Scotland’s Future by Phil Sharpe

The argument for the national self-determination of Scotland has been advocated in the following terms: “Decisions about Scotland – decisions that affect us, our families, our communities and the future of our country – should be taken in Scotland to reflect the views and concerns of the Scottish people, rather than by governments in Westminster with different priorities, often rejected by voters in Scotland.”(1) The assumption is that a historic and nationally based society represents the natural foundation for taking and realising a democratic decision making process that represents the aspirations of the people of that area. Hence it is also assumed that the people of other national and culturally distinct areas do not have anything in common with the people making new claims for national independence. The interests and views of the people of England and Wales will be different from the wishes expressed by the people of Scotland. In other words the claim for national independence is being made on the basis of the standpoint of national exclusiveness. Only the people of Scotland can decide how to reconcile their aspirations with the role of national political institutions. It will be a Scottish Parliament that is able to reject the unpopular measures of Westminster and instead inaugurate the fairer society that the people of Scotland want. In other words only in Scottish terms can the principles of democracy be realised and reconciled with the ‘special’ identity of the distinct people of this national area.

Consequently the claims for Scottish national independence are based on a mythological process that unites the Scottish people because of their distinct geographical location. The actual history of Scotland indicates its capitalist character, and has a rich history of important class struggles from the Highland Clearances to the Shop Stewards Movement of World War One and the Upper Clyde Shipyards occupation of the 1970’s. Instead of any attempt to explain this past in relation to the present is effectively ignored by this document. Therefore what is considered important is that Scotland is purely conceived in terms of the present and so is defined as a thriving capitalist economy. The assumption is that the economic potential of Scotland could make further progress if national political independence is achieved: “Independence will give us the powers we need to build a stronger economy. It will equip us to compete effectively in the global economy, rather than remain under Westminster which has created an unequal society and an unbalanced economy.”(2) What is not explained is why would the UK Parliament have an interest in the exploitation of Scotland when Scotland has been a part of the UK since 1707? Instead of addressing this important question the assumption is made that the very fact of the integration of Scotland into the UK is inherently unfair. Scotland has been a colony of the UK. This assumption is then connected to another one which is that an Independent Scotland would be able to establish a welfare state and be an equal society. Why the people of the UK would oppose this aim remains unexplained yet again.

However we have a problem with the definition of independence. The constitutional relationship with the monarchy of the UK would remain and the pound would not be replaced by the Euro. Hence Scotland would not be a democratic republic and it would retain the commitment of the UK to NATO. Defence policy would effectively be decided in Westminster. However despite these problems the yes vote in the referendum would apparently establish an independent state. What will be crucial in this regard is not the realisation of any meaningful conception of self-determination and instead it will be the role of the Scottish Parliament that assumes virtually mystical powers to be able to discern and carry out the wishes of the people. Thus we have to have a naïve view that the latest form of Parliamentary democracy is the organisational expression of the wishes of the majority and not the denial of these interests in the form of the domination of the economic and political elite. We have to suspend belief that the primary political institution of Scotland whilst not being the realisation of a democratic republic, and is not socialist, is still able to uphold the interests of working people. Any failure to implement the welfare state would seem to suggest that the promises of a better society have been shown to be a sham.

In reply to these concerns the document makes three important assumptions: Firstly: ‘the people of Scotland will always get governments we vote for’. Secondly: ‘we will control our own resources and make our own decisions about our economy.’ Thirdly: ‘we can decide how to use our wealth to benefit all the people in our society.’(3) The assumption is that there will always be a perfect harmony between the character of the government of Scotland and the wishes of the people. The result is that the economy becomes to benefit the people and wealth is utilised to create a better society. What is not explained is how the process of parliamentary elections will result in the formation of governments that utilise resources in the manner desired by the Scottish people. If the character of elections is the same as in other capitalist countries the ownership and control of resources will be under the domination of the transnational corporations and the role of Parliament will be to sanction and justify this situation. Only if the economic and political character of the situation changes so that the ownership and control of the economy is based on the importance of the working class will this prospect of the ability to use resources in terms of the benefit of the Scottish people become possible. However this is not what is being promised. Instead we have the assumption that a capitalist economy presided over by the Scottish Parliament will be able to establish a situation of material prosperity. Hence the argument is that it has not been capitalism that has been the cause of economic insecurity, poverty and unemployment in Scotland and instead these aspects have been the result of the role of the Westminster Parliament. To the extent that the UK has been presided over by the Westminster Parliament this view has some validity but the situation will not be profoundly changed by the realisation of Scottish independence. This is because the causes of inequality and poverty will remain and political activity will not be able to affect this situation unless it changes in terms of the establishment of the hegemony of working people and the development of their power to influence the utilisation of resources.

