.

The conference was recorded by Independence Live and their full coverage can be seen at:- <http://independencelive.net/event/1211>

For RIC thorough discussions and debate are vital to the activities of the movements for Scottish self-determination and social justice. Our members and supporters will be seen in all these campaigns. We don't wait for a line handed down by leaders, but encourage all to take

part, because that is the sort of Scotland we want to create. We remain Scottish internationalists arguing that Another Scotland Is Possible, Another Europe Is Possible, and Another World Is Possible.

Allan Armstrong

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