

# THE STORY OF EDINBURGH RIC

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**During the referendum campaign Edinburgh RIC was host to activists from all over the world. Welsh activists were up frequently, particularly during the last week. Allan Armstrong (Edinburgh RIC) was asked by Mabon ap Gwynfor to write an article about RIC and how it came about. Below is this article.**

## FREEDOM COME ALL YE!

**Scottish internationalism and the Radical Independence Campaign.**



RIC international rally for Scottish independence held on The Meadows on September 13th

In the last few weeks before the September 18<sup>th</sup> referendum, many people from Wales, England and Ireland came to Scotland to help the campaign for a 'Yes' vote. There were 'Yes' rallies in Cardiff and London, whilst a large 'Yes Scotland' slogan was displayed on the hills behind West Belfast.

On the evening before the referendum, at less than two day's notice, about two thousand people turned up to the internationalist rally held on The Meadows in Edinburgh. This was the place James Connolly had conducted his open-air socialist meetings when he was living in Edinburgh.

At this September 17<sup>th</sup> rally, there were people from Ireland, England, Catalunya, Euskadi, France, Greece, Italy, Germany and several other countries. There was a representative from the UN-recognised West Papuan opposition to the continued Indonesian occupation. The next day he went on to the count at Ingliston as an official observer. Also present at the rally was a vocal contingent from Wales who, entirely in character, burst into greatly appreciated song!

This rally was organised by the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC). RIC has been to the forefront of the campaign to win progressive international support for Scottish self-determination. However, you have to know something about recent history of the Left in Scotland to see how RIC came about.

As recently as 2003, the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) had managed to win six MSPs to the Scottish parliament at Holyrood. Both the Labour and SNP vote had fallen back. The SSP launched the Declaration of Calton Hill [i], which offered a clear republican challenge to the SNP leadership's own increasingly watered-down version of Scottish self-determination. This Declaration was launched on October 9<sup>th</sup> 2004 at the very successful rally on Calton Hill in Edinburgh. It was organised to protest against the royal opening of the new Holyrood parliament building.

Then, a few weeks later, the Tommy Sheridan fiasco engulfed the SSP! In the 2007 Holyrood elections, the Left lost all its MSPs. The SNP surged back forming a minority Scottish nationalist government for the first time. This replaced the previous Labour/Lib-Dem coalition. In 2011, the SNP won an outright majority in the Holyrood elections, giving it a mandate to initiate a Scottish independence referendum.

By now the Left was marginalised and fragmented. Yet, many were still clear that the SNP government's official 'Independence-Lite' proposals fell far short of the genuine Scottish self-determination found in the Declaration of Calton Hill. The SNP government accepts the monarchy (hence the long arm of the UK state's Crown Powers), sterling (hence economic tutelage to the City of London) and supports for the British High Command (hence continued participation in imperial wars). The SNP government has the backing of Sir Brian Souter, the homophobic owner of Stagecoach, a major global transport corporation. It has tried to woo Rupert Murdoch and Donald Trump.

So the Left received a big boost when the SNP Conference, held in Perth in October 2012, narrowly voted to end the party's long-standing opposition to NATO. This was the SNP's 'Ditch Clause 4' moment. The 'suits' had taken over. Many SNP members resigned, including two MSPs.

This provided the opening for the Radical Independence Campaign, initiated by a very young group of socialists who had formed the International Socialist Group (ISG). They were not compromised by 'Tommygate'.

The SNP leadership had launched the official 'Yes Scotland' campaign on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2012, in Edinburgh. A week later, on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, the ISG and others on the Scottish Left people attended a meeting in the STUC buildings in Glasgow. The meeting made a call "for an extra-parliamentary, pro-independence campaign, which puts forward a vision of Scotland that is:-

Green and environmentally sustainable.

Internationalist and opposed to Trident and war.

For a social alternative to austerity and privatization.

A modern republic for real democracy.

