

Former leader Alex Salmond's arrest threatens to tear Scottish National Party apart

By Steve James
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Former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond has been charged with 14 offences, including two of attempted rape, nine of sexual assault, two of indecent assault and one of breach of the peace.

After a private hearing at Edinburgh Sheriff Court, Salmond, the most prominent public face and former leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), protested his innocence. He told the assembled press, “The only thing I can say is I refute absolutely the allegation of criminality and I will defend myself to the utmost in court.”

Salmond explained that he was unable to make any further comment “until proceedings are concluded.” He would not answer questions, he said, because “I’m informed that court rules are that your questions and my answers might breach court rules.”

Salmond is entitled to the presumption of innocence. Under Scottish law, the media is prevented from going into detail about the background to the case, referring to evidence that might be heard or the possible outcome.

Salmond’s arrest comes amid escalating factional warfare now affecting every major British ruling class party, under the impact of the profound geopolitical instability provoked by the Brexit crisis and immense class tensions. Both the Conservative and Labour parties are hopelessly divided over Brexit. They are unable to fashion a common response, unable, thus far, to even find a mechanism to prevent a “no deal” Brexit despite all the threats of supply chain failures and food and medicine shortages such a departure from the European Union (EU) might well entail.

The only certainty is that, regardless of which faction wins, the working class will be targeted for intensified exploitation and the destruction of vital social provisions to ensure that British capitalism can continue to challenge its major rivals for trade and investment.

Relations between Salmond and his successor and former protégée Nicola Sturgeon are thoroughly poisonous—meaning that the latest legal turn of events could tear the SNP apart.

Salmond resigned as SNP leader immediately following the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, which those seeking independence lost decisively by 55 to 45 percent. He was replaced by Sturgeon, whose initial approach differed little from Salmond. Despite losing the independence poll, the SNP ballooned in membership topping out at as much as 125,000.

Sturgeon continued Salmond’s technique of imposing austerity with regional tweaks, while placing blame for them on funding decisions imposed by Westminster. Salmond, for his part, won a Westminster electoral seat in 2015. Debate within the SNP and its periphery hinged on whether it was wise to begin a low-level campaign for a second independence referendum after the failure of their 2014 campaign or to keep the demand as a general principle while focusing on calls for greater autonomy.

This debate became bitter and heated with the Brexit vote of 2016.

The Scottish electorate voted to remain in the European Union (EU) by a large majority, 63 to 37 percent, against the narrower British decision to leave.

Sturgeon immediately stated that a second independence referendum was back on the table as the only means to secure continued Scottish membership of the EU. However, this was largely for the record given that the large majority opposed to Brexit does not translate to a sudden shift towards support for Scottish independence. Moreover, all plans by the SNP to develop Scotland as a low-tax investment platform modelled on the Republic of Ireland depend upon access to the Single European Market—and the EU 27 did not look favourably

on moves to break up the UK when they wanted Brexit reversed and feared any encouragement of separatist movements in Catalonia and elsewhere.

Sturgeon therefore focused on securing anti-Brexit alliances at Westminster and leading opposition to the threat of a no-deal exit from the EU—seeking the backing of dominant sections of business and finance, including those in Scotland, reliant on the EU’s single market and customs union. The SNP has repeatedly offered Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn a coalition pact for a future Labour minority government, only to be rebuffed.

Salmond, who retains a large base of support in the SNP, used his distance from office to position himself as the voice of “grassroots nationalism.” Following the loss of his parliamentary constituency in North East Scotland in 2017, he also took up a broadcasting role with RT, the Russian government-funded news channel, who offered him a weekly current affairs slot where he could pose as a political “outsider.”

Salmond was vehemently attacked from across the political spectrum, including from within the pro-NATO SNP. Sturgeon commented that she “would have advised against RT and suggested he [Salmond] seek a different channel to air what I am sure will be an entertaining show.” She insisted, “Neither myself nor the SNP will shy away from criticising Russian policy when we believe it is merited.”

An SNP spokesman said, “The SNP has no connection to Alex’s company or his media interests. The SNP has regularly expressed concern over actions by the Russian government.”

During the crisis last year over the alleged poisoning by nerve agent of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, the SNP’s leader in Westminster, Ian Blackford, effectively urged a boycott of Salmond’s show describing the party’s former leader as a “private individual.” Salmond’s programme, which continues on RT, had questioned the Conservative government’s insistence that the Russian government was responsible for the attack.

In August, Salmond resigned from the SNP to pursue a judicial review of the Scottish government’s handling of a case against him involving allegations of sexual harassment. He issued a statement complaining of “a procedure so unjust that even now I have not been allowed to see and therefore to properly challenge the case against me.” Salmond won his judicial review earlier this month, having crowdfunded £100,000 [US\$132,000] from supporters to pay for his challenge.

At Edinburgh’s Court of Session, Lord Pentland ruled

in early January that the Scottish government’s actions were “unlawful in respect that they were procedurally unfair” and had been “tainted with apparent bias.”

It emerged in court that the Scottish government’s investigating officer had had substantial contact with one of the women accusing Salmond of impropriety, before taking on a role against Salmond. Among those attending the hearings in support of Salmond were former Scottish Justice Secretary, Kenny MacAskill, and a former presiding officer of the Scottish parliament, Tricia Marwick.

MacAskill, who held his position for seven years, told ITV Border, “I’m a friend of Alex ... and you stand by your friends. And I think that the actions of the government, as the courts decided, were cack-handed and indeed wrong.”

MacAskill took the opportunity to attack Sturgeon, suggesting that a puritanical inner circle were intent on “driving out” anyone seen as a threat to Sturgeon. MacAskill suggested Sturgeon’s husband Peter Murrell should resign as the SNP’s chief executive.

Days after winning his case, Salmond elaborated to the pro-independence *Sunday National* on his differences with Sturgeon: “Nicola should be concentrating all her energies on the independence agenda when we will never have better circumstances. ... As far as I am concerned Westminster’s Brexit difficulty should be Scotland’s opportunity.”

Joyce McMillan, a *Scotsman* journalist and advocate for Sturgeon, replied, “If Nicola Sturgeon is proceeding with great caution ... it is because she has good reason to ... she knows that Scotland remains almost evenly divided on the matter of independence.”

She concluded, “Sometimes, amid the maelstrom of Brexit politics, it is wise to step back a little and look at the big picture of where we would like Scotland and the other countries of these islands to be in 25 years’ time ... we are unlikely to get there by seeking to snatch a second independence referendum out of the jaws of the Brexit crisis, and pushing a divided electorate to a knife-edge decision.”

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