Hence the document assumes that the people of Scotland will work together in a post independence situation in order to decide how resources are used and divided up. However the cross-class harmony of the struggle for independence will be replaced by the divisions created by the competing claims of different occupational and regional groups. Whatever the Scottish Parliament decides will not satisfy all sections of society. Instead the politics of class will eventually come to replace the politics of nation. Indeed we can argue that this prospect is likely because the perspective of nationalism is based on the denial of the importance of class. In ideological terms it is possible to create the politics of one national interest but this can only occur in terms of the temporary suppression of the underlying politics of class. The inability of the Scottish Parliament to divide resources fairly will renew the politics of class that have a long history but which have been temporarily transcended because of the euphoria created by the struggle for national independence.

The supporters of independence would reply that Scotland has the potential to be a wealthy economy based on the importance of North Sea Oil and the dynamism of several growth industries. This point is not necessarily invalid but there will be no inherent mechanism that will connect the prospect of prosperity with reality. Instead the wealth will still go to the major transnational corporations, and the taxes generated from the economy will not automatically go the creation of a welfare state. Instead it is likely that a low tax economy based on the importance of the market, globalisation and finance capital could replace the worthy aims of ‘Scotland’s Future’. It also has to be remembered that Alex Salmond has promised that a post independence government would contribute to the repayment of the national debt of the UK and so the conditions would be created in which an austerity policy would be more likely than a situation of growth and expansion. The point is that Scotland cannot be exempt from the conditions of global economic crisis and so the argument that Scotland’s situation is favourable to the realisation of prosperity is undermined by this possibility of austerity. However the document does not address these questions and instead suggests that present economic problems are created by a Westminster Parliament with a bias towards the interests of the South-East of England. This may be true but this problem will not be solved by the formation of a Scottish Parliament. Instead the regional differences and contradictions of uneven development will be intensified and confirmed. Furthermore the document does not outline how the Scottish Parliament will resolve the problems created by the elitist Westminster government. It will not challenge the authority of Westminster whilst also making the assumption that self-determination provides the basis of an alternative dynamic form of government.

The document contends that the following aspects will be the priority of the Scottish government: Firstly, ‘a strong external focus on competing in the global economy’; Secondly, ‘promoting areas of comparative advantage to develop a distinctive economy; Thirdly, ‘emphasising innovation, technology and manufacturing’; Fourthly, ‘fostering high levels of trust and reducing income inequality, encouraging a stronger and shared sense of national purpose’; Fifthly: ‘improving workforce skills and opportunities, particularly for women and young people’.(4) However some of these aims are immediately incompatible. The imperatives of competition in the global economy imply the prospect of low wages in order to produce cheap exports. This situation could undermine the commitment to income equality. Only the growth of the profits of the multinational companies will encourage the development of exports within the global economy, and this prospect suggests that the struggle of trade unions in order to fight for higher wages will be discouraged by the Scottish Parliament. In contrast to this logic of globalisation the document tries to reconcile the apparently incompatible aims of reducing corporation tax with employee participation in the administering of companies and an enhanced importance for the fair work commission that will establish a higher minimum wage. Hence the document suggests that the dynamism of capitalism can be reconciled with the aims of improved economic democracy and greater equality. This process of reconciliation may have been possible in the era of the post-war boom but it is unlikely in the situation of austerity. Instead the interests of the forces of capital will be most likely to be advanced in terms of the further reduction of the influence of the trade unions and the dilution of the obligation of employers to provide a decent minimum wage.

