



The Progressive Alliance: Why the SNP needs it

Tommy Sheppard and Anne McLaughlin

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Tommy Sheppard was born in Coleraine, Northern Ireland, in 1959, and moved to Scotland to study medicine at Aberdeen University. He graduated with a degree in politics and sociology and went to London. Returning to Scotland in 1993 Tommy set up the Stand Comedy Club in 1995, which he started as a hobby and built into a successful business. Tommy lives in Edinburgh with his partner Kate and cocker spaniel Henry. Tommy was an active member of the Labour Party for over 20 years. He stood for parliament in 1992, and was a councillor in Hackney from 1986 to 1993.

He moved back north of the border when John Smith appointed him Assistant General Secretary of the Labour Party in Scotland. As Tony Blair took Labour in search of Middle England, Tommy was one of many who got left behind. In September 2014, after spending two years working on the Yes campaign, he finally got round to joining the SNP. In May 2015, Tommy Sheppard was elected as the MP for Edinburgh East with a majority of 9,106 and 49.2% of the vote. Tommy is the SNP's spokesperson on the Cabinet Office and speaks for the party on proportional representation and constitutional reform.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The progressive alliance, or indeed alliances, is based on a series of local and national agreements to cooperate to secure the most progressive outcome at and after the next general election. For this to happen support for such alliances must be built within and across all the progressive parties, as well as deep within civil and economic society. This is one of a series of publications exploring why the progressive parties and wider social movements should support such an alliance-building approach.

WHAT IS IN IT FOR US?

We have been asked by Compass to contribute to a discussion on whether and how the SNP might support a progressive alliance within the UK. This is relevant not only while Scotland remains part of the UK, but may also create alliances and perspectives which inform progressive governance of the British Isles after Scotland becomes an independent country.

Following the call for a second Scottish independence referendum in March 2017 and the determination of the Scottish Parliament to allow people in Scotland a choice of post-Brexit futures we are about to begin to campaign in earnest to win a referendum on Scottish independence. While that may only be of passing interest to people engaged in the debate about a UK progressive alliance, it will be all consuming for our party. Our focus will be on Scotland in the immediate future and our ability to take part in debates on a UK progressive alliance will be limited. Nonetheless, we set out some arguments below which we hope will ensure that our intentions are not misunderstood and which could form the basis for alliances once we win the constitutional reforms we seek.

One could argue that it is actually more in the interests of independence campaigners to see the UK unreformed and ever more reactionary. The worse the UK gets the stronger the case for leaving it becomes. Some might say, therefore, that not only does taking part in an alliance to secure progressive reform in the UK not help the cause of independence, it could undermine it. With the prospect of the UK becoming more isolationist and more divided on ethnic lines, and with the public sector and workers' rights under attack, we should simply let the Brexiteers get on with creating their dystopian future while we busy ourselves building the case for secession.

But that has not been the SNP's attitude. Since June 2016 we have consistently argued for the whole of the UK to stay in the Single Market, only advancing the case for a differentiated post-Brexit arrangement for Scotland once it was clear that the Tory government was set on the hardest Brexit possible. Even now, as we prepare for a Scottish referendum, we will still argue for UK-wide arrangements which hurt working people least. Our reasoning is simple.

First, just because things get worse people will not necessarily demand change. If you hit someone with a big stick and there's no guarantee they will fight back, they might just lie down and bleed.

We have been there before. During the long, lean years of the Thatcher government, people saw whole towns and industries devastated, mass unemployment blighted many parts of Scotland and Labour lost general election after general election. But still Scotland stuck with the UK. Scots had an alternative in the SNP and independence but despite the extent of the de-industrialisation, or perhaps because of it, they lay down and bled.

Second, while we want independence as soon as possible and will be putting the collective energy of a mass movement into making sure we win it, nothing is guaranteed. Until we win a referendum, and see its outcome implemented, the lives of the people of Scotland will be affected by decisions at Westminster.

