

## The Pro-independence Radical Left in Scotland since 2012

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### Résumé

Cet article a pour objectif de dessiner les contours de la gauche radicale et indépendantiste dans l'Écosse d'aujourd'hui. La longue campagne qui a précédé le référendum sur l'indépendance écossaise de 2014 (celle-ci ayant commencé dès 2012, soit plus de deux ans avant le référendum lui-même) a donné naissance à un nouveau paysage politique, surtout à gauche. Celui-ci se caractérise par deux tendances : la multiplication de nouvelles organisations (par exemple la *Radical Independence Campaign*, *Common Weal* et le *Scottish Left Project*), souvent (mais pas toujours) favorables à l'indépendance écossaise, et le renforcement des partis indépendantistes de gauche ou de centre-gauche déjà existants, qui ont tous gagné énormément de nouveaux adhérents. Cet article se concentre sur les organisations indépendantistes de la gauche radicale en Écosse : celles créées depuis 2012, ainsi que celles qui leur ont donné naissance. Après avoir présenté chacune de ces organisations et les liens qui existent entre elles, il se penche sur leurs stratégies à court terme (présenter des candidats et remporter des sièges aux élections parlementaires écossaises de 2016) et à moyen ou long terme (faire campagne pour l'organisation d'un nouveau référendum sur l'indépendance écossaise et proposer une vision de l'indépendance différente de celle mise en avant par le *Scottish National Party*).

### Abstract

This article aims at mapping the pro-independence radical left in today's Scotland. The long Scottish independence referendum campaign (which began in 2012, more than two years before the referendum itself) gave birth to a new political landscape, especially on the left. This landscape was characterised by the birth of new organisations (such as the *Radical Independence Campaign*, *Common Weal* or the *Scottish Left Project*), often but not always supportive of Scottish independence, and by the reinforcement of the pro-independence, left-wing and centre-left parties, which all gained huge numbers of new members. This article focuses on the pro-independence, radical left organisations in Scotland: the organisations that have been created since 2012, as well as those from which they originated. After presenting each of these organisations in turn, as well as the links between them, it then considers their short-term strategies (fielding candidates and winning seats in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election) and their medium- to long-term strategies (campaigning for a new Scottish independence referendum and presenting an alternative vision of independence to that offered by the *Scottish National Party*).

**Mots-clés :** Écosse – indépendance écossaise – référendum sur l'indépendance – référendum d'autodétermination – gauche radicale – indépendantisme – organisations indépendantistes

**Keywords:** Scotland – Scottish independence – independence referendum – radical left – pro-independence organisations

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## **Introduction**

Despite losing the Scottish independence referendum of 18 September 2014 (the first ever organised in Scotland), the pro-independence side has undeniably gained from it. First of all, since the referendum, Scotland has been more or less split down the middle on independence: 45% of Scots voted Yes to independence in the referendum itself, and one year later, in September 2015, between 49% and 53% (depending on the polls<sup>1</sup>) said that they would vote for independence if a new referendum was organised. This had never been the case before: until the referendum campaign and at least since the 1980s, the majority of polls had shown support for independence between 25% and 40% (Ipsos Mori, 2012). Secondly, Scotland's main pro-independence party, the Scottish National Party (SNP), is now – and for the first time – the dominant Scottish party in both the Scottish Parliament (known as Holyrood) and the British Parliament (Westminster). Thirdly, membership of all the pro-independence parties (the SNP, but also the Scottish Greens and the Scottish Socialist Party) massively increased immediately after the referendum – an increase which happened against a background of widespread disaffection for political parties throughout the Western world. The SNP's membership had already been on a rising curve when the referendum took place, but the SNP has now become the third biggest political party in the UK, even though Scotland is home to only 8% of the total British population. Fourthly, the pro-independence camp in Scotland was boosted by the launch of many new political initiatives such as RIC, Common Weal, the Scottish Left Project or, most recently, a political alliance called RISE. Almost all of the radical left in Scotland campaigned for a Yes vote in the referendum (one key exception being the Red Paper Collective, which is made up of Labour or Labour-supporting activists, trade unionists and academics<sup>2</sup>).