It is argued that independence will allow the Scottish Parliament to improve the extent of tax credits, to promote the efficiency of the National Health Service and to generate better education including more university places. The suggestion is that this process of recreating the welfare state will be paid for by a fairer tax system, an energy fund based on control of the Oil reserves of the North Sea and substantial reductions in the defence budget caused by the rejection of the continued role for nuclear weapons. This argument seems to be logical but it is undermined by the possibility that the priorities of the forces of capital may be different. The policy of supporters of capital has been based on the very erosion of the welfare state as something that undermines the efficiency of the economy. This perspective is not tackled in this document and instead has been glossed over by the view that the Scottish Parliament will have the ability to develop a constitutional convention that establishes the principles of an independent Scotland: “The Scottish Government believes a constitutional convention will ensure a participative and inclusive process by which the people of Scotland as well as politicians, civic society organisations, business interests, trade unions, local authorities and others, can have a direct role in shaping the constitution.”(5) This comment implies that the various forces involved in the creation of the constitution can establish shared interests in terms of the aims of Scotland. But as previously argued the supporters of capital have different aims from those of labour. Hence equality is not an aim of the forces of capital and they prefer the importance of efficiency. In contrast the trade unions will be more committed to the principles of equality. How can these contending social forces be reconciled in terms of the formulation of a common constitution for Scotland? Indeed it could be argued that even if a common constitution is developed this will be at the expense of important social forces. The trade unions will resent the development of a constitution that relegates their aims to secondary importance. Consequently it could be argued that the possibility of the development of a Scotland united around its common constitution is already a convenient fiction that has little chance of being realised. Instead the prospect of the intensification of class contradictions will result in the generation of class struggle rather than produce the inter-class harmony of common support for the constitution.

However the assumption being made by the authors of the document is that the people of Scotland have an inherent ability to discuss and reach compromises that would enable a commitment to a fairer Scotland to be realised. It has only been the dominant power of the Westminster Parliament that hat has undermined this possibility of consensus. It is assumed that the economic ability to establish a fairer Scotland is already in existence such as expressed by the existence of rich resources that would be created by national control of Scotland’s energy and the abolition of nuclear weapons. Therefore all that has been lacking is the process of political goodwill that would actually be created by an independent Scottish Parliament. But the illusion that cannot be reconciled with reality is the assumption that the political role of the Scottish Parliament would amount to effective control of the economy. But this would not the situation because the forces of economic domination would be the multinational companies and this situation would not be challenged by a Parliament that is explicitly not committed to nationalisation. So we would not have state capitalism never mind the prospect of socialism and workers control of the economy. Only the latter development could ensure that the economic resources of Scotland were actually organised and controlled by the Scottish people. However this prospect is undermined by the commitment of the document to the role of a capitalist Scotland within a global economy.

The arguments in favour of an independent Scotland can be analysed more specifically: Firstly, “To create a more democratic Scotland. The Scottish Government believes that the people of Scotland are the ones who will do the best job of running our country. We will not get ever decision right, but more often than not the choices we make for our economy and our society will be better for Scotland than those made at Westminster.”(6) The argument made above is that this commitment to effective political self-determination cannot be realised because of the continued capitalist character of the economy. The actual important decisions about economic activity will be taken by the big companies and by a Parliament that is beholden to these social forces. If a form of political self-determination is to be created it will be necessary to establish organs of popular will or direct democracy based on the hegemony of the working class. This development could result in the formation of an economy that did correspond to the principles of political self-determination. But this Scottish Workers Republic would still not be truly able to consistently uphold the principles of self-determination until the development of an international state that was based on a socialist economy. However one thing that is true in the above comment is that a Scottish Parliament would be more accountable to the people than a Westminster based government. This prospect represents the convincing argument being made for the political independence of Scotland. What is unconvincing is the claim that the economic situation would be transformed by the development of a politically independent Scotland. It is true that the Scottish Parliament could reverse the privatisation of Royal Mail and abolish the bedroom tax, but this does not mean that a successful and fair economy could be created.