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As SNP MPs we were elected on the mandate 'Stronger for Scotland', which broadly means attempting to get the best deal we can from the UK for as long as we remain part of it. It is therefore very much in our short term interest also to work towards a change of government in the UK and secure an administration that will halt the reduction in the relative and absolute size of the public sector, combat inequality through progressive tax reform, and further devolve control to the nations and regions of the UK. We have worked hard over the last two years to discharge that mandate, and although

our time at Westminster may be drawing to a close we will maintain this stance until we leave.

Third, being part of a progressive alliance in the UK can allow us to explain and promote the progressive case for Scottish independence and help build support for the proposition in Scotland and beyond. As we argue below, the character of the Yes movement was unequivocally progressive and it garnered the support of most left of centre activists in Scotland. But there were some who were not convinced and we should aim to have them with us next time. Explaining how independence fits into the progressive politics of Britain will at least start that dialogue. It will also help to normalise the proposition for our immediate neighbours, to remove the fear and misunderstanding that surrounded the argument in 2014.

We seek control of our own affairs not to withdraw from Britain, Europe or the world, but to better engage with other countries, on our own terms and as equal partners

Fourth, the way we campaign for independence will have an effect on its success and sustainability. We seek control of our own affairs not to withdraw from Britain, Europe or the world, but to better engage with other countries, on our own terms and as equal partners. The relationships we create now will continue in the future and will help the new Scottish state, its institutions and civil society to engage cooperatively with the people and governments of England and Wales.

And besides all that we all have family and friends who we would not wish to abandon to the forces of reaction if we can help it.

ONLY ONE TORY

To allow any prospect of the left surviving, the first-past-the-post electoral system has to change. We have long campaigned for proportional representation and will continue to do so, although in Scotland the SNP is the biggest benefactor of the status quo, having won 95% of the seats in Scotland with 50% of the vote.

A proportional voting system where the number of seats a party wins reflects the number of votes cast would not bring about a majority left government – not yet, anyway – but it would at least prevent the elimination of left representation in parliament and offer the prospect of a coalition in which left wing thought had influence. As an independent country, Scotland would much rather deal with that than face a hostile neighbour forever covered in Tory permafrost.

So, from the SNP's point of view, there are many reasons why we should support a progressive alliance, but with a major caveat. The progressive alliance has necessarily focused on electoral politics, particularly in how to translate a non-Tory majority in particular seats into a progressive win under the first-past-the-post system. In fairness, it is hard to see how this can be applied in a country where only one of the 59 MPs is a Tory.

We are not trying to be arrogant here, and not suggesting the SNP has a monopoly of good ideas. But it is a fact that the Tories are our opposition in Scotland and that we have long sought to oust them in the UK. So removing an SNP MP to replace them with a Liberal Democrat, Green or Labour representative does not change the arithmetic of the anti-Tory bloc. Besides, as we understand the progressive alliance concept, tactical compromises are only sought when challenging Tory-held seats – and there is only one. However, there may well be a need to look at parties in a UK-wide progressive alliance not challenging SNP incumbents in some seats, where to do so might split the left of centre vote and allow a Tory to gain the seat.

WHAT HAPPENED LAST TIME?

In the 2015 general election the SNP could hardly have been clearer about its intention to change the UK government. Although we rejected the idea of having a formal pact with Labour it was pretty clear that given the chance we would be voting for anyone other than the Tories to form an administration. Many in the SNP would have gone further to formalise a deal with Labour but held back as it became obvious how the prospect was being used by the Tories. But our determination to vote against the Tories was unconditional.

The Tory press went apoplectic at the notion. You remember the billboards of a grinning Alex Salmond with a little Ed Miliband in his breast pocket. Labour was hounded in England for daring to think about doing a deal with the Caledonian devils who were hell bent on destroying Great Britain we knew it.

The Tory campaign came close to being xenophobic

The hypocrisy of the feigned Tory rage was breath-taking. Only months after they ran a campaign to reassure Scots that their views would be respected in the UK, now they were saying it was illegitimate that Scotland's elected representatives should have any say in its government. The Tory campaign came close to being xenophobic, suggesting that there was something sinister about the SNP's intentions and SNP MPs should be denied access to the levers of political power. It was as if – after Scottish people had voted to stay in the union – some now felt that Scotland should be seen and not heard. Time to get back to business as usual.

