

# **A Marxist Case for an Independent Scotland**

## **Introduction**

Marxists have an ambivalent attitude towards the national question. On the one hand, they are wary of the dangers of 'bourgeois nationalism' whereby the ruling class employ a divide and conquer strategy to split people by language, race, ethnicity, or religion, so as to distract the working class from engaging in a class struggle against their capitalist oppressors. On the other hand, Marxists defend the right of 'oppressed' nations to self-determination, up to and including independence, because, as Lenin explained, 'nothing holds up the development and strengthening of proletarian class solidarity so much as national injustice'. (*The Collected Works of V I Lenin*, Volume 36, pp 608-609)

On the question of Scottish independence, the Left in Scotland is similarly caught on two minds. There are those in the Labour Party and the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) who maintain that independence would disunite the British working class and only go to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie. However, others on the Left, most notably in the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the Communist Party of Scotland (CPS), believe that the breakup of the British state is a precondition for securing progressive, socialist change for the peoples these islands since it would open up opportunities for the Left, both in Scotland and south of the Border, to promote a radical political agenda that otherwise would remain excluded from mainstream politics.

In this essay, the following questions will be addressed with the aim of building a Marxist case for an independent Scotland:

- What is Scotland's current status?
- How did Scotland lose its independence?
- What support has there been for Scottish self-determination?
- What's the Marxist perspective on the national question?
- Is there a Marxist case for Scottish independence?

## **Scotland's current status**

Scotland is a country (i.e. a geographical region) that occupies the northern third of the island of Great Britain and is part of the sovereign state known as The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK). It has a population of just over five million, compared to 52 million for England, 3 million for Wales and 2 million for Northern Ireland, and although it lost its status as an independent nation-state over 300 years ago, few if any would deny that Scotland remains a nation.

Under the terms of the Acts of Union of 1707 that created the UK, Scotland's legal system constitutes a distinct jurisdiction in public and private law from those of England and Wales and Northern Ireland. The continued existence of legal, and also educational and religious institutions distinct from those in the remainder of the UK have all contributed to the continuation of Scottish culture and national identity since the Union of Parliaments.

In 1999, a devolved legislature, the Scottish Parliament, was created with tax varying powers (i.e. power to vary (down or up) the basic rate of UK income tax by up to 3p in the pound) and authority over many areas of home affairs following a referendum in 1979. However, as

Enoch Powell once observed: 'Power devolved is power retained', and consequently the devolutionary settlement for Scotland has had only a limited impact in terms of UK government arrangements and Parliamentary business at Westminster. There remains in place a Secretary of State for Scotland in the Cabinet, and at Westminster, Scottish Question Time, and a Select Committee on Scottish Affairs and a Scottish Grand Committee, both of which have a complement of English Conservative MPs to ensure that party balance reflects the overall balance in the House of Commons.

Be that as it may, in 2011, the Scottish National Party (SNP) won an overall majority at the Scottish Parliament and as a result a referendum on independence is to be held in the autumn of 2014. This will determine whether Scotland becomes once again a sovereign nation-state or remains a constituent part of the UK.

### **Scotland's loss of independence**

Tradition has it that Scotland emerged as a sovereign kingdom in 843 under the rule of Kenneth MacAlpin although this is now disputed by historians. What is not disputed is that his successors during the Middle Ages ruled a unified kingdom roughly corresponding to the geographic boundaries of modern day Scotland.

When King Alexander III, died in 1286 he left an infant granddaughter, Margaret, Maid of Norway as the heir to the Scottish throne. However, Margaret herself died four years later in a tragic shipwreck en route to Scotland. Following the death of Margaret, an opportunity arose for Edward I of England to place a puppet king, John Balliol, on the Scottish throne. When a rebellion broke out against Edward's suzerainty, he sent troops to subjugate Scotland.

The resulting Wars of Scottish Independence were fought in the late 13th and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Scotland's ultimate victory in the Wars of Independence under the leadership of Robert the Bruce confirmed Scotland as a fully independent and sovereign kingdom.

In 1603, King James VI of Scotland succeeded to the English and Irish thrones when his aunt, Queen Elizabeth I, died childless. Although there was a Union of the Crowns, Scotland continued to be ruled as a separate state for the next century.

