

Scottish Independence Referendum – Neil Findlay MSP recommends some reading

✘ *Neil Findlay is the Labour MSP for Lothians and he would like to recommend some reading around the issues which he believes will decide the Independence debate.*

“The Red Paper on Scotland 2014 – Class, Nation and Socialism” was published last week. The first book written in 1975 brought together a range of people from across the board left to address issues affecting Scots in the 1970s. The new Red paper follows this tradition and includes chapters from leading trade union officials, politicians academics and activists. Their agenda is clear: the promotion of an agenda for radical political change, not just in Scotland but across the UK and beyond. They argue only significant political and economic change, not constitutional change alone is required to address the deep rooted issues facing Scotland its people.

Hence, this book isn't a book about whether we should be Scottish or British; rather this is a book about that injects some class politics into the debate. It should be no surprise to find then that a central supposition of the contributors is that whatever the constitution, powers must have a purpose. Namely, that we have to start addressing, substantively and not just paying lip service to, the deep inequities, which shamefully still exist in the Scotland of 2013.

The Red Paper collective argue that Scotland won't tackle the multitude of problems it faces with a change of border, flag or even a list of powers, it will only do so through a political agenda which seeks to radically challenge the perpetual failure of the dominant neo-liberal orthodoxy – a

failure that has revisited us again in the guise of an austerity programme precipitated by a fundamental failure of the market system. It is against that backdrop that the thinking of the Red Paper Collective has developed during our discussions over the past two years.

Featuring people who every day work for, and in the interests of, working people it should be no surprise to hear that the group who contributed to the Red Paper concluded early on that an assessment of which model would best serve and advance the interests of ordinary working people was needed prior to the referendum. This included a consideration of the status quo and some form of enhanced devolution, as well as independence. Posing this hypothesis necessitates, in fact demands, an answer grounded in the political and economic realities of today: a direction in tune with the natural instinct of nearly all of the contributors, who in their daily working lives simply cannot afford to pander to fantasy.

The political reality is that should Scotland vote for independence the SNP Government will not dissolve; they will carry on under the guise of a so called "Scotland's party fighting Scotland's corner." Initially this will include that party writing any new constitution, which will be hard to undo or amend – a constitution that will no doubt incorporate membership of the EU, a UK currency union (impacting upon our ability to raise taxes and determine public spending priorities), the monarchy and reducing corporation tax so as to attract the inward investment – a policy that can only result in a race to the bottom. Such a proposition could actually be interpreted as a form of federalism and not independence at all; critically however it would be an arrangement that adheres even further to neo-liberal thinking.

Economic realities are expertly laid forth by Professor John Foster and Richard Leonard. They show clearly how external ownership of the Scottish economy is growing. Unless, I have missed something there is no suggestion of any change on that front, unless a Lazarus style recovery is made by those political parties who advocate appropriation. Therefore, you would have a Scottish economy still externally controlled, predominately in the city of London but without any ability to intervene and influence or curb that power. In such a circumstance political self-determination is, arguably, fatally undermined from the start.

The strength of the book also lies in its multiplicity. To take a couple of examples, Alan MacKinnon unpacks and analyses just how realistic the removal of Trident will be in an independent Scotland, particularly given the conversion of the SNP to the cause of NATO. Stephen Smellie, Vince Mills and Gordon Munro argue for an empowerment of local government asking why within the current constitutional debate the role of local government is largely absent.

Another section of the book considers democratic ownership of our economy. The value of this section is in the production of pragmatic, but progressive, policy ideas. Indeed, these chapters provide a pathway for progressing public ownership in a variety of sectors ranging from football to energy; each acknowledges that this need not mean a homogenous version of public ownership. No matter the result of the referendum next year these are chapters that offer any (progressive) government sound policy ideas.

At the heart of both 'Yes' mainstream and Radical Indy thinking is that there can be no "British Road to Socialism."

Apart from the obvious question of how and why anybody thinks the Scottish Road will be any easier, this point does throw up some philosophical considerations. Is it right for example that we take the lifeboat strategy whereby the lifeboat escaping from the sinking ship takes only Scots without any recourse or concern for those left behind?

We should never forget that advances made over the centuries – universal education, the NHS, the minimum wage, pension and the welfare state were all won by progressive forces across the UK campaign for them. They were not handed down willingly by the political elites. That unity is very important – tearing it up could be a huge mistake. What is clear is that a bricklayer in Leith has more in common with a bricklayer in Liverpool than he has with a merchant banker in Edinburgh's financial sector. Some suggest otherwise and say that we could offer a good example to the more reactionary forces elsewhere in the UK. Such an argument makes assumptions that may reflect more their own wishes than political reality.

The truth is that, as Stephen Low and Vince Mills highlight, social attitudes are very similar in Scotland and the North of England and we cannot assume that Scots are more inclined to progressive politics than their counterparts in England, especially those Northern regions. These arguments quite simply ignore how the progressive unity of working people, not national consciousness has been at the root of material advancement for working people across the UK. Such unity provides greater capacity to challenge the dominance of international capitalism and we weaken that at our peril. Such an analysis is, or should be, an inescapable principle of socialists – each of the Red Paper contributors forcefully remind us of this point.

Finally, the book suggests that an enhanced devolution settlement is something that needs considered: thus reflecting, if the polls are to be believed, the views of the majority of Scots. Such a model would enable us to work constructively within the UK whilst taking decisions at the Scottish level to meet our national circumstances.

The Red Paper on Scotland 2014: Class, Nation and Socialism: has sought to instil some radical thinking into the current constitutional debate, which up until now has been sadly lacking. We recognise we have merely scratched the surface but nevertheless have, we hope, provided food for thought particularly for those thinking about what type of country we aspire, or should aspire, to be.

You can purchase the book for a bargain £11.00 including postage – from the Centre for Workbased learning, Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road, Glasgow, G4 0BA) or £7.99 if you can collect it yourself from Neil Findlay MSP.

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