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Britain

Batley — No Great Victory for Starmer

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It is good news that Labour was not defeated by the Tories in the Batley and Spen by-election. [1] But the outcome—a narrow victory for Labour candidate Kim Leadbetter, with 13,296 votes against the Tories' 12,979—is hardly a great victory for Labour leader Keir Starmer.

Given the awful record of the Johnson government on the pandemic, corruption, inequality and poverty, Labour should be racing ahead in by-elections, not squeezing in with tiny majorities in heartland seats. But in Batley, Labour probably won because their candidate, Kim Leadbetter was the sister of popular local MP Jo Cox, gunned down by a fascist thug during the Brexit referendum in 2016. [2]

Obviously she did not win on the basis of the decisive radical policies and critique of the government put forward by Starmer—because there were no such clear and radical alternatives advanced. Batley, like Hartlepool before it, reflected a Labour leadership intent on saying as little as possible, particularly on the pandemic, for fear of being criticised by the right-wing media and thus becoming 'unpopular' with sections of the electorate. The constant complaint, apparently, from Labour canvassers in Batley and Spen was that 'people don't know what Starmer stands for.'

While the Johnson government engages in an utterly irresponsible lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, Labour says nothing. Neither is there any clear Labour plan for overcoming the dire rise in poverty and inequality shown by last week's revelation of the sharp decline in life expectancy in Greater Manchester.

The intervention in this election by George Galloway and his wholly owned mini-subsiary, The Workers Party of Great Britain, who won more than 8000 votes, was bad news for the radical Left. [3] Bad news because while correctly criticising Starmer's economic and pandemic policies from the left, Galloway deliberately set out to build support among socially conservative voters on the basis of rampant homophobia and transphobia.

Galloway openly adopted the position of the *Telegraph-Mail-Spectator* radical Right, that Labour and the whole Left is dominated by 'woke' urban elites who are middle class and made a 'California turn' some decades ago. Galloway's attempt to divide economic radicalism from social radicalism is a gift to the Tory and Labour Right. It is exactly on these issues, particularly of racism and immigration (about which Galloway and his party say nothing), that the far right and the Tories attempt to drive a wedge into the working class. It is on this basis that the pro-Brexit side in the 2016 referendum won substantial support in those former industrial towns of the North and Midlands 'Red Wall', which later voted Tory at the 2019 election.

The by-election was marked by street confrontations, in which mainly young, Muslim activists, sometimes apparently led by Shakeel Afsar from Birmingham, heckled and harassed Labour canvassers on the issue of LGBT+ friendly education in schools. Galloway disclaimed all knowledge of these events and his campaign denied any connection with the Birmingham activists.

Still Galloway himself deliberately tried to stoke up and capitalise from anti-LBGT+ feeling in the conservative sections of the Muslim community. Afsar was a leading figure in the picketing of Anderton Park primary school in Birmingham in 2019, where reactionary sectors of the Muslim community campaigned against LBGT+ friendly education in schools.

In the current situation, the real militant Left will want to campaign against the British government's harsh treatment of

refuges and asylum seekers, exemplified by their housing in the Covid-unsafe Napier barracks in Kent and the inadequate provision made for the many unaccompanied children arriving from France. The Left will want to join and support Black Lives Matter campaigners in their fight against the glorification of Britain's racist and imperialist past in the slave trade.

The real militant Left will also take a stand against violence against women, and in support of those raising this issue.

Fighting against racism and sexism is fighting back against the real oppression that people face daily in their lives. This lived experience, which involves mountains of sexist and racism violence, and equal mountains of racist and sexist discrimination, cannot be pushed aside by courting the support of socially conservative Muslims or those in the working class supporting right wing and reactionary ideas. Or saying that anti-racist and anti-sexist campaigners are 'woke' elites.

Galloway's tactics have a distinct echo of the 'national Bolshevism' stand of the German Communist Party (KPD) in the early 1930s. The KPD made correct criticisms of the Social Democrats on their pro-capitalist economic policies, but tried to woo workers influenced by the nationalist ideas of the Nazis and other right-wing parties, particularly trying to create a broad political front, on a German nationalist basis, for the return of Alsace-Lorraine from French occupation.

This policy was a disaster. Making bids for support from extreme right and reactionary political forces, or those in the working class influenced by their ideas, leads to strengthening the Right and not the Left.

Galloway's campaign rightly spoke out against Islamophobia and in support of Palestine. Absolutely correct things to do, but you cannot divide Islamophobia from racism in general. Nor pick and choose which sections of the oppressed you back, while staying quiet about others—or even adopting reactionary and hostile positions towards them.

Galloway's attempt to forge an alliance of socially conservative forces from the white and Asian communities will never work, because it will always be disrupted by racism towards Muslims.

Galloway's 8000 votes doubtless reflected disillusion with Starmer, but for a variety of reasons, some correct and some reactionary. Galloway is drifting to the right. His 8000 votes represent not a surge for the Left, but a reactionary dead-end. One which the very name of his party—the Workers Party of Great Britain—reveals.

Galloway appeared on pro-Brexit platforms with Nigel Farage during the referendum campaign, and inveighed not just against the EU, but also national self-determination for Scotland. He dismisses criticism of this as the Left not understanding alliances. But it is those who stand with and make concessions to, the reactionary right who do not understand alliances. Or maybe understand them all too well. Hostility to social radicalism is a gift to the Tory right and to creeping fascism.

3 July 2021

Source [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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[1] This election on 1 July 2021 was provoked by the election of the sitting Labour MP as mayor of West Yorkshire in May 2021.

[2] See "[Jo Cox and the well of hatred](#)".

[3] [George Galloway](#) was a Labour MP from 1987 until 2003 when he was expelled from Labour. He then became a member of [Respect](#) and was elected MP for that party in 2005 (London) and then in 2012 (Bradford). The party dissolved in 2016. After two unsuccessful election campaigns as an Independent Galloway formed the Workers' Party in 2019.