

Scottish National Party backs European Union over Catalonia

By Steve James
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In the face of public outrage across Europe over Spanish riot police attacking voters in Catalonia, the attempted suppression of a referendum and the arrest of elected ministers, the Scottish National Party's (SNP) Nicola Sturgeon has solidarised itself with the European Union (EU) in endorsing Spanish repression.

Where SNP leaders have made statements condemning Spanish state violence, they have been as muted as possible, token posturing directed towards their own membership and supporters. The party has been careful to avoid any statement that could be interpreted as encouraging the Catalan nationalists.

Last week, the *Times* of London reported that in the weeks prior to their October 1 referendum, Catalan ministers wrote to the Scottish administration four times asking for support. Two emails were sent to Sturgeon herself by ministers seeking to explain their actions, but there has been no indication of any reply. Notes were also sent to Fiona Hyslop, the external affairs minister, and John Swinney, the deputy first minister. Only Swinney publicly responded stating, "The Scottish government does not have a view on whether Catalonia should become an independent state."

At last month's SNP conference, delegates assembled as shock over the brutal repression of the October 1 referendum by the Spanish police and Civil Guard reverberated around the world. The conference concluded as the right-wing Popular Party government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy threatened to invoke Article 155 of the Spanish constitution, imposing direct rule over Catalonia. The conference passed a short resolution condemning police violence against voters, but the text committed the SNP to nothing at all.

Instead it hailed the 2012 Edinburgh Agreement between the Scottish and British government, the basis for the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, as "a shining example of two governments with diametrically opposed views on independence coming together."

The resolution concluded by calling on the Spanish government to respect the "Si" vote and for "the UN, EU and the Council of Europe to mediate negotiations with the purpose of facilitating an agreed solution."

In response to the Catalan parliament's October 27 declaration of "a Catalan republic as an independent, sovereign, democratic and social state," the Scottish government again avoiding giving Catalonia recognition. A statement merely noted, "We understand and respect the position of the Catalan government," before adding that "Spain has the right to oppose independence."

The statement went on to mildly "encourage a process of dialogue to find a way forward that respects democracy and the rule of law."

The SNP has entirely avoided any criticism of the EU and its component governments for supporting the dictatorial actions of the Spanish government. The same statement concluded by invoking the EU's "political and moral responsibility to support dialogue to identify how the situation can be resolved peacefully and democratically."

Subsequently, Catalan ministers have been locked up, stripped naked and charged with rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds, or have fled the country. And the Scottish government has said nothing at all.

One does not need to endorse the reactionary perspective of the Catalan nationalists in seeking to create a mini-state as a low-tax investment platform at the expense of the working class to be struck by the cool response of Scottish nationalists to the fate of their peers in Catalonia.

Even a motion to the Scottish parliament calling for recognition of the Catalan parliament's independence declaration and on the EU, the Council of Europe and "all other European institution" to ensure a "peaceful, diplomatic and transparent transition of power from Spain to Catalonia" has, thus far, been signed by only 21 SNP Members of the Scottish Parliament. Demonstrations against the jailing of the Catalan ministers have been very small affairs and have been entirely ignored by the SNP.

The indifference is striking given that Catalan and Scottish nationalists, particularly amongst the pseudo-left, have hailed each other as fraternal progressive movements, shining examples of "civic nationalism." Scottish flags are frequently and prominently displayed at Catalan secessionist demonstrations, Catalan flags at the much smaller Scottish equivalent.

So much for solidarity, when class interests are at stake.

Scotland and Catalonia are both wealthy regions within major imperialist powers. Both separatist movements represent the interests of sections of the regional bourgeoisie and upper middle class seeking a greater share of profits extracted from the exploitation of the working class. Both aim to do this by establishing direct relationships with global finance, transnational corporations and particularly the EU, rather than have these mediated through the UK or Spain. Both seek continued EU and NATO membership for their secessionist projects. Short of outright separation, both stoke regional chauvinism to extract a

greater share of national wealth from central government, diverting social tensions along channels that excuse their own pursuit of austerity by blaming central government while deepening divisions in the working class.