On 1 May 1707, however, Scotland entered into an incorporating political union with England to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain. This union resulted from the Treaty of Union agreed in 1706 and enacted by the twin Acts of Union passed by the Parliaments of both countries, despite popular opposition and anti-union riots in Edinburgh, Glasgow and elsewhere in Scotland. Therefore, from 1707, Scotland ceased to exist as an independent sovereign state.

### **Support for Scottish self-determination**

The 1787 massacre of striking weavers by British soldiers in Calton, which then was a village in the outskirts of Glasgow, is generally recognised as marking the beginning of an organised, Scottish labour movement. The Calton weavers' banner on the day of the massacre showed Scotland's national hero from the Wars of Scottish Independence, William Wallace, striking down the beast of tyranny.

Scots Wha Hae was written by Robert Burns in 1793, not long after the Calton Massacre and has since been adopted as the SNP party song on account of its strong patriotic sentiments.

Scots wha ha'e wi' Wallace bled Scots wham Bruce has often led Welcome to your gory bed Or to victory Now's the day and now's the hour See the front o' battle lour See approach proud Edward's pow'r Chains and slavery	Wha will be a traitor knave? Wha can fill a coward's grave? Wha sae base as be a slave? Let him turn and flee! Wha, for Scotland's king and law, Freedom's sword will strongly draw, Freeman stand or Freeman fa', Let them follow me!	By oppression's woes and pains, By your sons in servile chains, We will drain our dearest veins, But they shall be free. Lay the proud usurpers low! Tyrants fall in ev'ry foe! Liberty's in ev'ry blow! Let us do or die!
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Another indication that there has been a longstanding tradition connecting the struggle for workers' rights with the demand for Scottish self-determination was the Radical War of 1820. This ill-fated insurrection and general strike rallied workers behind the slogan "Scotland Free or a Desert".

That tradition was carried into the 20th century by the likes of the pioneering trade unionist and politician, James Keir Hardie, who managed to secure a commitment to Scottish home rule from the political parties he helped create, namely the Scottish Labour Party, Independent Labour Party and the British Labour Party.

Perhaps most notably of all, the struggle for worker's rights and Scottish self-determination was upheld by the Red Clydeside leader and Marxist teacher, John Maclean, who called for an independent Scottish Socialist Workers' Republic. He believed that workers in Scotland could develop in a revolutionary direction more swiftly than their counterparts in England and Wales since Scottish society had been structured along the lines of "Celtic communism" in the past. He argued that "the communism of the clans must be re-established on a modern basis" and raised the slogan "back to communism and forward to communism".

An upsurge of Scottish nationalism occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s. This coincided with the discovery of oil reserves in the North Sea that opened up the possibility of a prosperous future for an independent Scotland. However, what is often forgotten is that there was a manifestation of large-scale support for the principle of Scottish self-determination prior to the 1960s. Around two million Scottish people between 1947 and 1950 signed the Scottish Covenant which was a petition to the United Kingdom government to create a home rule Scottish parliament.

### **The national question**

It's a matter of historical fact that people typically based on shared culture, religion, history, language and ethnicity and living within recognised geographical boundaries have strived successfully to breakaway from the rule of perceived oppressors and form self-governing sovereign 'nation-states'. Since World War Two, well over a hundred new independent states have joined the international community, most recently in 2011 with South Sudan.

The recognition of national struggles for independence led Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to develop a theory of the national question although it was left to Vladimir Lenin and others later on to provide detailed elaboration and development of the theory.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, written in late 1847, Marx and Engels explained that the coming into existence of new nation-states was the result of class struggle, specifically of the capitalist class's attempts to overthrow the institutions of the former ruling class and establish the economic, social and political conditions most conducive to their class needs.

Marx and Engels in their writings produced three themes which were to be important for the future development of the Marxist theory of national self-determination:

1. Only the national liberation of the oppressed nation enables national divisions and antagonisms to be overcome, and permits the working class of both nations to unite against their common enemy, the capitalists.
2. The oppression of another nation helps to reinforce the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie over workers in the oppressing nation-state: 'A nation that enslaves another forges its own chains'. (*Marx & Engels Collected Works*, Volume 21 p120)
3. The emancipation of the oppressed nation weakens the economic, political, military and ideological bases of the ruling class in the oppressor nation-state and this contributes to the revolutionary struggle of the working class of that nation-state.

Lenin, building on the foundations laid by Marx and Engels and applying them to the new era of imperialism in the early years of the twentieth century, put great emphasis on the right of oppressed nations to self-determination. Through defending the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, he believed, socialists in oppressor states demonstrated solidarity with workers of oppressed nations and laid the basis for an internationalist, socialist-inspired alliance between the workers of all nations against their common enemy, the capitalist class.

