

# The Scottish National Party's Tactical Opposition to Bombing Syria

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*Among the 223 MPs in Westminster who opposed the British government's dangerous fuelling of the Syrian inferno were 57 of the 59 members returned from Scotland.*

All but one were from the Scottish National Party (SNP), the ruling party in the devolved Scottish government in Edinburgh. The final vote came from Ian Murray, the Labour Party's sole surviving MP north of the border.

The SNP's position should not be confused with principled opposition to the escalating war in Syria or imperialist militarism in general. Still less should it be considered to be articulating the mass opposition to war among working people across Britain.

Rather, the party's position combines parliamentary manoeuvring with the real concerns in sections of the Scottish and British establishment that Cameron's Syrian adventure has no "exit" strategy, and threatens to embroil the British military in an uncharted calamity.

That the SNP felt able to oppose the government at all testifies primarily to the deep divisions within the Labour Party and the free vote given to Labour's right wing by "left" Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Had Corbyn imposed a whip on Labour's MPs, threatened the right-wing "rebels" with expulsion, de-selection or any of the many sanctions which, as party leader, he had available—in short launched a serious parliamentary fight to defeat the government—there is every likelihood that the SNP would have supported Prime Minister David Cameron in return for some token concession or other.

Prior to the vote, and before it was clear that the Labour right wing would be given free rein by Corbyn, Scottish First Minister and SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon made clear she was open to persuasion. She was "not yet convinced the case for air strikes has been made," she said. "That is not to say I will not listen to the case that David Cameron will make."

Sturgeon added that to respond to the "threat that is posed by ISIL [Islamic State, IS] ... there are some tests that require to be passed in order for air strikes to be made."

Asked about her attitude to the Royal Air Force's current bombing campaign in Iraq, she made clear she had no problem with it since "there are differences with Iraq in that the government requested airstrikes, that's not the same situation in Syria."

Alex Salmond, now the SNP's foreign affairs spokesman, further clarified the basis of the Scottish nationalists' opposition to the Syrian war. He told the BBC,

“We’d like to hear far, far more about diplomatic initiatives through the United Nations and also the real practical things like interrupting the financial flows into Daesh ...”

For his part, SNP Defence spokesman Angus Robertson complained that the UK had “spent 14 times more bombing Libya than in post-conflict stability and reconstruction.”

This is of course the purest hypocrisy. Since coming to power in Edinburgh in 2007, the party has repeatedly made clear it is willing to support British military actions, particularly if a UN flag is flying over the slaughter of the day—including in Libya.

In 2011, the SNP voted with the Cameron government and the Labour opposition for the British bombing campaign against the Libyan government of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Robertson said at the time, “I think Libya needs to get rid of Gaddafi. But in the end we are responsible for trying to enforce this Security Council resolution.”

Robertson used the occasion to deepen links with the British military. He urged the government to “think long and hard about considering the closure of important bases like RAF Lossiemouth and RAF Leuchars in Scotland.”

Both bases were used for launching raids against Libya, under cover of a UN resolution enforcing “no fly zones”. At the time, the main concern of First Minister Alex Salmond, the SNP’s then leader, was that the SNP was not invited into the COBRA emergency meetings with the British government.

In 2013, MPs at Westminster were obliged by massive public opposition and disagreements within the military over a lack of planning to reject Cameron’s first demand for a military intervention in Syria—explicitly targeting the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

The SNP introduced an amendment, with the Labour Party, proposing that a United Nations resolution should be sought as cover for any military role. Salmond explained at the time that this amendment “gave an indication of the sort of role an independent Scotland will be able to play on the international stage.” He called for “constitutional guarantees” against military action without UN backing.

In 2014, the SNP voted against the British government launching a new bombing campaign in Iraq against Islamic State. But Angus Robertson made clear once again that this was on a tactical basis. Speaking in Westminster, he explained that he supported the Iraqi government, supported “our armed forces” and insisted, “It would be far better if there were an express United Nations motion covering all of this.”

For Robertson to now complain that not enough has been spent on Libyan reconstruction is rank hypocrisy. Having destroyed the Gaddafi government, triggered and stoked a raging and ongoing civil war, the only means whereby British imperialism could impose “stability and reconstruction” in Libya is by an invasion by tens, if not hundreds of thousands of troops. The same applies in Syria.

The SNP’s position is one of militarism and war, but under slightly differing terms. This is in line with their perspective for the creation of an independent Scotland—a goal to which the SNP remain committed despite their 2014 referendum defeat. The SNP has repeatedly made clear that they support NATO, the European Union, a struggle against Russia, and increased spending on frigates, fast jets and long-range reconnaissance aircraft.

Commenting on their manoeuvres, right-wing political analyst Stephen Daisley noted approvingly on Scottish Television,

“A breakaway Scotland run by the nationalists could pursue a less assertive foreign policy but independence supporters have to quell the notion we would be a global pushover.”

He continued, “The SNP is beginning to carve a feasible pro-peace, pro-security defence position.” In another column he described the SNP as “conservative revolutionaries, out not to smash the status quo but to maintain it on a smaller scale.”

A further component of the SNP’s political calculation will rest on the hope that, by posturing as opponents of the Syrian war with the help of the pseudo-lefts, next year’s elections to Holyrood will result in a further overwhelming SNP landslide at the expense of the Labour Party. Commenting on what this might mean, Labour candidate Barrie Cunningham noted, “I don’t see how it cannot be a trigger for a second independence referendum, which I personally do not want to see.”

Opposition to the war drive of British imperialism cannot be contracted out to any section of the capitalist class, no matter how much their role has been obscured by the pseudo left. Everything depends on the rejection of all forms of nationalism, and the unified political mobilisation of the British working class as part of a global antiwar movement seeking an end to imperialist militarism through the struggle for world socialism.

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