The argument in favour of the economic success of Scotland is that with independence it can reject the priorities of Westminster, promote dynamic industries and tourism, and utilise energy reserves in the interests of Scotland: “The ability to make our own decisions is the point of independence. It will provide the best conditions for sustainable economic growth, and enable us to protect living standards, reduce poverty and inequality, and build a better society.”(7) However the problem with this argument is that it assumes a direct correspondence between the possibilities of political independence with the economic situation. It is assumed that the Parliament will be able to direct the activity of the economy in the interests of the people. But the imperatives of capital are different and the forces that support these interests will contend that efficiency is more important than the creation of a fairer society. It is unlikely that the Scotland Parliament will undermine its relations with capital in order to pursue the objective of greater equality. Instead the aim of prosperity will be advanced in terms that favour capital and in this sense it is entirely possible that inequality and a low wage economy will remain. This possibility will indicate that ultimately the problem that undermined the aspirations of the people of Scotland was the domination of capital rather than the significance of the Westminster Parliament.

These arguments are ignored and instead the role of Westminster is blamed for the problem of inequality within the UK. It would be more accurate to blame the influence of capital for establishing the objectives of the Westminster Parliament. This has resulted in the austerity policy and the aim of resolving the crisis of capitalism at the expense of the material standards of working people. The answer to these problems is not the establishment of a Scottish Parliament that is still committed to the role of capitalism but is instead about the generation of entirely new economic and political principles represented by what we would define as socialism. Or, rather, the question of the role of Parliamentary institutions would be the result of the decisions of the people concerning what is the most effective expression of their class interests. We would dispute the boastful claim that the Scottish Parliament has some mystical power to transform the economic conditions of the people of Scotland. Instead the only effective basis to achieve real transformation is by overcoming the domination of the cause of inequality and poverty which is that of capital. Instead of this understanding the supporters of the existing Scottish government consider working with the supporters of capital as one of their major objectives. The success of this aim will quickly put the objective of realising equality into jeopardy. Only a break with capital will enable the promotion of real equality to become more than an empty boast. This break cannot be carried out by a bourgeois Scottish Parliament and is instead something only the mass actions of the working class can achieve. Instead of this understanding the Scottish government considers that with independence they will have the resources to realise a fairer society, even accepting the continuation by Scotland of contributing to making payments towards resolving the national debt of the UK. But the point is that the prospect of a fairer society in Scotland is not primarily dependent on the level of its economic and financial resources. These are important but what is more crucial is the question of the willingness of the Scottish Parliament to reject the interests of capital. There is nothing to suggest in this document that the Scottish Parliament considers issues in these terms. Instead it wants to unite all the people of Scotland in favour of the fairer society. This conception of unity is an illusion under capitalism and cannot be realised. A fairer society can only be upheld by the historical alternative of socialism.

The document argues that the Scottish Parliament can utilise the talents of the people of Scotland in order to create the fairer society: “The strength of our economy, our natural resources, and the degree of political consensus we enjoy gives us confidence that choices will be made to use the wealth of our nation in order to transform our economically productive country into a rich and fair society. But only independence can deliver this outcome and secure a Scottish Parliament with the necessary responsibilities, political balance and political will to achieve genuine social advances.”(8) This argument is economically based on the massive wealth of the North Sea energy reserves, utilising the talent of the population and a commitment to public services. (Although no mention of major nationalisation is made) However what is crucial is the view that political independence will generate these economic benefits. The alternative is the Westminster government that will not utilise the resources of Scotland to their maximum advantage. In contrast to these arguments Socialists would suggest that what is crucial is not political independence for Scotland but instead the character of the type of system that could preside over the whole of the UK and the EU, which is socialism. The presumed economic benefits of independence will not be possible as long as the Scottish Parliament is beholden to the forces of capital and its preference for efficiency rather than equality. The benefits of North Sea Oil will be an illusion as long as they remain under private ownership and are not nationalised under workers control. We do not deny that Scotland has rich economic resources but the continuation of capitalism after independence will mean that profits go to the multinational companies rather than the people of Scotland. Only socialism can establish the possibility that resources come under the ownership and control of working people.