Committed to equality and opposition to discrimination on grounds of gender, race or sexuality." [ii]

The public launch of RIC took place in the Radisson Blu Hotel in Glasgow on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012. ‘R’ stood for Radical. ‘I’ stood for Independence. Until November 24<sup>th</sup> the ‘C’ had stood for Conference. With 800 people in attendance, it was clear there was a real basis for a Radical Independence Campaign, and the meaning of the ‘C’ changed accordingly.

RIC’s strength has lain in its ability to unite people around its five principles and to reach out to the exploited, oppressed and alienated. Where the SNP government is pro-corporate business, RIC is for the working class. Where the SNP has had a fraught record on women’s and gay rights, RIC is unambiguously on their side. Where the SNP government is pro-monarchist, RIC is republican. Where the SNP government accepts the continued existence of the rUK, RIC is for the break-up of the whole of the UK. Where the SNP government seeks its allies under NATO’s umbrella, RIC opposes US/British imperialism and supports the democratic struggles of the world’s oppressed. Where the SNP is Scottish nationalist, RIC is Scottish internationalist.

From the start, RIC has located its campaign for Scottish self-determination in its international context – in the European-wide fight against austerity and the global struggle for greater democracy and justice. There were speakers from Greece, France, Euskadi and Quebec at the first conference.

At the second even bigger conference, attended by 1100, and held in the Marriott Hotel in Glasgow on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013, a session was organised with the intention of taking RIC’s campaign for meaningful democracy throughout these islands. In addition to Mary McGregor from Scotland, we heard Bernadette McAliskey from Ireland and Steve Freeman from England [iii]. Leanne Wood, Plaid’s republican leader was invited from Wales. Leanne had to send her apologies. However, on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, this year, she spoke at a large RIC meeting held Glasgow’s historic St. Andrews Hall [iv].

RIC came to see itself, in effect, as the Scottish component of the Global Campaign for Social Justice. Another Scotland, another Europe and another World are possible. These are inextricably linked. Scottish independence has a particularly important role to play. It challenges the UK state and its key role, supporting the US in upholding the existing global corporate order and promoting continuous imperial wars.

After the first conference, local RIC groups formed throughout Scotland. These extend beyond Scotland’s Central Belt and four major cities – Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee. RIC groups have been formed in Inverness and Dumfries & Galloway. In addition, political and campaigning organisations have affiliated to RIC, including the influential think tank Common Weal, CND (Scotland) and Trade Unionists for Independence.

Different local RIC groups have operated autonomously and established their own relationships with the official ‘Yes Scotland’ campaign. At a national level, ‘Yes Scotland’ was controlled by the SNP leadership, despite the participation of independents like Dennis Canavan (former Labour and independent MSP), the Greens and the SSP. However, at a local level, things were very different, with most ‘Yes’ groups, including many SNP members, being considerably more radical than their national leadership. Indeed many rank and file members of the SNP joined RIC [v].

The widely read blog, *bella caledonia* [vi] (for self-determination, autonomism and independence) made a very important contribution to the wider radical independence

campaign, especially in a context where the British and mainstream Scottish media were almost universally hostile to a 'Yes' vote.

From June to August this year, the 3000 strong National Collective [vii] (Imagine a Better Scotland) of artists and creative took their 'Yestival' to every part of Scotland from the Central Belt, the four major cities, and on to Shetland and Orkney, the Western Isles, the Highlands, Dumfries & Galloway and the Borders.

Up to September 18<sup>th</sup> there was a common purpose uniting RIC and 'Yes Scotland' in getting out the referendum vote. After that the divergence would have become much clearer if there had been a 'Yes' vote. The SNP government would have used its electoral mandate, under the UK state's devolved Holyrood rules, to bring Scottish unionist MSPs into its negotiations with Westminster. Meanwhile, the drawing up of any new Scottish constitution would have been left to the 'great and the good'. In practical terms the SNP government acknowledges the anti-democratic principle of the sovereignty of Crown-in-Westminster.

In contrast, the RIC National Forum (which brings together delegates from local RIC groups and affiliated organisations) held on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014, agreed that a 'Yes' vote would confirm the republican principle of the sovereignty of the people. This would provide a mandate to begin organising a popular campaign for a new Scottish constitution, culminating in a Constituent Assembly.