This was quite an insult to the Scottish electorate and their resentment at being told their votes could never help shape a government may well have been a further factor in the SNP landslide that year. But politically that was irrelevant. The Tories had written off Scotland and their demonising of the SNP was a message intended for south of the border.

Labour's response was inadequate, to say the least. Under pressure, Miliband said, 'I am not

going to have a Labour government if it means deals or coalitions with the SNP.' It seemed as if Labour was buying into the narrative that the enemy within was amassing on the northern border.

With things as they are it is highly likely these questions will arise again and Labour will need a better response. It works just to say the party is fighting for every vote and every seat and simply refuse to get drawn into speculation.

But if that breaks down the only plausible response for democrats is to point out that all parties have a responsibility to play the hand the electorate deals them. Then all MPs of whatever persuasion must work to try to form a government that reflects majority opinion in the country. And within that mix all MPs should have equal value and be able to vote for a government that best reflects the aspirations of those who voted for them. Given the chance to do that, we are confident that SNP MPs will play a constructive part in creating a left of centre alternative government.

IS THE SNP PROGRESSIVE?

We recognise that while we might want to work with others in a progressive alliance, others might not want to work with us. Our early days in the House of Commons were marred by extremely intemperate remarks from some Labour members who likened us to Eastern European fascists. A lot of this has subsided after nearly two years of those Labour critics watching us argue for the very same policies they do, and attacking the Tories with rather more vigour and effect than many in their own ranks.

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These days the biggest critics of the SNP in parliament are those firmly on the right of the Parliamentary Labour Party. They are the same motley crew who attack their own leader incessantly, and invariably pop up to support causes such as Trident renewal, Israeli occupation of Palestine and, indeed, the first-past-the-post system enthusiastically. It is unlikely they would want to be part of a progressive alliance anyway.

Nonetheless, while we have won respect by our deeds in parliament, we are aware that there are still people in England who are unconvinced of our progressive intention. We will try to evidence our left of centre credentials in a moment, but first a word about the nature of the contemporary SNP.

THE N WORD

Many people in the SNP would not use the word nationalist to describe their political philosophy, preferring instead socialist, republican, internationalist or some other term. But as a party we do espouse a contemporary progressive nationalism and we are sick and tired of this being used against us as a term of abuse.

Let's just lance this boil. We no longer have to say this in Scotland but most people reading this don't know us quite so well. The SNP supports civic nationalism, defined in various ways but always including the words 'inclusivity', 'diversity' and 'equality'. There is no, repeat, no similarity with ethnic nationalism. Our critics who express those views do so provocatively but without believing what they are saying. As we will come on to demonstrate, our track record can easily dispel that lie.

THE SCOTTISH REALIGNMENT

The SNP has now replaced the Labour Party as the mass social democratic party in Scotland.

The SNP has now replaced the Labour Party as the mass social democratic party in Scotland. Its success is the result of a process that began more than 20 years ago. As Blair took Labour on a search for elusive Middle England, the party's traditional working-class base had to like it or lump it. But not in Scotland. The SNP had been moving leftwards throughout the 1980s as its activists cut their teeth on various campaigns against the Thatcher government. It now stood ready as an alternative for the disillusioned. A battle for Scotland's social democratic heart followed in the first decade of this century.

In 2007 the SNP became the biggest party in the Scottish Parliament and while opposition politicians danced around on the head of a coalition pin, Alex Salmond whipped the rug from under them by positioning himself on the manicured lawns of Edinburgh's famous Prestonfield House (reminiscent of, if somewhat smaller than, the US White House). Helicopter in shot, he declared to the world's waiting press that the SNP would be Scotland's first minority government.

A business-like administration took office with gusto and within months it became clear that far from being the end of the world, the SNP could actually run things pretty well and was a credible alternative to both Tory and Labour. Indeed the word soon got round that this was a government that did not just claim to be listening but actively went out around Scotland and sought opinions from different sectors.

