**Scottish Sovereignty beyond the UK**

**Vince Mills**

**It feels almost a little self-indulgent to be discussing, once again, the constitutional stalemate in Scotland. There is now an escalating war in Eastern Europe, more and more obviously a proxy war between NATO and Russia, both, of course with nuclear arsenals.**

The US claims that the combined casualty rate is 200,000, higher than the numbers offered by the main combatants Ukraine and Russia but we all know about ‘truth’ in wars.

Whatever the number, it is too great and yet it is diminished by the death toll in Yemen's seven-year-old war with Saudi Arabia. The UN estimates that this reached 377,000 lives by the end of 2022. According to the UN 60 percent of deaths are caused by indirect impacts such as lack of safe water, hunger, and disease, and further that the majority of those killed by the war's indirect effects are "young children who are especially vulnerable …”.

Add to that the current crisis in that other theatre of ‘Great Power’ interference and abuse, Afghanistan. The UNHCR refugee council tells us: “Some 3.5 million people are displaced due to conflict…The health care system is collapsing; fundamental rights of women and girls are under threat…the economy is in free fall. Half of Afghanistan’s population experiences acute hunger.”

It is worth noting that part of the US response to this crisis, which they played a significant part in creating, is to seize some $7bn, of Afghanistan’s assets, some of which is the savings of ordinary Afghans now freezing and starving and facing the worst winter Afghanistan has seen in a decade with temperatures of -34 degrees.

It may seem self-indulgent, but it is not. The UK is not only part of NATO, but as we all know from the antics of Blair in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and Boris Johnston’s more recent attempt at a reprise in his rush to inflame the situation in Ukraine, the UK sees itself a close partner of US imperial ambitions.

The question then is obvious: what can we do to limit or better still prevent the havoc that the UK pro US pro NATO stance wreaks on the world?

Supporters of independence would of course look to an independent Scotland as being less imperialist and than the UK and supporters of ‘radical independence’ would argue ‘breaking up the British state’ would open the door to developing Scotland as a progressive force on the international stage. The, as yet, immovable obstacle to this position has been and remains the belief held by the vast majority of independence supporters that the SNP and only the SNP can provide the route to independence. The SNP not only wants an independent Scotland to be part of NATO, it desperately wants an independent Scotland to join the EU.

Joining the EU was something which the Radical Independence Campaign, before its demise, did not oppose. A glance at NATO’s web page will alert you to the problems this is likely to create: “Sharing strategic interests and facing the same challenges, NATO and the European Union (EU) cooperate on issues of common interest and are working side by side in crisis management, capability development and political consultations, as well as providing support to their common partners in the east and south. The EU is a unique and essential partner for NATO.”

The latest joint declaration of NATO and the EU, signed as recently as January 2023, explicitly refers to those countries who are members of the EU but not NATO: “We encourage the fullest possible involvement of the EU members that are not part of the Alliance in its initiatives.” So, EU member states that are not in NATO, are, from NATO’s point of view at least, still within their sphere of influence.

If independence is unlikely to allow us to escape the embrace of US led imperialism, what other options do we have? As the right wing nature of the SNP’s vision for independence has become clearer and building an undisputed majority for independence, has become more difficult, other options short of independence are being explored. David Martin former Labour MEP espoused what he calls Independence in the UK. In this model of devolution "Scotland would become a completely sovereign nation with total power over its domestic laws, services and taxation.” Leaving aside the financial implications of the budget deficit such a model entails - there would be no transfers from Westminster to Holyrood - and the damage to class solidarity across the UK - from an international perspective it has a fatal weakness: "Defence would remain a UK-wide function with Scotland making a contribution to this and other common services.”

While this would not necessarily mean that Scotland would have no say on key international issues that are defence related, for example the current conflict over Ukraine, it’s role would almost certainly be heavily circumscribed.

The answer to this problem is surely to be found in the kind of settlement that Katy Clark MSP argues for in her contribution the Red Paper Collective’s booklet *Scottish Independence: There is a Third Option.* She makes the case that “The principle of the union between the nations should be based on the consent of each nation. It is perfectly possible for there to be a constitutional settlement which requires the specific consent of the nation affected in relation to certain decisions.”

She has in mind areas like Trident and the power to go to war. Her’s is a very powerful argument, and it is a matter of serious regret that Gordon Brown’s commission report *A New Britain: Renewing our Democracy and Rebuilding our Economy,* offered so little in addressing the democratic deficit in international issues that Katy Clark raised.

The Brown report does propose that the Scottish Parliament should be allowed to enter into international agreements and join international bodies, but only in relation to devolved matters and that completely excludes defence.

At this point we perhaps need to identify an elephant in the room. Exactly which powers do the Scottish people want and would they, as I have been implying, use those powers to inhibit imperial and neo-colonial abuses. If the war in Ukraine is anything to go by and Nicola Sturgeon in any way representative of Scottish attitudes to the war, then we would have to be very cautious in making assumptions about Scottish anti-war sentiments. Back in March 2022 and completely out of step with even the most bellicose Tory, Nicola Sturgeon was urging consideration of no-fly Zones over Ukraine, despite dire warnings of the risk of escalation by NATO’s leaders.

Nevertheless, if sovereignty is to mean anything, then surely the right to decide whether your country is going to be involved in the death and destruction of neighbours near or far, perhaps incurring similar retaliatory action, is absolute.

In any case given the current constitutional stalemate isn’t this the right time to have a national discussion about powers for a purpose, including the purpose of bringing about a more peaceful world? Brown’s report falls far short of what most Scottish People need or want and Scottish Labour have to be able to find a way out of the current constitutional impasse or consider opposition as their permanent condition in the Scottish Parliament with all the dangers this poses to lack of influence on Scottish politics. The Left needs to win the Scottish people to a settlement that not only allows the left the political space it needs to argue for democratising the economy and tackling inequality but also seeking to influence international perspectives as part of the renunciation of our part in empire and our hope for a peaceful world.

That is why Glasgow Kelvin CLP was part of a composite motion passed at the Scottish Labour conference. The crucial part is as follows:

“… Conference welcomes the reforms proposed by the Commission on the UK’s Future led by Gordon Brown, particularly the abolition of the House of Lords and plans to delegate power away from the centralised UK Parliament, entrench devolution and give local economies the powers and resources they need. This must be part of the Labour Party’s reforming platform at the General Election.

Conference also welcomes the report’s discussion on additional powers for the Scottish Parliament and calls on Scottish Labour to approach the STUC to convene a campaigning alliance of trade unions and civic society by the end of 2023 committed to formulating proposals to strengthen the Scottish Parliament’s powers, ensuring that accountability and transparency of the Scottish Government is increased to fulfil Donald Dewar’s vision of a Parliament for the betterment of Scotland and to achieve social justice. And that reform must end the SNPs centralising agenda by giving local authorities powers to make a real difference for the communities they represent.

There is a majority for change in Scotland and across the UK and by offering the Scottish people economic, democratic and social renewal at the next General Election, Labour can deliver a stronger Scotland in a transformed UK.”

We must now ensure that the Scottish Labour Executive take action on this motion.

*Vince Mills is active in the Red Paper Collective and the Labour Party left.*