The referendum has undeniably revitalised activism and given birth to a new political landscape in Scotland, especially on the left and on the pro-independence side. However, now that it no longer has a referendum campaign to gather around, discussions within the radical, pro-independence left have centred on how it should organise. This paper has two goals. The first is to chart the birth of this radical, pro-independence left in Scotland, from the foundation of the Radical Independence Campaign in 2012 to the launch of RISE in 2015. The second is to identify the aims and analyse the strategy of the radical left since the referendum. This article will not consider all of the organisations that were born of the Yes campaign: rather, it will focus on those that openly identify as part of the radical left.

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<sup>1</sup> See the TNS Survey STV poll and the Survation poll of September 2015, whose results are for instance presented in the following articles: MacNab, 2015; *Scotsman*, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Such as Pauline Bryan, of Labour Campaign for Socialism, or Neil Findlay MSP, who led the Scottish campaign to make Jeremy Corbyn the new Labour leader.

## The radical, pro-independence left in Scotland: from RIC to RISE

The announcement in early 2012 that there would be a Scottish independence referendum triggered the creation of a whole host of new organisations dedicated to campaigning not only for a Yes vote, but for “another Scotland”<sup>3</sup>, by which was meant an anti-austerity, social democratic or socialist Scotland. Most of these new organisations were unwilling to shut down after the referendum. Instead, the broad left movement that coalesced around the referendum campaign has been trying to find ways of continuing the momentum of the campaign and taking on a more cohesive and definitive shape. The launch of RISE on 29 August 2015 is the latest development in this push to formalise the post-2012 left movement. RISE is the product of an alliance between the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), which was born in the late 1990s, and the Scottish Left Project, which was launched in the weeks that followed the referendum and was itself largely a product of the Radical Independence Campaign set up in 2012. This article will now consider each of these organisations or movements in turn.

The SSP is a well-established political party. It is one of the few parties that have managed to get people elected in the Scottish Parliament, and it had continuous parliamentary representation from 1999 to 2007.

### The SSP and Solidarity’s results in Scottish Parliament elections, 1999-2011

		1999	2003	2007	2011
<b>SSP</b>	<b>votes</b>	70,289	246,790	13,256	8,272
	<b>seats</b>	1	6	0	0
<b>Solidarity</b>	<b>votes</b>	-	-	31,066	2,837
	<b>seats</b>	-	-	0	0

After winning one seat and 70,289 votes (23,654 constituency votes and 46,635 list votes) in the first Scottish Parliament election of 1999, the SSP won a record total of 6 seats and 246,790 votes (118,764 constituency votes and 128,026 list votes) in 2003. The SSP’s popularity thereafter collapsed, mainly as a consequence of the party split caused by the Tommy Sheridan legal saga, which saw SSP members speaking against each other in court<sup>4</sup>. This split brought down the number of SSP Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) from 6 to 4, with Tommy Sheridan and Rosemary Byrne founding a new party called Solidarity. More importantly, in the subsequent Scottish Parliament election, which was held in 2007, the SSP lost all of its seats and a large part of its votes. It only received a total of 13,256 votes: 525 votes in the constituency of Paisley North (the only constituency which it contested), and 12,731 list votes. By contrast, in the same election, Tommy Sheridan’s new party Solidarity managed to win 31,096 votes, riding on the back of its front man’s popular appeal. Sheridan’s popularity was not to last: in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, held after Sheridan was convicted of perjury, Solidarity collapsed, only winning a total of 2,837 votes<sup>5</sup>, and it was

<sup>3</sup> To quote the slogan of the Radical Independence Campaign, “Another Scotland is possible”.

<sup>4</sup> The saga started in 2006, when Tommy Sheridan won a defamation case against the *News of the World* newspaper. One year later, Sheridan was charged with perjury during his defamation trial. He was found guilty of perjury in 2010, and served one year in prison between January 2011 and January 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Since then, Tommy Sheridan has tried to keep his political career afloat using different political fronts, the latest being the self-described “apolitical” Hope over Fear organisation (see the organisation’s Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/hopeoverfear2014/>).

clearly outpolled by the SSP, which once more became the main far left party in Scotland. However, the SSP continued its downfall, winning a mere 8,272 votes (all of them list votes, as the party did not field any constituency candidates). Its results therefore remained a far cry from those that it had had in the halcyon days of 1999-2006, until the damaging party split. Nevertheless, since the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the SSP has been on the rise again. In the weeks that followed the referendum, it went from having 1,500 members to having 3,500<sup>6</sup>. One prominent new member is Allan Grogan, founder of the “Labour for Independence” group, one of the few political organisations to be dissolved after the referendum.