Despite this, Labour remained the preferred choice of the Scottish electorate at Westminster. In 2010, despite the crash, foreign wars, expenses scandal and everything else, Scots stuck with Labour and elected 41 out of 59 Labour MPs.

But Labour's failure to win the UK election (and its failure to put together a coalition) destroyed it. Labour's principal argument for Scottish votes was that only the Labour Party could beat the Tories. It was a tried and tested tactic and until now it had worked very successfully.

On 9 April 1992 SNP activists reported stories of Glasgow Govan voters openly crying as they confessed they had voted Labour knowing they would lose Jim Sillars, their much loved SNP MP elected in the famous Govan by-election of 1989. They had not wanted to vote Labour, but in the two days before the general election, hundreds of Labour activists phoned round the good people of Govan begging them not to be the reason why another Tory government was elected. They told them it was so close that if Labour did not win Govan, they would not win the election. Voting for Jim Sillars would make them responsible for another four years of Tory misery. They voted Labour, got Tory.

Fast forward to 2010 and when in return for their votes the people of Scotland got a Tory coalition government it was the final nail in Labour's coffin. This time, all bets were off. The argument had run out of steam. Given a chance to kick back against a Tory government they did not vote for at the Scottish Parliament elections a year later, there seemed little point in voting Labour, and many Scottish voters switched to the SNP. The result was a majority SNP government, now in a position to implement its central policy pledge of giving Scots a vote on independence in Scotland.

Labour joined the Tories in a campaign to save the union. There's no coming back from that – not for a generation anyway

Even at that stage the Labour decline might have been halted. Had they put a third

home-rule option on the ballot, or allowed their members to campaign either way (as with Brexit), they might still have maintained enough support to bounce back. They did not. Independence supporters could not believe their luck. They held their collective breaths, waiting for Labour to work out that it made sense to offer a home-rule option on the ballot but they never did. Instead, Labour joined the Tories in a campaign to save the union. There's no coming back from that – not for a generation anyway.

SNP First Minister Alex Salmond had advocated giving people a home-rule option on the ballot. Only those closest to him know if it was the democrat, the political strategist or the gambler in him that prompted him to push for something that could have seen off the prospect of independence for a generation and more. Either way he did the democratic thing and Labour chose not to support it.

As Labour leaders cosied up to David Cameron, the SNP set about putting together the biggest campaign in Scottish history. The party was acutely aware that while it could get the question of independence on the ballot paper, it could not win the referendum by itself.

Before the independence vote the SNP formed an alliance at national level with many non-aligned activists, the Greens and the Socialist Party. Yes Scotland spawned hundreds of local activist groups and many specific national groups, such as NHS for Yes, Africans for Independence and the pivotal Women for Independence. In an act of remarkable selflessness the SNP suspended its party organisation and encouraged members to campaign under the wider Yes Scotland umbrella. The SNP was aware that while the SNP machine was suspended, Yes was providing a platform for minority parties to come to the fore and benefit from the increased exposure. The SNP did not care. This, after all, was what itP was formed for. In most cases it was impossible looking at local Yes campaigners to say who was in the SNP and who was not. And the interesting thing was that no one ever asked.

The Yes campaign provided a focus for anyone who wanted change

The Yes campaign provided a focus for anyone who wanted change. It brought together those who had long campaigned for national autonomy with those who increasingly saw independence as a more pragmatic and immediate route to social and economic reform than staying in the UK. The message was unrelentingly positive, always talking up the potential for a new progressive country, and arguing for better public services, equality of opportunity, and a fair distribution of wealth.

The Yes campaign was about many things, and least of all about identity. The media would have had you believe differently, but the campaign was not about nationality, instead it was about empowerment and taking control. It was breathtaking. The vibrancy and inclusiveness of the campaign was a world away from couthy (cosy) shortbread tin images of Scottishness. We already had our flags and anthems, we were at ease with being Scottish in all its forms, now we wanted political control. It was left to the

hapless Jim Murphy to play the identity card as he claimed his case to be ‘patriotic’.