Moreover, Lenin maintained that small nations, as Scotland is, could also play a role in defeating imperialism which he regarded as the highest stage of capitalism:

"The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the real anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat to make its appearance on the scene." (*The Collected Works of V I Lenin*, Volume 22, p357)

Marxists, therefore, support the proliferation of nation-states to the extent that it results in the emancipation of oppressed nations and promotes a growing awareness among workers, both in oppressor and oppressed nations, of their shared interests in opposing the capitalist system. Once capitalism is abolished and there is a transition to socialism, Marxists believe, state structures will gradually be dismantled, resulting in a stateless, classless communist world society.

### **Arguments for Scottish independence**

Tom Nairn, arguably Scotland's most influential left-wing intellectual of recent times and the author of *The Break Up of Britain*, famously claimed that the theory of nationalism is Marxism's greatest failure. What he meant was that although Marxist theory correctly identifies the capacity of nationalism as a divisive, reactionary force that diverts the proletariat from the class struggle against the bourgeoisie it, nevertheless, fails to recognise fully the potential nationalism also has as a progressive force.

A case in point is the issue of the 'civic nationalism' (aka as liberal nationalism) championed by the Scottish National Party (SNP) and others in their campaign for a Yes vote at the 2014 Independence Referendum. Is it effectively a form of 'bourgeois nationalism' that would serve the purposes of the ruling class by dividing British workers and preventing the working class from uniting against them? Something Marxists would want to oppose. Or does it open up new possibilities to create a fairer, more equal and more democratic society in Scotland that could then act as a beacon for the working class in the rest of the UK? Something Marxists would be inclined to support.

In answer to the first question posed above, if the aforementioned civic nationalism is, as critics on the Left maintain, just another form of bourgeois nationalism then one would expect the business community to be overwhelmingly in favour of Scottish independence. That is not the case as indicated in a speech by Confederation of British Industry (CBI) director-general John Cridland when he said: 'CBI Scotland council is not convinced of the business and economic case for Scotland seceding from the Union and judges that businesses - Scottish, English, British - would lose out from the fragmentation of our single market.' (*London Evening Standard*, 06.09.2012)

In answer to the second question, all three parties (i.e. SNP, SSP and the Scottish Green Party) affiliated to the Yes campaign have a track record of supporting progressive reforms. Moreover, both the SSP and the Greens in particular see themselves as parts of global movements dedicated to advancing progressive causes and can be said to have a broad internationalist outlook rather than a narrow (bourgeois) nationalist focus.

On the issue of Scotland breaking away from the rest of the UK, Marxists cannot argue for independence on the grounds that Scotland is an oppressed nation within the UK since there has been no systematic attempt by the British ruling class, in modern times at least, to deny Scottish people their democratic rights including the right to secede from the UK. However, there are other reasons for supporting Scottish independence from a Marxist perspective, not least that working people in Scotland, in common with those in other parts of the UK, pay a heavy price for being ruled by the British state. The price of remaining in the UK includes the following:

Britain has a permanent seat at the UN Security Council due in no small part to being the fourth highest military spender in the world with expensive nuclear weapons based on the Clyde. The tax money diverted to military spending by our political leaders to maintain the illusion that Britain remains a world power is money denied for much needed improvement of education, health and welfare provision.

Britain is a belligerent state that has been engaged in twenty-two separate wars and conflicts since the end of World War Two. British interventions in the likes of Iraq in 2003 and since 2001 in Afghanistan have been largely counter-productive but nevertheless costly in terms of money and more importantly, human suffering and lives.

Successive British governments' adherence to neo-liberal ideas that free capital flows, a deregulated financial sector and powerful private banks would be good for the economy has proved a costly mistake to the tune of £1.2 trillion. That is the amount incurred by the public purse since 2008 to bail out banks and financial institutions that were on the verge of collapse. As a result of the bailouts creating a financial black hole for the Treasury, an austerity programme has had to be implemented involving massive public spending cuts, job

losses and a decline in living standards for working families.