The document also outlines the major principles of a proposed constitution. These include equality of opportunity, entitlement to public services, protection of the environment and a ban on nuclear weapons being used in Scotland. The status of local government, rights in relation to health care, pensions and welfare, children’s rights and education and employment opportunities.(9) The principles of equality and human rights will be crucial aspects of the constitution, and in international relations Scotland would aspire to promote these principles. There is also a commitment to improve public services like the NHS, civil service and police. The role of local authorities based on participatory democracy will be improved and the process of consultation with business, trade unions churches and charities will be part of the consultation process about state and local policy.

The establishment of a constitution in order to promise rights and access to services is the most fruitful aspect of the programme of the Scottish Parliament. A written constitution indicates what is considered to be the most important aspects involved in the relationship between society and the state. In this context there is a commitment to democracy and equality that is an improvement on the situation within the UK where the importance of laws and tradition is used to justify an unwritten constitution and the lack of a conception of the rights and duties of the members of society. However the crucial question is whether the proposed principles of the constitutional convention of Scotland can be realised in relation to the other commitment to develop a thriving capitalist economy. Can the political principle of equality be reconciled with the market logic of inequality and the domination of capital over labour? It is assumed by this document that the role of the Scottish Parliament means the influence of democracy and participation will be sufficient to realise equality in economic terms. Hence the importance of the political defines what happens economically. But historical development has indicated that the role of the political is usually subordinated to the importance of the economic. We cannot expect anything different in relation to an independent capitalist Scotland. The constitutional commitment to equality and fairness is likely to be undermined by the priorities of the economy that will be defined by the privileged interests of capital. This does not mean that the principles of the constitution are a sham but it does mean that the assumption that fairness and social justice can be reconciled with the profit making concerns of capitalism are an ideological illusion that has to be criticised.

Does the above criticism of the views of the Scottish government amount to an opposition to political independence? Not necessarily! Marxists would be critical of the unprincipled aspects of the proposed process of the creation of an independent state such as the retaining of the role of the monarchy, membership of NATO, and preference of the pound instead of the Euro. If the people of Scotland vote in the referendum for independence this situation expresses their democratic wish for secession from the UK state. We would argue that this process would be more principled if the result was a creation of a democratic republic. What we are primarily concerned about is the political relationship between the working class of Scotland and the rest of the UK. The most important organisation that is of a British and international character are the trade unions. We would argue that the trade unions retain their UK organisational content and that the working class of Scotland and the UK should still consider the necessity of united campaigns in favour of better conditions and against the policy of austerity. This united action could become the basis for solidarity within the whole of the EU against austerity and in favour of mass strikes that become the basis for the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of an international socialist state.

Consequently the major aspect of concern for Marxists about the campaign for the independence of Scotland is the attempt to gloss over class divisions in favour of the false creation of a homogenous national identity. This ideology of the Scottish nation tries to obliterate the proud history of the Scottish working class which is symbolised by the revolutionary activity of John Maclean. Instead of the politics of national unity Marxists advocate the standpoint of international class struggle and we suggest that national independence is a false and flawed answer to the problems of inequality and poverty. The people of Scotland have responded to the reactionary policies of successive Westminster governments by increasing their support for Scottish nationalism. But in the last analysis this standpoint is a bourgeois doctrine that tries to reconcile the aspirations for the welfare state with the competitive role of a capitalist Scotland within the global economy. In this manner support has be gained from the labour movement for the aims of Scottish nationalism. We would argue that the aspiration for equality, fairness and the welfare state can only truly be realised by transition to socialism. It may be that the Scottish workers republic becomes part of this process of revolutionary transformation.

FOOTNOTES

(1)Scottish Government, Edinburgh, 2013pxv

(2)ibid pxv

(3)ibid p3

(4)ibid p6

(5)ibid p22

(6)ibid p40

(7)ibid p43

(8)ibid p56

(9)ibid) p353