One of the most significant jobs undertaken by RIC in the last year of the campaign was to register many thousands of people in Scotland's deprived housing schemes. Once bastions of Labour support, electoral registration and participation in these areas had reached historic lows. Much of this stemmed from New Labour continuing the Tories' neo-liberal onslaught on these communities – even more so, after the 2007-8 Financial Crash. RIC's successful registration and mass canvassing campaigns provided the basis for the confidence in believing that a popular constitutional campaign was possible, in the event of a 'Yes' vote.

The growth and political development of RIC's own local groups also contributed to this feeling of confidence. These groups sometimes differed in their approach and ambition, often reflecting local social and political conditions. Some saw themselves as little more than pressure groups on the official 'Yes' campaign. Others saw the need to take the lead in a campaign for genuine Scottish self-determination. That political divide remains after September 18<sup>th</sup>.

Edinburgh RIC has been one of the most independent-minded groups. It was the first local group to be set up, just before the first RIC national conference. Since November 2012, we have had fortnightly meetings. A core of over 100 activists has attended these meetings, which have varied in attendance between 20 and 40. We have organised public meetings and weekend conferences attended by between 50 and 190. In addition, Edinburgh RIC has over 700 people on its contact list. Writers and campaigners such as Gerry Hassan, Paddy Hill, Owen Jones and Lesley Riddoch have spoken. 'No' supporters were also invited to debate, although a majority of them declined to do this.

A key aspect of the fortnightly Edinburgh RIC meetings has been an opening talk followed by break-out groups to maximise participation. This reflects our belief that we had to begin discussing and organising now to make our vision of another Scotland possible. The SNP

government was changing its own policies during the campaign; so it was important that RIC campaigned openly for its alternative.

Thus we have had campaigners leading off discussions on – neo-liberalism; austerity; welfare; health; the bedroom tax; a living wage; citizens income; trade unions; women; young people; gays, lesbian, bisexual and transgender politics; renewable energy; criminal justice; democracy and republicanism; secularism, Palestine solidarity; Ireland and Catalunya; the European Union; and the First World War.

However, the purpose behind this was not just to draw up some future ‘wish list’ for after independence. We became involved in local campaigns in Edinburgh. For example, we were part of the protest against the bedroom tax. This forced the local Labour/SNP council [viii] to suspend the operation of this tax in the city [ix]. We also participated in the CND blockade at Faslane nuclear submarine base on April 15th, 2013 [x].

Edinburgh RIC joined Greek and other European socialists in protesting against former Greek social democrat premier, Papandreou, on his visit to the city on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013. We also joined the hundreds outside the First Minister’s official residence at Bute House, on August 9th this year protesting against Israel’s invasion of Gaza.

Edinburgh RIC campaigned very actively and successfully against Nigel Farage. As a result, Edinburgh became a ‘no go area’ for Farage [xi]. In the EU elections, held in May, UKIP was pushed down to sixth place in the city, after the Greens. We also challenged George Galloway’s Left unionist ‘Just Say Naw’ gathering in January [xii].

Edinburgh RIC formed part of the 20,000 strong, ‘Yes Scotland’ march and rally in the city on September 21st, with its large SNP presence. We were also on the Edinburgh 2014 May Day march and rally. Although there were plenty of trade unionists, including Trade Unionists for Independence’ (TUPI), there were very few Labour Party members, and no sign of their MPs or MSPs!

From the beginning of August this year, Edinburgh RIC went into overdrive, with weekly organising meetings. Our work was concentrated upon two major areas – Pilton/Muirhouse in the north of the city and Craigmillar/Niddrie in the east of the city. These are two of the most deprived areas in Edinburgh. Joint canvassing and campaigning work was conducted with the local ‘Yes’ groups, TUFI and anti-austerity and cuts groups. These local campaigns were imaginative and inspirational.