There were no insurmountable barriers to independence, only challenges we would overcome. We had no opponents, only supporters yet to be convinced. People were encouraged to speak one to one with family, friends, taxi drivers, school and workmates. And they did. A million conversations brought the campaign alive. And people were open to persuasion. We started the campaign at 25% support and ended at 45%. Put another way, three-quarters of a million people voted for independence on 18 September 2014 who did not feel that way at the start.

THE LEGACY OF DEFEAT

It was a remarkable and inspiring campaign without precedent, but it did not win. The legacy is vast, however. It shapes Scottish politics today and is likely to do so for years to come.

As Yes activists came to terms with the result something remarkable began to happen. There's a computer at SNP HQ which hosts the membership system and every time someone joins online it goes beep. In the morning of 19 September it started beeping at a much faster rate. By the following day it was a continuous tone. A surge was under way.

In their defeat those who had campaigned for independence were determined that this was not the end of the story. En masse, and without prompting, they joined the pro-Indy parties. The memberships of the Greens and socialists rose, but the main recipient of this desire to keep things going was the SNP.

Today one adult in 30 in Scotland is a member of the SNP

In the space of a few months SNP membership soared from 25,000 to over 100,000. It kept rising throughout 2015 and 2016 too. Today one adult in 30 in Scotland is a member of the SNP: the equivalent membership for a UK-wide party would be around 1.5 million. Even the Labour Party, with its massive increase in membership during Jeremy Corbyn's leadership challenge, has only around a third of that.

These new recruits were driven above all by the desire to keep the campaign for self-government alive. Paradoxically, the political organisations advocating independence reached unprecedented strength a short time after the opportunity to do anything about it had been maxed out.

The growth in membership was not equally matched by a growth in activism. The number of activists on the ground perhaps doubled, indicating that many had joined simply to register support and pay their money. But people who joined were veterans of the biggest

campaign in Scottish political history – seasoned and ready to go. At every level the new recruits were welcomed. Many turned up to their first SNP meeting to see familiar faces who they would have been working with in the Yes campaign, only then becoming aware of their party affiliation.

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Research suggests that the new members were younger, more female and more left wing than the cohort they joined. Any reading of the policies passed by recent conferences shows that the aspirations of active members are indelibly left of centre.

SCOTLAND'S MASS PARTY

Today's SNP is more like the political wing of a movement than a conventional political party. The party did not have the staff resources and structures to absorb and put to work the new influx adequately. It still doesn't, and yet it works.

Critics have wrongly suggested that the strength of the SNP is its discipline. As if thousands of foot-soldiers are marshalled by a well-oiled machine. Believe us, we don't have much of a machine, and at times it is far from well oiled. We have a small but dedicated and exceptionally hard-working team at our Edinburgh HQ whose members do it for the same reasons as other SNP supporters. In fact, the SNP's strength comes from something else that often gets mistaken for discipline: goodwill and commitment.

SNP members, regardless of whatever else they care about, are all passionately committed to one thing: Scotland's independence. It is an overarching, compelling aim that each and every one of us can coalesce around. And no matter how positively you campaign for independence, there is always a feeling that someone (the British establishment) has done you and your country wrong. So you have shared hurt, shared solutions and shared purpose.

As a result, on the whole SNP members exhibit enormous respect for each other and the collective, more we think than can be observed in any other major party. And there is a camaraderie that comes from fighting the establishment and repeatedly losing, until one day we hope we might just win. The discipline that engulfed the party when we started winning was organic, instinctive and right across the board.

Today's SNP is unashamedly left of centre, in the tradition of classic West European social democracy. It has woven together a civic nationalism and the democratic case for national autonomy with a programme of social and economic reform intended to reduce inequality and see the wealth of the country more fairly divided. It is pro public service and pro trade unions. It has to all intents and purposes replaced the Labour Party as the mass socialist party in Scotland. That said, it is a broad church. No party that marshals 50% of the electorate could be otherwise.