The SSP campaigns for an independent socialist republic of Scotland. It is first and foremost a socialist party which argues (for instance) that “key industries should be brought into public ownership and placed under democratic control. These would include the rail network, the energy companies, the banks and oil industry” (Scottish Socialist Party, 2015a, 20). It is also a republican party which sees the British monarchy as “antiquated, class ridden and anachronistic” (*ibid.*, 16). As for Scottish independence, it has supported it “since [its] inception in 1998”, as underlined in its 2015 General Election manifesto and in its best-selling 2013 pamphlet making the “Case for an Independent Socialist Scotland” (*ibid.*, 7; Fox, 2013, 7). It sees Scottish independence as a “golden opportunity for advance” (Fox, 2014, 6): not as an end in itself, but as a means “to establish a left of centre social democratic state and free five million Scots from the yoke of British imperialism” (Fox, 2013, 5), in other words, “as a democratic step towards a Scotland that is fairer, that has ended exploitation and is at peace both with itself, its neighbours and with the rest of the world” (*ibid.*, 8). It naturally campaigned for a Yes vote in the Scottish independence referendum because, as explained in a pamphlet published in the run-up to the referendum, “Scotland’s working class majority will be better off free from the neoliberal warmongering chains of the British State” (Fox, 2014, 5). Since the referendum, it has supported the devolution of new powers to the Scottish Parliament (as a further step on the road to independence), on the basis that this was what Scottish people voted for in the referendum (Scottish Socialist Party, 2015a, 7). Moreover, it is in favour of the adoption of a written Scottish constitution and of the lowering of the voting age to 16 for all elections. It wants Scotland to adopt “its own currency protected against international speculation by limiting its convertibility into other currencies, controlling interest rates and inflationary pressures,” after an initial phase when the Scottish currency would be tied to the pound sterling (Fox, 2013, 20-22). It is in favour of Scotland leaving NATO and getting rid of nuclear weapons. Perhaps more unexpectedly, although it believes that the EU in its current form is a “neoliberal trap”, it does not support Scotland leaving the EU: rather, it wishes to “change it from within” (*ibid.*, 18) and is “committed to working in a pan-European socialist alliance to achieve our goal of a socialist federation of European nations” (*ibid.*, 17).

The origins of the SSP can be traced back to Militant, the Trotskyist entryist group within the Labour Party. In 1991, Tommy Sheridan and other Militant activists in Scotland founded their own party, Scottish Militant Labour, to “break with Labour in Scotland and [...] advocate a Scottish road to socialism”, as explained by one of its founders, Alan McCombes (McCombes, 2011, 14). Six months after its creation, the party managed to come second (after Labour) in the 1992 General Election in the Glasgow Pollok constituency, where

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<sup>6</sup> If one prominent Scottish political journalist was to be believed. See Hutcheon, 2014.

Tommy Sheridan was its candidate. In the 1992 Scottish local elections, four Scottish Militant Labour representatives (including Sheridan) were elected to Glasgow City council; they were joined by two others before the end of 1992. In the mid-1990s, however, “the SML surge began to subside” (*ibid.*, 22), and the party lost all of its councillors except for Sheridan. This led the party to “take the first tentative steps towards creating a bigger and broader movement of socialism in Scotland” (*ibid.*, 23). In 1996, Scottish Militant Labour played a key role in the formation of the Scottish Socialist Alliance, which also included “left-wing nationalists who wanted a socialist independent Scotland, Labour left-wingers who believed their old party had sold its soul to the free market, former Communist Party stalwarts and a few ex-Green Party activists” (*ibid.*, 24). In September 1998, “after it became clear that the new Scottish Parliament [which was to be born in 1999] would definitely be established under proportional representation” (*ibid.*, 25), the Scottish Socialist Alliance became the Scottish Socialist Party. As noted previously, in 2006, the SSP split when Tommy Sheridan left it to found Solidarity. Since then, the main public figure in the SSP, which has no formal leader, has been Colin Fox, one of its two spokespeople<sup>7</sup>. Like Sheridan, Fox is a former member of the Militant tendency, as well as a former MSP. During the independence referendum campaign, he was a member of the Yes Scotland advisory board, as well as being involved in the Radical Independence Campaign, on which more will be said later.

