

Alex Salmond embodied Scottish nationalism's political bankruptcy—Part 1

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This is the first article in a two-part series

Alex Salmond, former Scottish First Minister, former leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and then leader of the Alba Party died suddenly last week, having just completed a speech to the Institute of Cultural Diplomacy, delivered in North Macedonia. Salmond was just 69 but had health problems and reportedly succumbed to a massive heart attack.

His death generated an outpouring of feigned sympathy from the British political establishment for someone generally considered to be a thorn in their side due to his separatist politics. King Charles and Queen Camilla reported themselves “deeply saddened” and lauded Salmond’s “devotion to Scotland,” while Labour’s Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and two former Tory prime ministers, Rishi Sunak and David Cameron, joined in. Former Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who spent the past years in a ferocious and damaging factional struggle with Salmond, described him as “my mentor”, while current First Minister John Swinney said Salmond had “inspired a generation.”

Arguably the most genuine tributes to Salmond came from the political representatives of Scotland’s pseudo-left groups. With the SNP split on calls for a new independence referendum it would likely lose and having suffered major electoral losses, and with Salmond’s unsuccessful Alba Party now bereft of its leader, the pseudo-left tendencies were genuinely in mourning for someone who came to embody the political heyday of Scottish nationalism.

All of these groups jumped on Salmond’s bandwagon for a prospective independent capitalist Scotland, portraying this as a means of opposing British imperialism, but none more enthusiastically than those based north of the border. For them, Salmond’s death is a deeply felt blow.

National Co-spokesperson of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) Colin Fox wrote, “Whatever else can be said about Alex Salmond, he was a towering figure in Scottish politics for more than 40 years. His forte was strategic ideas. He built the SNP from a small party to the dominant force in Scotland for nearly 20 years.”

Fox reported that Salmond recently had dinner with him “to discuss how the independence movement could move forward and secure the majority support that still eludes us. We had our political differences of course, and they were profound, for he never claimed to be a socialist, but we both discussed them respectfully and cordially.”

Tommy Sheridan was formerly a member of the Scottish parliament for the SSP and founder of the now defunct Solidarity Scotland’s Socialist Movement after his acrimonious split with his former comrades. Having abandoned any pretence of differences with Salmond and liquidating his party cum vanity project into Alba, he tweeted like a latter-day Braveheart that Salmond “was a colossus of Scottish politics & he will be remembered always as the guy who got us our Referendum, our chance of freedom.”

Craig Murray, also an Alba Party member who went to jail on Salmond’s behalf, was in thrall to him: “Before Alex Salmond, Scottish

Independence was an impossible dream, a romantic aspiration, outside the realm of practical politics. After Alex Salmond, it is the dominant question in Scottish politics and by far the biggest threat to the UK state.” He went on, “In Scotland’s national story, he deserves a place alongside William Wallace and Robert Bruce.”

Salmond’s record

A more objective appraisal of Alexander Elliot Anderson Salmond’s political record is in order.

Salmond was born in 1954 in the town of Linlithgow, Scotland, second son to civil servant parents. He studied economics and medieval history at St Andrews University. In 1978, he joined the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland as an assistant economist. In 1980, he got a job with the Royal Bank of Scotland, where he worked for several years as an oil economist.

But the young man with an impeccable pedigree as an adviser to the capitalist class grew up in a period of tremendous class struggles worldwide, rooted in the ending of conditions of post-war boom.

In the UK, over the 1960s and early 1970s, a powerful movement in the working class over jobs, wages and conditions had been building. The Conservative government of Edward Heath, elected in 1970, was forced to declare five states of emergency, faced with strikes by miners and power workers. Heath called an election in 1974 under the slogan, “Who runs Britain, the government or the unions?”. Heath lost to Labour under Harold Wilson, who immediately settled with the miners to stabilise the explosive political situation.

The “Winter of Discontent” and the 1979 elections

Less than two years later, in 1976, Wilson was forced to resign and was replaced by James Callaghan in a marked shift to the right. Callaghan, acceding to demands from industry and the City of London, borrowed money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and introduced sharp spending cuts. Labour’s time in office culminated in the 1978-79 “Winter of Discontent” in which millions of workers struck against its austerity measures. In the absence of socialist leadership, however, the Tories were able to defeat Labour in the 1979 election.

