

# FOCUS

## **THE SNP**

The 1979 General Election combined with the apparent apathy to Westminster's rejection of the Assembly Referendum result seemed to mark the bursting of the 70s 'nationalist bubble'. Scotland, however, did not return so neatly to British party politics. The marked swing to Labour represented a decisive rejection of Thatcherism and testified to a continuing and distinctive Scottish politics.

The SNP had built its mass membership on a politics of seemingly unending success. The reversal of 1978/79 was thus traumatic. Not only did the party's membership fall dramatically, but the SNP was also thrown into a long period of bitter in-fighting, which only now seems to be coming to an end. At various times both its left faction — the 79 Group — and neo-fascist Siol nar Gaidheal were threatened with expulsion.

This period was marked, as a gut reaction

to being out-manoeuvred by Labour over devolution, by a return to a sterile 'independence nothing less' position. The 1980 District Council elections seemed to further reinforce the irrelevance of the SNP and its policies to the mass of the Scottish people. The renewed 'fundamentalist' position — which is not simply that of the Party's rightwing — smacked of a deep cynicism and near contempt for the Scottish people and in particular their labour movement.

Against the 'fundamentalist' and basically petit-bourgeois position (putting 'Scotland first' and rejecting 'British' class politics), there has been a countervailing tendency which recognises that class is the main motor of Scottish politics. The electoral setback of May 1979 resulted in the SNP's left becoming an organised force for the first time with the setting-up of the 79 Group. This faction was formed by several of the SNP's leading personalities of the 70s boom years, who had been temporarily isolated by their commitment to the failed devolution project.

The Group argued that Scottish independence could only be achieved as part of an explicitly socialist programme. The SNP's inability to hold its erstwhile Tory supporters, who had clearly got cold feet at

the referendum, together with its inability to shake the allegiance of the working class (the core of the 'yes' vote) to the Labour Party, pointed to the need for the SNP to concentrate its efforts on securing and extending its working class support on the basis of an openly socialist programme. The party, they argued, had to abandon its all things to all people approach since Scotland's politics were clearly class based. The petit-bourgeois 'Scotland first' position had been clearly shown to be misplaced by the ease with which Thatcherism drove the SNP's erstwhile working class supporters back defensively to Labour. The 79 Group has argued that the party has always been left-of-centre in terms of policy but dominated by a right wing leadership; and that it had been the right wing leadership's failure to implement these left policies which had resulted in the reversal in the party's fortunes.

To what extent could the party's policies be deemed left-of-centre? Many of the 79 Group's leaders preferred their policy positions in the past to be called 'radical' rather than 'socialist'. In this they revealed a basically social democratic position — democracy and institutional reform were emphasised rather than the question of

ownership. Relations between capital and labour were played down and class confrontation treated as a distortion which could be overcome by 'democratisation', 'decentralisation' and 'workers control'. This position fitted in neatly with the overall strategy of the SNP in the 70s.

The establishment of the 79 Group has however produced a hardening of the left's position. Public ownership now receives prominence and a leading 79 Group member has stated '... independence, like every other social advance, can only be won in the class war'. However, their position on many issues is marred by a deep sectarianism towards the broad labour movement; a tendency perhaps reflected by the 79 Group's elitist and cliquish nature within its own party. The Group has only about 300 members and concentrates recruitment amongst leading members of the SNP.

Despite its small size, the 79 Group has built an influence far in excess of its card-carrying membership through an alliance with a loose centrist grouping within the party represented by William Wolfe, the SNP's new president. At the SNP's Aberdeen conference in May, the left achieved major successes on withdrawal from



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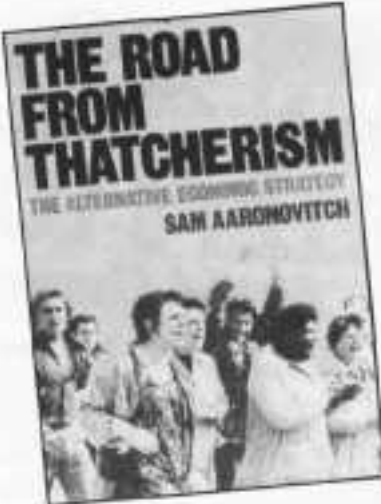
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the EEC and from NATO, but lost on a motion emphasising the role of a greatly extended public sector in Scotland's industrial regeneration. In addition the 79 Group and their centrist allies now have a small majority on the party's executive.

However this shift should not be exaggerated, as leading 79 Group members admit. Within the SNP issues like the EEC and NATO cannot be characterised simply in terms of left and right. The leftward change was exaggerated by sections of the Scottish press largely on the basis of the intervention

in support of a left-backed motion on civil disobedience by the charismatic ex-Labour MP and founder of the ill-fated Scottish Labour Party (SLP), Jim Sillars. The SNP remains basically a sort of populist social democratic party. However, at its Aberdeen conference, the organised left have given it a clear left-of-centre image, and pushed it towards a markedly different strategy from that of the 1970s.

The Aberdeen conference was marred by a deep hostility to the Labour Party in Scotland and to the STUC. The party's right wing

chairman, Gordon Wilson MP, received thunderous applause when he demagogically attacked Labour's 41 Scottish MPs as 'filleted haddocks', 'gutless, toothless and spineless' in the defence of Scotland's interests. He attacked the STUC's failure to save Linwood, forgetting that the SNP had been unable to make a serious intervention there and had indeed even failed to turn out its membership in large numbers for the February 21 unemployment demonstration in Glasgow. In dismissing Scottish Labour's Assembly proposals out of hand, he ignored

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the fact that these had resulted not from a direct threat from the SNP but largely from trade union pressure, particularly through the STUC, the work of the Scottish Communist Party and a much more principled position amongst many Labour Party people on the issue.

Such sectarianism is perhaps inevitable from a party committed to electoral politics. However, it also represents a genuine reaction against Labour's practice in Scotland and the weakness of its opposition to the Tories. This practice involves a sectarianism which applies not just to parties which threaten its electoral base but also to broader campaigns and alliances. This sectarianism must not be underestimated nor should the problems this creates for left unity and for the national movement.

Nationalism will not go away. The SNP's success is based on the political expression it has been able to give to the Scottish people's legitimate quest for national rights. Although the Labour Party has reaffirmed its commitment to an Assembly (with strong economic powers) it still sees it as a limited and secondary issue. Some of Labour's entrenched Scottish leadership may not wish to land the next Labour government with what some would regard as an embarrassingly strong commitment to an Assembly. This is a dangerous course, for Labour may not be able to contain the desire for self government so easily the second time round.

There is a clear need for the Labour left to integrate home rule with a programme for social and economic advance and harness Scottish national consciousness in a progressive direction to the building of a 'national-democratic' consciousness. This indeed is the approach of the STUC and the Scottish Communist Party. Such a perspective opens up real prospects for left unity and advance and for the isolation of the right wing nationalism of such SNP figures as Gordon Wilson and Douglas Henderson.

There is indeed a considerable reservoir of support for a new home rule project (which falls short of independence) in the SNP, though so far no one has had the courage to articulate it. A more developed labour movement position on the national question could open up the prospect of alliances here. Such an alliance must, however, be based on the principle that the next Scotland Act is drawn up by the Scottish people and their organisations, and not by Westminster civil servants and politicians.