In the wake of the independence referendum, the SSP argued strongly for prolonging the pro-independence Yes alliance in the form of SNP-Green-SSP single candidates in the 2015 UK General Election. As argued in its 2015 election manifesto, the SSP “felt that was the best way to inflict most damage on Labour and maintain the strength of the broad independence movement” (Scottish Socialist Party, 2015a, 5). In the end, there were no unified pro-independence candidates, as the SNP had nothing to gain from such an alliance, without which it managed to win a record 56 seats out of a total of 59 Scottish seats, and “the furthest the SNP was willing to go in that direction was to open up its own structures to allow non-members and new members to stand” (Wray, 2015). At the SSP’s annual conference of May 2015, the party voted again in favour of a Yes alliance, this time to contest the 2016 Holyrood election. The official statement issued after the conference was that the SSP was “keen to work with other socialists and progressives, many of whom have become active as a result of the Yes campaign”, but in practice, discussions were conducted with one left-wing movement only, namely the Scottish Left Project (Scottish Socialist Party, 2015b; Napier, 2015; O’Donnell, 2015). Those discussions led to the formal launch of “RISE, Scotland’s Left Alliance” on 29 August 2015<sup>8</sup>.

Let us now consider those radical left, pro-independence organisations that have been created in Scotland since 2012. The Radical Independence Campaign, also known as “RIC”, started as a conference in November 2012, after which an annual conference was held every year in November. Those conferences have been increasingly successful: the first was attended by 800 people, the second by more than 1,000, and the third, which took place just a few weeks after the referendum, was a sold-out event involving 3,000 participants, despite being held on the same day that 12,000 independence supporters gathered at another venue in Glasgow to hear the new Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. In the two years that preceded the referendum, RIC managed to bring together a whole host of people committed to an

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<sup>7</sup> Its other spokesperson is Sandra Webster, who stood for election for the first time at the 2015 General Election.

<sup>8</sup> Such moves towards a unity of the left have not included Tommy Sheridan’s party Solidarity, which has already announced that it intends to stand in every region in Scotland in the 2016 Holyrood election.

independent, left-wing, republican Scotland, namely socialists, environmentalists, trade unionists, community activists, feminists, LGBT activists, anti-nuclear activists, as well as members of the existing left parties (the SSP, the Greens – with the then co-convenors of the Greens taking part<sup>9</sup> – as well as the left wing of the SNP<sup>10</sup>). However, several of RIC's founder members (Jonathan Shafi, Cat Boyd, James Foley and Pete Ramand, for instance) come from a little-known leftist group called the International Socialist Group (Scotland), itself a split-off from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)<sup>11</sup> which specialises in conducting its campaigns using a variety of front organisations. Also involved in RIC is Robin McAlpine, a former Labour press officer and the founder of Common Weal, a pro-independence, social democratic think tank that also emerged during the referendum campaign<sup>12</sup>.

RIC used the campaign as a way of discussing and mainstreaming left-wing issues such as the fight against austerity and poverty, against fracking and nuclear weapons, or against the EU-US trade deal known as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). As was repeatedly stressed during the Radical Independence Conferences when these issues were debated, the SNP's centrist independence project was not the only one on offer. Speakers during the second RIC Conference even boasted that the very existence of RIC had led to some SNP policy changes (for example, its promise to renationalise Royal Mail), as well as changes in SNP discourse. During the referendum campaign, the argument that independence would make it possible to lower the corporation tax, for instance, had progressively given way to more left-wing, pro-independence arguments, such as the fact that an independent Scotland would be able to resist the so-called "bedroom tax" (technically the "under-occupancy penalty") or to defend universal childcare. One of the major aims of RIC was therefore to promote an alternative version of independence to that offered by the SNP and, as much as possible, pull the SNP to the left.