THE SNP IN GOVERNMENT

The SNP's detractors are keen to point to the party's record in government as evidence that it is anything but socialist. We are not afraid of criticism and sometimes there is a desire among party members to be more radical than the Scottish government appears to be, but more often than not such criticism does not stand up to analysis. It is simply political point-scoring, which falls flat with the electorate, who do not recognise the catastrophe the opposition parties describe. And all too frequently people pretend that somehow the SNP government is a free agent able to choose from a range of policy options, when in fact – precisely because we are not an independent country – the room for manoeuvre is severely curtailed by Westminster.

Let's take tax as an example. The SNP is committed to making our tax system more progressive and the Scottish government has recently refused to pass on tax cuts to the better off by not increasing the top rate threshold. But we have been condemned by Labour for not increasing the top rate, even when evidence suggests that without any powers over company taxation higher rate taxpayers would simply reward themselves through dividends rather than payroll and avoid increased income tax.

We are also berated by the same critics for not generally increasing income tax in order to offset Westminster-imposed cuts in public service funding through the block grant. But without the power to direct overall fiscal and economic policy in Scotland there is no guarantee that such tax rises would achieve the desired effect. They might simply result in companies and workers relocating south of the border, reducing overall tax take. Indeed, central government might just use the pretext of additional revenues raised in Scotland to cut the block grant further, seeing the take home pay of ordinary people reduced for no gain, and an effective transfer of money south of the border.

That said, within its limited powers the SNP government has made some significant changes in areas such as welfare and housing. The right to buy has been abolished in Scotland and today social housing cannot be sold to individuals. If the British government goes ahead with removing Housing Benefit from 18–21

year olds, the Scottish government will restore it. The bedroom tax was mitigated though payments from the Scottish Welfare Fund and under powers newly devolved to the Scottish government, it will be abolished in Scotland. As powers over some welfare benefits are finally being devolved to Scotland the difference in approach is palpable. To quote our Social Security Minister:

There is value in looking at whether or not we continue to use the word 'benefit', because there is an implication in there that the rest of us are doing something nice for somebody else, when actually what we have said consistently as a government is that social security is an investment we make collectively in ourselves.

PUBLIC PROVISION AND UNIVERSALISM

By 2020 Tory and Tory coalition governments at Westminster will have cut the Scottish government's available funds by more than 10% in real terms. In such circumstances something has to give. Reorganisations of further education, police and fire services have aimed to reduce overheads through centralisation while protecting frontline services. Still that is not good enough for the very parties who put us in this position by voting to stay inside a system where we operate with one hand tied behind our backs. Still they go on the attack without ever offering any alternatives.

We have also managed somehow to avoid imposing cuts to local councils on the scale that is being experienced in England. But it follows that a government without the full powers of an independent country can only reorganise, save and mitigate so much without something eventually having to give.

But in the midst of this and many unpalatable decisions being forced on us principles have been defended. Chief among these is resistance to privatisation of public services. The debate about the public sector in Scotland is about how to reform and reorganise within a public interest, non-profit framework. There is almost no debate about whether public services should be privatised – that argument has been won.

The old socialist adage 'from each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs' is alive and well in Scottish public policy

Likewise the Scottish government retains a commitment to universalism that seems absent among the left in England. The old socialist adage 'from each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs' is alive and well in Scottish public policy. We believe

everyone should help fund public services through taxation and everyone should be able to access them.

Just because some people might be well enough off to afford private health care or education it does not mean they should lose access to these public services. In fact, if they do, then we begin to eradicate the political support for public services, making them residual. Public services should be the normal way in which people combine to provide the services and facilities they need, not a safety net providing a place of last resort for those who can afford no better.

Those who attack this principle deploy no end of shibboleths in their argument, from rich pensioners getting fuel payments or bus passes to middle class parents getting child benefit. But this is a price worth paying for decent public services which command widespread support across the community. And having universal services allows us to make the case for progressive tax reform to fund them, a case which is toast without them.