In Scotland, where the strike wave raged with equal ferocity, the Labour government had introduced a bill for a Scottish Assembly as a means to steal some of the wind from the emergent pro-independence SNP. The nationalists had won several by-elections in working class areas, on the

basis of claiming that more recently discovered North Sea oil revenue should be diverted to Scotland. Representing a layer of the regional capitalists and upper middle class, the nationalists exploited growing unemployment to press their case.

The assembly vote in 1979 won a narrow majority for devolution, but the Labour Party refused to implement the result on the basis that a threshold of 40 percent of the total electorate voting “yes” had not been reached—in a referendum in which only 64 percent had taken part. In revenge, the SNP submitted a vote of “no confidence” and voted with the Tories in another motion put forward by Tory leader, Margaret Thatcher, which brought the Callaghan government to an end.

The Tories won the election, while the SNP, widely and accurately perceived as having brought Labour down, lost all but two of their 11 seats.

In response to its 1979 debacle, the Labour Party briefly turned left under Michael Foot before just as quickly shifting sharply rightwards after Foot backed Thatcher’s war against Argentina over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands. Foot lost the 1983 General Election largely thanks to the vote for the right-wing Social Democratic Party—whose leaders split from Labour in 1981—and was replaced by Neil Kinnock.

As the Thatcher government set about aiding British capitalism in destroying its industrial base to free up capital for global speculation, the Labour Party and the trade unions adopted “new realism” and the free market. Section after section of workers sought to defend themselves, only to find both the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party ranged against them—a development that found its most finished expression in the betrayal of the 1984-85 miners’ strike.

Salmond and the 79 Group

Alex Salmond’s entire career is that of an undeserving beneficiary of the rightward lurch of the Labour Party and its abandonment of its old national reformist programme, which reached its conclusion in the “New Labour” project of Tony Blair.

Salmond, who joined the Federation of Student Nationalists at St Andrews in 1973, had, by 1979, concluded that to gain a hearing, Scottish nationalism had to tack sharply to the left in how it presented the perspective for an independent capitalist Scotland.

He joined the left-wing 79 Group within the SNP. Set up in response to the reputation of the party as “Tartan Tories”, the faction focused on anti-nuclear issues and the ongoing industrial destruction across Scotland. This was presented, despite far greater assaults on the working-class taking place in England, as an argument for Scottish independence.

The 79 Group also, briefly, flirted with Sinn Fein, being invited to a Sinn Fein conference amid Britain’s dirty war against the Irish Republican Army. As a consequence, 79 Group members, including Salmond, former Labour MP Jim Sillars and Kenny MacAskill, were expelled briefly from the SNP.

This was the most temporary of setbacks, however. Salmond was elected to Westminster in 1987 for the North Eastern constituency of Banff and Buchan and became SNP leader in 1990. Many of the 79 group’s members secured leading positions in SNP governments.

Anti-poll tax protests

Labour’s growing unpopularity among workers opened a space which,

once the 79 Group were reinstated, the SNP sought to fill by advancing itself as the only way that Tory rule could be ended in Scotland. Blaming all social problems on the unfair treatment of Scotland in the UK, the SNP insisted that a new era of social progress would be inaugurated by independence.

This populist anti-Tory message was exemplified in the SNP’s response to the Poll Tax. The officially named Community Charge, introduced in Scotland in 1989 and England and Wales in 1990, was an attempt by the Thatcher government to shift more of the burden for local authority spending onto the working class, replacing property-based rates with a tax on individuals regardless of their wealth. The tax generated mass opposition, which was organised outside of the trade unions and the Labour Party and involved a mass non-payment campaign, town hall protests and a huge demonstration in London in 1990 that was attacked by riot police.

In Scotland, the SNP launched the “Can Pay, Won’t Pay” campaign of civil disobedience. Salmond was suspended from the House of Commons for protesting the Tory budget. By contrast, the Labour Party, which formally opposed the tax, refused to lift a finger against it. Instead, Labour local authorities implemented the tax and jailed non-payers. The Salmond-led SNP duly blamed the poll tax on Westminster, claiming it showed how badly Scotland was treated in the union with England.