However, RIC was more than just a forum for discussion. After its second conference of November 2013, it became actively involved in the grassroots campaign. It was responsible for two major initiatives: it organised mass canvasses and it registered voters in housing schemes all over Scotland. The aim of these was to engage with the people and get the Yes vote out in working-class areas where turnout is generally very low. RIC therefore played a big part in the fact that the referendum saw "the highest level of voter registration in Scottish or British history since the introduction of universal suffrage", if historian Neil Davidson is to be believed, with 118,000 people registering in one month alone (August 2014) and 330,000 people voting for the first time (including of course 109,000 16- and 17-year-olds enfranchised for the occasion) (Davidson, 2014).

Out of RIC emerged the Scottish Left Project, which was launched in October 2014 as a "grassroots forum for left-wing ideas and talent" (Gordon, 2015a). Its members include a wide variety of pro-independence left-wing activists: the founding members of RIC (in particular Jonathan Shafi and Cat Boyd) as well as prominent SSP members (such as Alan McCombes, Frances Curran and Ken Ferguson), but also former "depute leader" of the SNP Jim Sillars, John Wilson MSP (who left the SNP over the decision to support an independent

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<sup>9</sup> Namely Patrick Harvie MSP and Maggie Chapman, who was a local councillor from 2007 to 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Christina McKelvie MSP for instance took part.

<sup>11</sup> The Scottish members of the SWP had collectively joined the Scottish Socialist Party in 2001.

<sup>12</sup> It was originally a project started by the Jimmy Reid Foundation (itself a left-wing think tank) in 2013, but became a think tank in its own right in 2014.

Scotland remaining in NATO and had at the time of writing joined the Scottish Greens), former Labour for Independence member Deborah Waters, and trade unionists such as Emma Stewart of the EIS teaching union and John Davidson of the PCS union. The Scottish Left Project was born out of the idea, presented in its opening statement, that “there [was] a need for something truly new and original to be born out of the independence movement that can manifest itself at the ballot box in 2016 and beyond” (Scottish Left Project, 2014). One of its first objectives was thus to “discuss how the Scottish Left c[ould] present the best possible socialist challenge at the Holyrood elections in 2016” (*ibid.*) which is how RISE came about.

## RISE’s aims and strategy

The name RISE is meant to be indicative of the alliance’s core beliefs: RISE stands for Respect, Independence, Socialism and Environmentalism. Its first *raison d’être* is electoral: its goal is to field candidates in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election, in which it will exclusively target the regional, list vote. In Holyrood elections, voters have two votes: a first vote for a constituency candidate, who generally represents a political party, and a second vote for a regional party list. Small parties have generally targeted the second vote, which is proportional, rather than waste precious resources on the first vote, for which the majoritarian First Past the Post system is used. The Scottish Greens, for instance, have never fielded constituency candidates in Holyrood elections, and the SSP did not field any in the latest election (held in 2011). The mixed (partly proportional, partly majoritarian) system used to elect MSPs has made Holyrood elections a more favourable terrain than Westminster elections for small parties in general, and for the radical left in particular. According to research conducted by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, in practice, political parties generally need to win at least 6-7% of the vote in a particular regional ballot in order to have a chance of gaining a seat in the Scottish Parliament, which is a much lower threshold than that needed to get a seat at Westminster (Scottish Parliament Information Centre, 2011).

However, one might still wonder why the Scottish radical, pro-independence left has adopted an electoral strategy, when many socialists and radicals have a track record of opposing electoral politics on principle, and at a time when the SNP’s popularity has reached record highs. Several reasons lie behind this choice. While winning seats in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election is a short-term aim in itself, it is also seen as part of “a long term process to rebuild socialist politics in Scotland and electoral support for it” (Gordon, 2015a), as noted by Jonathan Shafi. It is felt that support for such politics had been strong in the first half of the 2000s, before the Sheridan court dramas, and that the post-referendum context offers socialists a perfect opportunity to regain this lost support. To the non-Labour left, the results of the 2003 Holyrood election, when the SSP and the Greens had won a total of 13 seats and 260,000 votes, were evidence of Scots’ willingness to vote for a left alternative to Labour. The main push behind the creation of RISE is therefore the belief that there is in Scotland a significant political space that is waiting to be occupied: not only the space vacated by the collapse of Scottish Labour, but also the new political space carved out through mass democratic participation in the Scottish independence campaign.