The SNP will gradually try to increase the proportion of gross domestic product that is deployed in the public realm when given the power to do so, a clear challenge to the political consensus south of the border, where there has been an absolute and relative decline in the public sector. But there are severe limits to the extent to which this can happen while Scotland is a regional economy inside the UK and unable to ring-fence policy so that, for example, the benefits of increased government spending can be reaped in additional tax revenues.

Let us quickly look at some other matters on which the SNP government has no power or competence to judge whether the party is progressive or not.

First, the constitution. We continue to argue for major electoral reform with a parliament where each party gets seats in proportion to the votes cast for it. We argue for the abolition of the unelected House of Lords. We support decentralisation and regional government through the UK although we are now forbidden to vote for it in the British parliament. And we

support extending the vote to all 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland for elections which are under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

We continue to argue for major electoral reform with a parliament where each party gets seats in proportion to the votes cast for it

Second, defence. We are the lead opponents to nuclear weapons and have argued against Trident renewal incessantly at Westminster. Anyone attending an SNP conference is left in no doubt about our absolute commitment to getting rid of these weapons of mass destruction, as any mention of it is guaranteed a response no other policy, possibly including independence, can attract. We advocate that the UK should cease being a nuclear power and develop a defence strategy which gives up the vestiges of empire and confronts the security problems in the modern world, notably cyber-attacks and international terrorism.

Third, in international policy we argue for human rights and increased support for developing countries, particularly through reviewing trading agreements which enforce their impoverishment. We have resisted intervention in foreign wars where there is no international mandate nor plan for peace built on letting the people of the country in which the war is fought decide their own future.

The SNP rejects the austerity delusion

Fourth, in overall economic matters we have repeatedly spelled out policies for public sector led growth through spending stimulus and reforming taxation to ensure it is based on ability to pay. The SNP rejects the austerity delusion that has been commonplace in UK public policy.

At every turn we have voted against Tory and Tory coalition budgets that have unsuccessfully tried to cut debt only to increase it through falling growth.

And finally let's take a brief look at our record on social policy. On lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights the SNP has a track record to be proud of. Indeed, last year Scotland was declared to give the best legal protections in Europe for people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. And recently Nicola Sturgeon pledged to reform gender recognition laws for transgendered people, ahead of all other political leaders.

Here is an example of a party using its popularity in some policy areas to drive a change in social attitudes in others. We don't do things based on how popular they might be. We do what we believe to be the right thing to do. And if it is something that does not have popular support right now, we try to take people with us nonetheless.

Labour used to understand such pragmatism, knowing where you want to take the country but being canny about how you do it, but no longer seems to. When we hear Labour MPs talk about the need to change immigration policy because the public wants them to, we despair. Of course you have to listen to people but not to the extent that you do something that goes against all your principles, simply because you are threatened with a loss of votes.

Immigration is not a big vote winner, but the SNP government has repeatedly and passionately declared Scotland's desire to welcome people to this country wherever they have come from and whatever the reason, whether to study, work or seek refuge. The SNP understands its responsibilities to people in need of sanctuary and values the enrichment of other cultures, languages and customs. We also need people to come and live in Scotland, to help us grow the economy. We need a bigger population. So whether it is through duty, desire or need, you will hear SNP members and – more importantly – SNP government ministers speak passionately and positively about immigration.

We recognise that immigrants face problems when they come to Scotland and racist attitudes exist. It would be foolish and dangerous to say otherwise. But anecdotal evidence and crime statistics show that immigration is viewed very differently in Scotland from how it is viewed in the rest of the UK. It will take much research to understand this fully, but we believe that the position our political leaders take on this matter has considerable influence on the public's views. People are more influenced by politicians than they care to admit, and sometimes that is for the good.

BACK TO INDEPENDENCE

How does independence fit into all of this? It became clear during the Yes campaign in Scotland during 2012–14 that old allegiances were changing.

Undoubtedly there are some people who believe in independence no matter what, irrespective of whether things would be better or worse in an independent Scotland. That said, even those people argue that independence is not just about having our hands on our own money, but about having the power to make decisions that can make all the difference.

