

AFTER THE ELECTION



UNITE THE NON-RESPECT LEFT

REBUILD THE SOCIALIST ALLIANCE

The general election provides socialists with valuable information on the health of Britain's parliamentary democracy and state of the socialist movement. The Tories got the campaign off to flying start on the issue of immigration and asylum. But as the election progressed this was superseded by Iraq as the major concern. The gains made by the Liberal Democrats and the election of George Galloway show the political significance of the war.

The Iraq issue represented a major loss of trust in Blair and his government. But it goes beyond that. It calls into question the system of government. It showed the concentration of power in the hands of the Prime Minister and a small clique of advisers and senior officials. This enabled Blair to back Bush's war despite massive popular opposition. A feeble and corrupted parliament failed to represent the people or make the government accountable. The exposure of the inner workings of government adds to loss of confidence in parliamentary democracy and points to a growing crisis.

The failure of parliamentary democracy is reflected in the alienation of voters. Forty percent of the electorate did not vote. Only 35% of those voting supported Labour. The new government therefore had the backing of only 22% of the electorate. But this translated into 55% of the seats in parliament and an overall majority of 68. A minority government

has effective control over the House of Commons.

The bankruptcy of the political system and the lack of accountability is a danger to our civil liberties and to the working class movement. The concentration of power that took us to war will now enable the government to push through unpopular laws and policies, privatising parts of the health service, introducing ID cards and further limiting our civil liberties. The government is free to promote authoritarian ideas and anti-democratic policies. This is an ideal breeding ground for racist and fascist ideas. The Tories used immigration to tap into an undercurrent of racist ideas. The increase in votes for the BNP indicates this danger.

Many working class voters and some Labour MP's are very disillusioned with Blair's government. Labour openly supports big business interests and defends the existing constitution which acts as a barrier to genuine democracy. Brian Sedgemore MP spoke **for** many in his harsh public condemnation of Blair's government. Yet all he could propose was voting for the Liberal Democrats. For many Labour voters this seemed the only credible 'left' alternative. The Liberal Democrats gained twelve seats at Labour's expense. But for socialists the vacuum to the left of Labour points to failure to build a credible alternative working class party.

Socialist Alliance - People before Profit

The crisis of democracy, the experience of Labour in government and the growing disillusion amongst Labour supporters has not translated into votes or support for socialist alternatives. If anything the socialist movement is weaker. In 2001 the left stood 303 candidates, including 98 for the Socialist Alliance. This time there were 187. Leaving aside the position of Respect, the array of socialist candidates competing for working class votes tells its own story. These included the Scottish Socialist Party (average vote: 2.01%), Socialist Labour Party (1.15%), Socialist Party (1.57%), Alliance for Green Socialism (1.02%), Democratic SA (0.64%), Socialist Unity (1.01%), Communist Party of Britain (0.55%) and the Workers Revolutionary Party (0.35%). The Independent Working Class Association (2.13%) and the Walsall DLP (2.3%) stood one candidate each.

Respect stands out as the exception to prove the rule. The election of Galloway was a major achievement. Respect had eight results above 5%, including 27%, 20%, 19% and 17%. However 17 Respect candidates got below 5%, including 12 below 2%. This unevenness is quite startling. In some areas Respect did no better and sometimes worse than the Socialist Alliance in 2001. The factor that seems to explain this result is the concentration of Muslim voters in certain constituencies. Bethnal Green and Bow provide an obvious example. Only Janet Alder's 6.4% in Tottenham did not rely on a Muslim vote.

Even if we aggregate the votes of Respect and the Non-Respect socialists, it falls well short of an effective nation-wide opposition to Labour. Despite the relative success of Respect it would be a mistake for socialists to see this as the answer. As yet it is no more than a short term project to garner votes from Muslims alienated by the Iraq war. Winning protest votes should not be confused with the long term building of a party that can win power. As presently constituted Respect is built on sand. It remains wedded to the ideas of 'real' Labour. If the Labour leadership changes there is the obvious possibility of Galloway following the path back to Labour taken by Ken Livingstone.

However the relative success of Respect cannot be denied. It puts the spotlight firmly on the organisations which constitute the Non-Respect left. No doubt the election will help the SWP to present the Non-Respect left as a diminishing band of irrelevant sects. If it is not true then the Non-Respect left has to make some significant progress towards unity. This is why the Socialist Alliance is calling for greater unity of the Non-Respect left. This is one reason why a provisional organisation has been set up to prepare for the relaunch of a new Socialist Alliance.

Uniting the Non-Respect left is not an end in itself. A left divided between Respect and the Socialist Alliance is not a solution to the lack of a working class party. It will not overcome the divisions with the socialist movement which render it ineffective and unattractive to the working class movement. There has to be a real dialogue and debate between Respect, the Socialist Alliance and the advanced sections of the working class movement about how we can build a working class alternative to Labour.

This election points to the following conclusion. There is a growing crisis of democracy which socialists need to recognise and respond to. There is no working class party to rival the Liberal Democrats. The socialist movement is neither popular, credible nor attractive to working class voters. Despite the success of Respect, socialists should not put all their eggs in the Respect basket. Socialists must organise independently of Respect. However we should neither ignore Respect nor relate to it in a sectarian way. That would only help Blair and not the future of our movement.

If you would like to contact the Socialist Alliance please email us at -

samember@hotmail.co.uk

Socialist Alliance - People before Profit