Britain is officially described as a 'parliamentary democracy' but, nevertheless, has a political system which includes many features that are far from democratic. For example, we are not citizens but subjects of a hereditary monarch, a Head of State by accident of birth, who is also commander-in-chief of our armed forces; sovereignty or political power in the British state is invested in the 'Crown in Parliament' and not with the people; we have an unelected second chamber in the British Parliament, the House of Lords; we have an electoral system that underpins a two-party system which offers voters little real democratic choice and often results in Scotland being ruled by a party decisively rejected by the Scottish electorate. As a consequence of features like those outlined above, there is a 'democratic deficit' in Britain which is in addition to the other shortcomings that people living in the UK have to endure.

There are distinct disadvantages of Scotland remaining a part of the British state for the Scottish population as outlined above but for Marxists the vital question is would Scottish independence open up new possibilities for socialist advance not only in Scotland but in the other nations of UK as well?

Scotland has had its own devolved Parliament and government since 1999 and already significant divergences from the rest of the UK are apparent. For example, unlike in England, people living in Scotland benefit from free medical prescriptions, free social care, and no tuition fees for universities as result of Scottish governments coming under stronger pressure to pursue social democratic policies than governments of the UK. Independence would give Scottish governments increased powers to formulate the social democratic policies required to tackle more effectively the complex social and economic problems that currently beset Scotland. The improved capacity to align Scottish government policies with Scotland's values, needs and opportunities would be one of the greatest benefits of independence.

However, in the event of Scottish independence not only would there be a transformation of the economic, social and political contexts for Scotland but also important consequences for the rest of the UK. For example, Trident would have to leave the Clyde and probably be scrapped on cost grounds; the UK would have a diminished status on the international stage and would likely 'shrink' its foreign and security policies; the severe British anti-union legislation would go north of the border, and be undermined south of the border; the loss of the Scottish bloc of Labour MPs would initially favour the Conservatives at Westminster but, nevertheless, could provoke a significant political realignment resulting in a boost to progressive centre-left politics; Wales and Northern Ireland would become a smaller periphery to the UK's core in England and might well look to establish greater levels of autonomy or even full-scale independence in the case of Wales.

Be that as it may, it is important to note that independence is not the same as 'separation'. We live in an increasingly interdependent world in which national independence goes hand in hand with international interdependence. An independent Scotland would continue to have close economic ties, cultural links, and bonds of kinship with the other nations of the UK no matter what new constitutional arrangements are made. Moreover, there would be no reason why the 'unity of the British working class' could not be maintained through existing trades unions and social movements operating across borders as happens in Ireland and North America. They would have the opportunity to show the way cooperation across national boundaries could and should be pursued to further the interests of working people and their

families in the 'globalised' world we live in.

Lastly, a widely held misapprehension, including by many on the Left who oppose Scottish independence, needs to be cleared up. While it is true that the SNP, a pro-capitalist party, is the main force driving the campaign for Scottish independence and that some of its policies for an independent Scotland are far from progressive (e.g. low corporate taxation, retention of the monarchy, staying in NATO, retention of the pound sterling and financial regulation from London), a Yes vote cast at the forthcoming independence referendum will NOT be an endorsement for the SNP and its vision for an independent Scotland. It will be a vote for independence and the opening up of a range of possibilities for Scotland in the future.

In the event of a majority Yes vote in 2014, then it is likely a two year period of intense political activity and realignment will ensue, culminating in an historic election at which Scottish voters will deliver their verdict as to which of the competing visions for an independent Scotland they prefer. There is no great certitude that the SNP by 2016 will have retained its present configuration and political identity and even less certainty that it will emerge victorious, happy and glorious after the first election to be held in an independent Scotland for over three hundred years.

## **Conclusion**

From a Marxist point of view the most important question as regards nationalism is whether support for a specific national movement would advance the interests of the working class or not. When a struggle for national independence weakens the forces of imperialism and brings tangible benefits in terms of improved living standards and more democracy to the working class, then socialists should support the cause; when a nationalist movement justifies imperialism and threatens the advances secured by the working class, socialists should oppose it wholeheartedly.

Nationalism, therefore, has to be judged concretely, on the basis of the particular effects that its actions have in a specific context. In the case of Scotland, the choice at the forthcoming independence referendum is stark. Vote No and continue as before inside a neo-imperialist and reactionary British state that imposes legal restrictions on trade unionism, attacks the living standards of working people and provides military and diplomatic back-up for the USA to help maintain a neo-liberal world order. Or vote Yes and begin the dissolution of the UK in the name of progress and social advance and in so doing help realise the potential for the Left not only in Scotland but across Britain that has for far too long lain largely untapped.