But for most people the argument is now about taking power for a purpose: independence as a means for transformation. There is a desire that decisions about Scotland's future should be taken by the people who live there, and that the process of doing this would result in a fairer and more equitable division of wealth within the country. Moreover there is a very strong feeling that Scotland wants to play its full role in the world, rather than have its character and intentions represented through the prism of the UK, in which it will always be the minority player.

SOLIDARITY

Although – other than a dwindling band on the Labour left – few on the left in Scotland still argue against independence, and indeed all of the socialist parties campaigned for it, some remain to be convinced. The principal argument centres on the concept of solidarity: that the working class of Glasgow and Edinburgh have more interests in common with the working class of London and Liverpool than they do with the ruling class of either country.

In one sense this is a truism; of course people who have very little have more in common than those who have wealth and property. But that is true not only across the Scottish border. Those in the working class of Glasgow also have more in common with the working class of Lisbon, Marseilles, Milan, Detroit or... than with the non-working classes. You get the idea. To claim cross border common interests as a reason for maintaining the union is to suggest that the UK as presently constituted is an optimum polity, which allows the democratic advancement of class interests. Our basic contention is that if this were ever true it is certainly not true any longer.

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In actuality the union prevents a potential progressive majority in Scotland from achieving radical social and economic reform because it is hitched to a conservative majority, which frustrates its every ambition. We suggest that an independent Scotland would allow the emergence of a progressive country in the

north of Britain, which would espouse equality and solidarity within and beyond its borders. We believe this could act as a catalyst for progressive change throughout these islands. Billy Bragg recognised this when he claimed that the only way England could ‘wake up’ politically was through Scottish independence. In 2011 the socialist singer songwriter said our independence would throw up ‘the possibility of a more progressive England’.

Already, many in England look enviously at free university education, free medicine and free elderly care in Scotland. They are told by the *Daily Mail* and others that these things are only possible by dint of English taxpayers subsidising Scottish ones. This is a lie. But with independence we would demonstrate beyond question that providing free university education, medicine and elderly care is possible simply because people choose this, by administering things in a different way, according to different priorities. Then, we hope, England would choose that too.

But even when Scotland is independent a lot of governing will be necessary across Britain. British-wide structures will need to be established for everything from intercity transport to security coordination. In such structures a progressive Scottish government could argue for a policy programme that defends public provision, democratic freedoms and workers’ rights in a manner a Tory government would never do. There is another democratic concern here. Some suggest that somehow Scottish votes are required to achieve progressive governments in England and that Scottish independence somehow betrays ordinary folk in England, leaving them to a permanent Tory government forever and a day. That is not actually true. Since 1945 there have been 30 years of majority Labour government. In only eight of those did the majority depend on seats in Scotland.

But even if a UK Labour government required Scottish MPs’ support this would only mean that people in England were being governed against their will, which democrats should not defend. The left in England is clearly not in a good place electorally but it is not dead yet. We very much

want to see a renewal of the left in England and hope that it can build majority support if not by itself then in alliance with liberal progressive opinion, which can provide an alternative to the Tories. It is very much in an independent Scotland’s interests to have our nearest neighbour led by a government that espouses similar social and economic policies rather than being set implacably against the direction of a Scottish government.

But that majority is unlikely to come about under our corrupt first-past-the-post system, which not only persistently obliges people in Scotland to be governed by a party they do not vote for, but also allows Tories to win with a minority of votes throughout England. And that brings us back to electoral reform and the need for proportional representation.

We are convinced that Scotland will continue on the journey to self-government and that soon we will leave the UK. The midwife of that process will be our progressive alliance, determined to win political power in order to transform our country and improve the life chances and happiness of the majority. By the time of the next UK general election that process may be well under way, and as a consequence we will be unable to play any direct role in the internal politics of the remaining UK state.

But while we are leaving we would be happy as our swansong to assist in forming a left of centre UK government that will fundamentally modernise constitutional arrangements in the rest of the UK.