RISE will therefore target the votes of several categories of Scottish people. First of all, it will target those voters from deprived areas who registered and came out to vote in the Scottish independence referendum, many of them for the first time. Secondly, it will hope to attract

some of the many people who joined the SNP in the wake of the referendum and who might be disappointed with the party's lack of radicalism (Carrell, 2015). The SNP being first and foremost a nationalist party, it is by definition a wide chapel which brings together both left-wing and right-wing supporters, even though its political programme and its current leader are both clearly social democratic. As noted by RISE founder member Cat Boyd:

[N]o party is big enough to encompass the radical left and Michelle Thomson [a Scottish property developer, former managing director of Business for Scotland and current SNP MP]. [...] Her vision of society's future is radically different from mine. I back independence because Westminster offers no channels to redistribute wealth and power. Thomson came to independence from a "cash is king" perspective. [...] There's a place for pro-independence businesspeople in parliament, I'm sure. But working class, pro-independence Scotland needs its own voice – and the two can't be conflated (Boyd, 2015).

Or as summed up by SSP spokesman Colin Fox: "[t]he SNP is no place for a socialist" (Gordon, 2015b). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, RISE wishes to become the "natural home" for former Labour voters. The current unpopularity of the Labour Party in Scotland, which lost 40 of its 41 Scottish seats at Westminster in the 2015 General Election, has created a political opportunity which the non-Labour left hopes to grasp. As noted by SSP activists, "[t]he self-destruction of the Labour Party in Scotland opens the door to the development of a principled socialist alternative and a new political home for working class people" (Red Left, 2015). Moreover, it is argued that filling in the space vacated by Labour is crucial to Scottish democracy and pluralism, in a context where the SNP is by far the majority Scottish party in both Holyrood and Westminster. As noted by the editor of the SSP newspaper, "what we now see in Scotland is the possibility of one dominant party replaced entirely by another", making it "vital that the socialist and green perspective finds expression in the parliament" (Wray, 2015).

RISE therefore hopes to become a significant opposition party, and possibly even replace Labour as "the main opposition to the SNP", as Colin Fox has repeatedly stated since its launch<sup>13</sup>. In the short term, RISE may pose more of a problem for the Scottish Greens than for Scottish Labour or the SNP, as both RISE and the Greens will be competing for the regional vote, and will be doing so from a similar leftist perspective<sup>14</sup>. However, the Greens have the undoubted advantage of being more implanted locally and better known than the new socialist coalition. As a consequence, during the launch of RISE, there was some talk that the new alliance might be "open to forming an electoral agreement with the Scottish Green Party" (Gray, 2015). Nevertheless, such an agreement would only be considered "further down the line", in other words, after the 2016 Holyrood election. It should be noted that the SSP had already approached the Scottish Greens with a view to forming a Red-Green alliance on the occasion of the 2014 European election, an alliance which the Greens had then rejected; this largely explains why they were not approached again at the time when RISE was being set up. According to the SSP, a Red-Green alliance in 2014 might "have been the test bed for a similar initiative in the more fruitful Holyrood elections of 2016" (for instance, *Scottish Socialist Voice*, 2014).

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<sup>13</sup> For instance during the launch of RISE and during a TV interview given on 25 August 2015 (STV, "Scotland Tonight").

<sup>14</sup> RISE will also be competing against Tommy Sheridan's Solidarity, which has stated that it will be fielding candidates in every region. The Solidarity campaign poster for the 2016 Scottish Parliament election encourages voters to give the SNP their first, constituency vote, and Solidarity their second, regional vote.

RISE and the radical left aren't just preparing for the next Holyrood election: they are also preparing for a future Scottish independence referendum. In that respect, RISE has identified three key questions that will inform its long-term strategy:

First – how do we increase the potential of getting another referendum? Second – how do we increase the chances of winning another referendum? Third – how do we increase the potential for that future independence victory to translate into genuine social change? (Small, 2015)

In other words, the launch of RISE is intended to strengthen the pro-independence camp in Scotland in view of a future independence referendum, not only in order to increase the likelihood of victory, but also for the left to be ready to offer an alternative to the SNP project in case of victory.