At the same conference where the SNP issued a token criticism of Spanish state repression, Sturgeon articulated her main concerns, warning of the “utter chaos that is now engulfing the UK, when we look forward and see the implications of Brexit, that slow motion car crash that is developing right now ...”

The SNP’s overarching aim is charting a course defending Scotland as a European investment platform through the ever deepening, multi-faceted crisis of the British departure from the EU. Above all, the SNP intend to maintain good relations with all the major European powers, including Spain, and the EU institutions, while offering to work with anyone willing to assist in keeping Britain in the EU single market.

The SNP lost its 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and it is acutely aware that support for separation has declined since then. In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit poll in 2016, where Scotland voted by 62-38 percent to remain in the EU, and with the SNP by far the largest party in Scotland, Sturgeon said for the record that a new referendum on independence is all but inevitable. But she knows that support for remaining in the EU does not translate into support for breaking up Britain and a new border between Scotland and England.

Aware that talk of a new referendum, along with the SNP government’s own austerity policies, contributed to the loss of half a million votes at the last general election, Sturgeon has tied a new poll directly to the outcome of the Brexit process. She told the BBC at the time of the SNP conference: “I won’t give any further consideration to the timing, until Brexit and the terms of Brexit become clearer, until we’ve got a clear line of sight about what all that means for Scotland.”

Under those explosive circumstance, to have the slightest chance of retaining EU membership the SNP would need support from every EU member, including Spain, Italy and Belgium—countries with their own separatist movements—for accession to the EU. And without access to the Single European Market, the so-called “independence” project is wholly unviable.

Glasgow Herald journalist and columnist David Pratt summed up the Scottish government’s position: “Winning over Madrid’s support for Scotland’s future relationship with Europe given Brexit has not been easy. While signs of improvement in securing that Spanish support were becoming evident, it would be all too easy to sour or squander any gains with Madrid over Catalonia.”

In the face of SNP’s response to the Catalan crisis and its ever more open rightward shift, the SNP’s pseudo-left appendages are deeply exposed, paralysed and demoralised. Writing in the *Scottish Socialist Voice*, Hugh Cullen of the Scottish Socialist Party complained that “formerly active and vibrant Yes groups have either folded, become social gatherings or are dominated by nationalism detached from reality.”

Musing on Catalan events, and their implications for the pseudo-left in Scotland, SSP leader Colin Fox blogged, “The tactics the Independence movement employed in Catalonia in holding this referendum may well have backfired. It has not

persuaded a majority of Catalans to support Independence. It has grievously underestimated the powers the Spanish state would employ against it and the huge inequity in the power relations it faced here.”

Cat Boyd, writing in the pro-independence *National*, declared her belief that Catalonia was a marker for the future of the Scottish independence movement: “Holyrood will only seek a referendum when such a vote would be in its best interests; Westminster will only allow it when it believes it would be to its own advantage. Britain’s government today is as confused as Spain’s, and the repressive state thrives in these situations.” Boyd concluded, “What’s happening in Catalonia is horrible, but don’t say it can’t happen here.”

During decades of political deceptions by the pseudo-left, presenting Catalan or Scottish nationalism as progressive and viable, the claim was that, were a vote to be won, the issue of separation and independence could easily and peacefully be resolved. A new capitalist state, the pseudo-left claimed, would be more capable and willing to implement economic measures of social improvement, not least for themselves.

That a profusion of new small states could lead to a rebirth of social reformism flies in the face of the logic of world economy, which renders the notion of national economic independence impossible. Moreover, it is belied by the reality of the impact of separatist movements in the Balkans and elsewhere.

This counts for nothing for the pseudo-left. Still less do they consider that the dominant sections of the capitalist class might oppose the fragmentation of a powerful and well-armed state apparatus on which their rule depends.

In the face of the threat of state violence directed against the Catalan secessionist movement, the pseudo-left now calls for caution and compliance. Their volte-face proves politically that the only social force that can defend democratic and social rights is the working class. But to do that it must be unified, not fragmented along national and regional lines. The defence of the Catalan working class from the threat of state repression demands the mobilisation of the entire Spanish and European working class in the struggle for a United Socialist States of Europe, and the abolition of the continent’s reactionary division into rival nation states.

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