The SNP was ably assisted in this nationalist presentation by all the pseudo-left groups, but the Militant Tendency above all.

The leader of the All Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation was the Militant Tendency’s Tommy Sheridan, who led efforts to prevent sheriff officers from seizing goods from non-payers and was jailed for six months.

Militant, whose leaders had been expelled from the Labour Party by Kinnock in 1983, responded to its successes winning support over the Poll Tax by pioneering an “Open Turn”, or the “Scottish Turn”—initially as Scottish Militant Labour—based on championing Scottish separatism as a means of securing socialism.

This culminated in the 1998 formation of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), as a break with its English parent organisation, and the building of ever closer relations with the SNP.

The Labour Party joined the SNP partway, presenting the ongoing assaults on workers’ jobs and living standards as expressions of a “democratic deficit”. The party argued that workers in Scotland had consistently voted Labour but got a Tory government in Westminster, and that this could be resolved by creating a Scottish assembly or parliament.

The objective roots of devolution and separatism

Underlying the moves towards regional devolution and independence lay more than tactical manoeuvres of crafty and competing pro-capitalist parties. Fundamental shifts in the world economy, bound up with the expansion of containerisation in the movement of goods, accelerating use of computer technology in production and distribution, along with the tremendous expansions of currency trading and many other forms of financial parasitism, laid the basis for a changing relationship between regional elites and the nation states in which they were based.

This globalisation of capitalist production, as well as destroying the material basis for social reformism, opened up prospects for wealthy regions to establish direct relations with globally mobile investment capital.

Where negotiations had previously been handled through the apparatus of this or that state, and subordinated to its industrial policies, the trend increasingly was for regions to establish their own investment agencies, offering tax breaks and cheap labour to all comers. In this way, regional

devolution or out-and-out independence represented the structural changes in the capitalist state necessary to facilitate a race to the bottom in terms of the jobs, living standards and social rights of the working class. Above all it would also set workers in this or that region against each other to the detriment of all.

This is what underlies the growth of Scottish, and Welsh, nationalism, at the same time as accelerated moves towards independence in Catalonia and elsewhere throughout the world. In every case, the regional elite, mainly of wealthy regions or with significant natural assets—within long-established imperialist states—sought the means to grab a greater share of the exploitation of the local working class. The same trends, in an openly right-wing form, emerged in Belgium, with the Flemish separatist Vlaams Blok and Vlaams Belang, and Italy with the variants of the Northern League.

In the UK, the SNP placed itself as the most consistent advocate of the greatest expansion of powers for the regional elite, demanding the fullest “independence” from Westminster. This, the SNP claimed, underpinned by additional North Sea oil revenue and access to the European Union, would provide a basis for progressive social reforms.

The SNP under devolution

Salmond was first elected SNP leader in 1990 and quickly embraced a “gradualist” approach to independence against the “fundamentalists” in his own party. His SNP campaigned alongside the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats for a “Yes” vote in the newly elected Blair government’s 1997 referendum on devolution to Scotland and Wales.

After the massive 75 percent support for the new parliament, Labour won the first elections in 1999 under Donald Dewar, with the SNP coming second. Salmond became Leader of the Opposition.

Salmond continued to seek delineation for the SNP as being to the left of the Labour Party, above all on the question of war. Shortly before the 1999 election, for example, he went on Scottish television to oppose the NATO bombing of Serbia, stating that the assault was “an act of dubious legality, but above all one of unpardonable folly.”

Where the Blair government supported the bombing, Salmond was concerned, citing the Luftwaffe’s blitz on London during World War II, that bombing would “steel the resolve of the civilian population.” He advocated a “full scale economic blockade of Serbia” of the type then implemented against Iraq for years. Salmond’s limited opposition, in conditions when the bombing was massively unpopular, was a canny reading of the popular mood and his broadcast broke the pro-war official consensus. Salmond was ferociously attacked by the Labour government and media. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook denounced him as “the toast of Belgrade tonight.”

One year later, Salmond resigned the SNP leadership, taking up his Westminster seat from which he later was central to efforts to impeach Tony Blair for his lies about “weapons of mass destruction” used as a pretext for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Salmond was replaced at the helm of the SNP by John Swinney, formerly a strategic planner with Scottish Amicable Life Assurance.

To be continued



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