RISE sees its two key objectives (obtaining parliamentary representation and preparing for a new independence referendum) as linked. As author Alan Bisset declared at the launch of RISE, “the left must have a profile in the Scottish Parliament before any future referendum”. From that perspective, the priority is to challenge the SNP narrative which warns against splitting the pro-independence vote in parliamentary elections. The radical left also disagrees with the SNP on how the next independence referendum can be won, and on why the first one was lost. The SNP's strategy for the 2014 referendum was to stress the continuities between Scotland's present situation as part of the UK and its future situation as an independent country, so as “to make the prospect of independence as palatable as possible to the unconvinced” (Davidson, 2014). This largely explains its support for three divisive policies in the pro-independence camp, namely retaining the monarchy, remaining in NATO and keeping the pound. The radical left on the contrary believes that most Yes supporters actually want their country “to be as *different* from the contemporary UK as possible” (*ibid.*). To quote Colin Fox:

[T]here is a danger those looking for significant change and meaningful improvement in an independent Scotland will be discouraged from voting Yes [to independence] if all they see are conservative commitments to keep the pound, stay in NATO, maintain the hegemony of finance capital and retain an unelected, unaccountable and unrepresentative Head of State as the uppermost goals of our new nation. We know from polling evidence that many Scots from working class backgrounds particularly will vote No unless they see real change coming down the line (Fox, 2014, 5-6).

The radical left therefore believes that the SNP's cautious approach is one of the key reasons why the 2014 independence referendum was lost.

At the time of writing, RISE did not have a formal structure yet. This was to be voted on during its first conference of November 2015, a conference to which all RISE members were invited. It would then “select candidates through open primaries and formulate policies through open policy forums” (Carrell, 2015). In the meantime, it was to build itself up from the grassroots. Local groups (known as “circles”) were set up all over Scotland. RISE was not (at least for the time being) intended to be a political party: it was an electoral alliance, to which the Scottish Socialist Party was affiliated while retaining its autonomy as a political party. This raised the following questions: what existence would RISE have outside of elections if any, and would the left alliance even continue to exist beyond the 2016 election? If so, would it remain an alliance or become an actual party on the model of Syriza in

Greece?<sup>15</sup> RISE's electoral results in 2016 will probably be crucial to determining its short-term future and its long-term structure.

## Conclusion

The Scottish independence referendum didn't just reinforce the SNP's status as Scotland's dominant political party: it boosted the entire pro-independence camp, in particular by giving birth to new political groupings on the left, intent on challenging the SNP's position as the voice of independence in Scotland. One cannot fully grasp the independence debate in Scotland without a knowledge of this radical "new left": of who these people were, what they stood for and what they hoped to do in the months or years following the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. This "new left" hoped to seize and build on the momentum born of the referendum campaign, a campaign which had led to a flurry of grassroots initiatives and a rise in political participation.

The conversion to independence of most of the radical left in Scotland goes against what Alan McCombes has called the "old Left theology that preached the British road to socialism" (McCombes, 2011, 21). As noted by Neil Davidson, "[a]ccording to conventional wisdom, a referendum would at best only encourage constitutional illusions, at worst lead to national divisions among the British working class" (Davidson, 2014). Since 2012, however, the majority of Scottish radicals were convinced that only "independence w[ould] allow Scotland to achieve what it cannot in the UK", namely social democracy or socialism<sup>16</sup>.

Every time a new left party or alliance is formed, the question of its eligibility is raised. This is a legitimate question, especially when, as is the case for RISE, getting good electoral results is the stated aim of the party or alliance. For the time being, one can only note that the launch of RISE was attended by 500 to 700 activists (depending on the account) (Gordon, 2015c; Ferguson, 2015), which is rather less than the 3,000 people who had taken part in the latest Radical Independence Conference, held in the wake of the referendum. However, RISE and the other new left initiatives should also be judged on the basis of two other criteria: first of all, their ability to endure in the mundane post-referendum political context, and secondly their ability to offer a credible opposition to the now all-powerful SNP – and for that, the necessary prerequisite is not so much achieving parliamentary representation as it is building a wide-ranging and cohesive policy platform, despite a long history of left divisions and infighting.

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<sup>15</sup> Syriza was a coalition of parties when it was created in 2004, but it became a party in 2013. The main difference between RISE today and Syriza when it was created is that Syriza brought together different parties, whereas RISE brought together only one party and one left-wing movement, the Scottish Left Project.

<sup>16</sup> In the words of Pauline Bryan from the Red Paper Collective (Bryan, 2014).

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