Although Edinburgh, more prosperous than Scotland’s other cities and with a significant middle class, ended up voting ‘No’ on September 18th, there were majority ‘Yes’ votes in these particular local housing schemes. Many had voted for the first time. Nor are these schemes confined any longer to the traditional white working class. They have significant migrant communities. Amongst others, Africans joined the ‘Yes’ campaign in Pilton; Asians and Slovaks in Craigmillar.

Edinburgh RIC also participated in the very successful ‘Leith Says Aye’ event [xiii]. On August 24<sup>th</sup> this stretched along the whole mile of Leith Walk. It was also supported by Edinburgh North ‘Yes’ campaign, Africans for an Independent Scotland, Asians for Independence, English Scots for Yes, Women for Independence, and the National Collective. There were street entertainers including the Independence Choir singing Hamish

Henderson's *Freedom Come All Ye* [xiv]. Hearts and Hibs for Independence campaigned together outside nearby Easter Road football ground.

Although we failed to win a majority in Scotland on September 18<sup>th</sup>, the 45% achieved has rattled the British ruling class. Cameron only conceded the referendum back in 2012 because he thought the prospect of any alternative to the 'Westminster way' would be trounced - "There is no alternative".

We had faced the biggest ruling class offensive, backed by the UK state, since the Miners' Strike. Only this time it brought together a combined Tory/Lib-Dem/Labour Better Together 'No' alliance, UKIP, the Orange Order, other Loyalists, British fascists, the BBC, the Pope and the Free Presbyterian Church, and the USA and China! They argued, "There is no alternative".

Yet 97% registered to vote and 85% actually voted. This is unprecedented in UK history. You could call this a democratic revolution. We showed that 'Another Scotland is possible'. This is why a mood of defiance has continued, whilst the 'No' camp is in disarray. Only the Loyalists and neo-fascists celebrated this 'victory' with a rampage through Glasgow's George Square on September 19<sup>th</sup>. All those 'Better Together' union jacks, and an Orange Order 'No' march seemed to stir their blood!

After the referendum on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, Edinburgh RIC booked a room in the City Library for a regular organising meeting. It can hold a maximum of 40 people. 136 turned up and we had to hold this meeting on The Meadows, less than a week after RIC's internationalist rally there. James Connolly would have liked that.

RIC continues to grow in strength. Tickets for RIC's third conference, being held in the Clyde Auditorium on November 22<sup>nd</sup> have already been sold out. This venue holds 3000 people. The struggle for genuine Scottish self-determination has not been defeated merely deferred.

**Allan Armstrong (in personal capacity), 5.11.14**

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[i] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration\\_of\\_Calton\\_Hill](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_Calton_Hill)

[ii] More recently opposition to NATO and discrimination on the grounds of disability have been added.

[iii] <http://republicancommunist.org/blog/2013/11/25/2nd-ric-conference-after-the-uk-the-future-of-4-nations/>

[iv] <http://radicalindependence.org/2014/07/03/ric-lecture-with-leanne-wood-am/> and <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/leanne-wood/solidarity-through-divergence-leanne-woods-speech-on-scottish-independence>

[v] Since September 18<sup>th</sup>, some RIC supporters have joined the SNP – others the Greens or the revived SSP.

[vi] <http://bellacaledonia.org.uk>

[vii] <http://nationalcollective.com>

[viii] This is the only Labour/SNP coalition in Scotland. Labour prefers coalitions with the Tories, but the Tories turned them down in Edinburgh!

[ix] A nationwide anti-bedroom tax campaign involving several different groups forced the SNP government to suspend its operation throughout Scotland.

[x] <http://www.banthebomb.org/index.php/news/63-trident/1444-scrap-trident-protest-blockades-faslane>

[xi] <http://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/nigel-farage-faces-barrage-of-edinburgh-protest-1-3404499>

[xii] <http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2014/02/03/just-say-naw-to-galloways-sectarian-british-unionism/>

[xiii] <http://yesedinburghnorthandleith.net/leithsaysaye>

[xiv] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySzKZoak2t4>