

# Can 'gender equality' exclude feminist politics? The case of the Radical Independence Campaign

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Scottish independence referendum saw the voters opt to remain within the United Kingdom, albeit by a relatively narrow margin. One of the voices arguing for a 'Yes' vote was the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), who took an overtly left-wing, class-based position, in contrast to the traditional SNP position. **Jenny Morrison** looks at the way feminism did – and did not – interact with the Radical Independence Campaign, arguing that the RIC must involve not only gender equality in representation but also integrate feminism into the core of its political demands.*



Credit: Craig Maclean

The Scottish Independence Campaign in the run up to the referendum of 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2014 was one of the largest political movements in recent Scottish history. By the final six months it was clear that the campaign was driven not only by nationalism but also by a centre-left opposition to austerity. An important organisation in driving the independence movement left was the [Radical Independence Campaign \(RIC\)](#), formed to expose the contradictions of the SNP driven Yes Scotland campaign and provide a class rather than a nationalist argument for independence. While there are [legitimate concerns](#) that RIC frequently falls into left nationalist-populist rhetoric rather than class based analysis, it is undeniable that RIC mobilised a high number of [working class people and communities](#) often ignored by the democratic process.

As well as campaigning for independence, RIC established itself as a [new and reinvigorated left](#). The claim to newness was, in part, based on the inclusion of feminism as an important aspect of left wing politics. Yet to what extent were feminist politics-proposals to advance gender equality-promoted by RIC? This blog is based on a survey of the published material and speeches of the RIC alongside interviews with thirty feminist pro-independence activists. It highlights a misalignment between the public emphasis on equality and the internal dynamics of the campaign which systematically marginalised feminism.

## An Image of Equality

RIC has defined itself as a [coalition including feminists](#) and organisers emphasised they 'take feminism seriously'. To this end the campaign instituted formal measures to increase gender equality within the organisation. Specifically, a 50:50 policy was actively implemented- where at least 50% of speakers on any RIC platform must be women.

Women participated in the campaign in high numbers with interviewees estimating between 40-50% of active participants were women, and an even higher participation rate in the under-30 age group. Moreover, several of RIC's leading public figures are women.

Yet while women were included in the campaign, feminist perspectives were not. References to women or gender were rare, as were demands designed to advance gender equality. At the national level RIC is structured around annual conferences held in [2012](#), [2013](#) and [2014](#). The plenary sessions of the conferences can be taken as an indication of the national political priorities of the organisation. Excluding references to the importance of 50:50 and equal gender representation, out of a total of thirty plenary speakers across three years only one individual, [Ailsa McKay](#), took a feminist perspective. Otherwise discussion on women or gender was relegated to breakaway women's sessions held at each conference.

Feminist politics are also conspicuous in their absence in the written documents and materials that emerged from RIC. The sporadically updated [RIC blog](#) contained one single reference to women in the two year campaign. Similarly the most prominent set of leaflets distributed by RIC with the slogan 'Britain is for the rich, Scotland can be ours' contained one reference to gender referring to the current gender pay gap. The most comprehensive statement of RIC politics and *de facto* RIC handbook 'Yes' by James Foley and Pete Ramand contained only a handful of references to women or gender towards the end of the book. Clearly exceptions exist and feminists within RIC have [published alternative accounts](#) placing gender at the centre of the debate. Yet these are attempts to push feminism back from the side-lines of the campaign rather than evidence of feminism at the centre of RIC.

### **Unity: Marginalising Feminism**

Given the inclusion of women and rhetorical commitment to feminism, a central question emerges as to why feminist politics were such marginal concern for RIC? Feminists often mentioned a strong informal discourse in the campaign which emphasised the importance of unity for a yes vote. As a result feminism could be framed as potentially damaging to the independence cause. As one feminist activist interviewed said:

*I think that a lot of women, and feminists of any gender are essentially choosing public unity, a public face of unity, over kicking up too much of a stink (Sandra).*

Similarly, others spoke of a pressure not to criticise the independence campaign:

*I planned to write something over the summer about the way that people talk about women in the Yes campaign, women as a voting group and so on, and I expect that people will find that distasteful and think that you shouldn't be doing that to the Yes campaign. (Alison)*

Of course RIC set itself apart the mainstream Yes Scotland. However, RIC justifies challenging the Yes campaign on issues relating to class because these are held to be central to the success of a yes vote. [Jonathon Shafi](#) from RIC remarked after the conference 2014,

*[W]hile the uniting objective was September 18th, the uniting political ideas were about social, economic and political issues related to poverty, corporate power, war and democracy*

Issues such as income inequality or the power of big business are placed as central to the British political system and, therefore, to winning a majority to break away from that system. In contrast gender is not considered a central

issue which may be an influential, uniting political idea. As a result discussion of gender can be justified as superfluous to the central struggle for a yes vote. Such subtle discourses discouraged feminist activists from raising critiques and so impeded the integration of their concerns into the centre of the campaign. RIC organisers could continue to claim that feminism was important-but also delay focusing on concerns of gender equality until after independence.

### **Equality: more than just 50:50**

Radical politics aim for a more equal society – which must include equality between genders. Equality of gender representation in RIC is an important step forward and puts it ahead of the established political parties. Yet while 50:50 is necessary, it does not automatically lead to a more central position for women's and gender equality. The degree to which feminist political demands are promoted by an organisation defines how prominent these demands will be when it succeeds in its campaign.

RIC activists are likely to form the basis of future social movements in Scotland, and are already prominent within the [Scottish Left Project](#): a coalition for socialism which aims to form a united left electoral challenge at the Scottish Parliament elections in 2016. If this is to move past the contradiction of RIC, it must involve not only gender equality in representation but also integrate feminism into the core of its political demands.

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