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New Labour falling apart

Respect and the England-Wales local elections

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The New Labour project is falling apart at the seams. Its local elections results were the worst in 40 years, with only 24% of the vote and coming third behind the Liberal Democrats. This is a disastrous result for Brown.

In London, the election of Boris Johnson as Mayor and the presence of a BNP member on the Greater London Assembly will disturb and depress all who value the multi-cultural diversity of the city.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/respecteastlondon2.jpg>]

Respect campaigns in East London

The most immediate catalyst for the collapse of the Labour vote was the abolition of the 10% income tax rate (ie Labour attacking a large part of its core base), but looming large behind that is the economic crisis the credit crunch, rising fuel and food prices set against continuing low wages for a big section of society. Added to this was Brown's inability to spin the New Labour project in the way Blair could do it.

All of this raises the prospect of a further electoral disaster in the European elections in 2009 followed by a drubbing in the general election of 2010 and the possible election of a Tory Government.

Against this background what are the prospects and possibilities for building a left-wing alternative to New Labour's neo-liberal policies. What is the terrain and what can be achieved?

Firstly, nothing in the general political situation has fundamentally changed since the launching of Respect in 2004. Large numbers of traditional Labour voters remain alienated, disillusioned and demoralised by the right-wing policies of New Labour. Some seek solutions in a "change" and vote for the Tories. Many more abstain, casting a plague on both parties. Such is the nature of party politics in Britain today, and the media coverage, that the rivalry between the main parties has become one of presentation and personalities.

Ideological differences have been left far behind as all the establishment parties support neo-liberalism to the hilt. Differences are miniscule, reflected by petty point scoring. In these circumstances voters can cast a vote for the opposition in order to register their dissatisfaction without, in fact, registering a vote for any fundamentally different policies.

At the same time, there is widespread anger at rising prices and the budget attacks on the poorest. There is opposition to privatisation and a fear about the future of the health service and education. The war and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, although receding as an issue, remains of concern for millions.

Of course, not everything flows in the same direction. Fears about crime and the issue of immigration are factors used by the press and politicians to drum up support for right-wing views.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/thornettwrack_copy.jpg]

In general, however, disillusioned working-class voters and the progressively minded sections of the middle class will not swing to the Tories. Some may be tempted by the social liberalism of the Liberal Democrats but most will withhold their votes unless and until they see a serious, viable, alternative. When the threat arises of a Tory win most of these will vote once again for New Labour with heavy heart and holding their noses whilst doing so. This was a significant feature of the Livingstone vote in the London Mayoral election. Such an attitude will be played upon by the

right-wing trade union leaders to argue against “rocking the boat”, arguing that New Labour has to be supported to keep out the Tories.

In these circumstances, there are possibilities for building a left-wing alternative to New Labour but it will not be easy or swift. We may not like where we are starting from but every journey has to start from where you are.

The first point to register about the performance of the left parties in the recent elections is that they confirm that there is the basis of support for such a project. Although the experience was very limited, with only a few handfuls of good results outside of London, the results demonstrate that where consistent and patient work has been invested, support can be obtained for left-wing candidates.

Respect's results confirm this. In Birmingham Sparkbrook, Respect's Nahim Ullah Khan won 3,032 (42.64%) and became Respect's third councillor in the ward. Elsewhere in Birmingham, Respect polled 25% in Springfield, 17% in Nechells and just under 5% in Moseley and Kings Heath.

These are extremely significant results. They indicate the possibilities of obtaining very good votes in elections and demonstrate that it is possible to win. They augur well for Respect's prospects in the city at the general election.

In Manchester's Cheetham Hill ward Kay Phillips polled 14.4% following an energetic campaign that built serious links with the local communities. In Moss Side Respect polled 5.8% and in Wigan 6.7%. In Bradford Manningham ward Respect won 7.5% and in Walsall 7.6%. Of course, these are very few wards contested but are small indications of what can be obtained in the first instance if there were forces to contest more widely.

A few of the results for the Left List also demonstrated the same potential for the left. They received a very good 37% and 25% in Preston and Sheffield respectively to 12% and 10% in Manchester. It is worth mentioning that the result in Preston and Sheffield are the products of work over a long period of time with a commitment from the core activists to the building of a broad electoral left alternative; a completely different approach from that of the SWP leadership.

In London the most impressive result was the vote for Hanif Abdulmuhit in the City and East constituency. Here, Respect came third, polling 26,760 votes (14.59%), an increase of 7,085(36%) against the background of a polarisation of the vote between Labour and Conservatives. This was a tremendous vote, beating the BNP and consolidating Respect's position in its east London stronghold.

Across London Respect's vote did not fare so well. Respect did not stand any candidate for Mayor or in any other constituency apart from City and East. Respect polled 59,721 (2.43%) in the London-wide list, a disappointment to the many Respect supporters who had hoped to win at least one seat on the Greater London Assembly by obtaining the minimum 5% required.

Notwithstanding the high profile of George Galloway this was always going to be difficult in the circumstances. However there is no doubt that the response to Respect's campaign, albeit limited by a lack of resources and any real presence in large swathes of the capital, confirmed the potential to build outwards from the success in east London.

This was not a bad result in the circumstances. There was a massive polarisation in London around the Mayoral election which no doubt squeezed smaller parties. Perhaps more importantly, the war no longer featured to anything like the same degree as in 2004. Although Respect has a broad array of policies covering the breadth of the issues facing the electorate it is probable that most people still see Respect as the anti-war party. This needs to be addressed. What exactly is Respect and what does it stand for? There is no doubt that the split in Respect damaged

the party's prospect, both in terms of voters seeing Respect as damaged goods and weakening the party's ability to campaign across London.

We did not have a Mayoral candidate, which meant that we did not get an entry into the booklet which went to every household in London. Nor did we have an election broadcast.

Unfortunately, with the exception of Newham and Tower Hamlets, Southwark, and some pockets in North London and elsewhere, Respect does not exist as an active force with an organisation on the ground. This is a consequence of four years of neglect, compounded by the split last year. The lesson of last year's Southall by-election demonstrated again in these elections, is that Respect cannot expect to get significant support unless it carries out regular, consistent work in an area.

Respect was not able to overcome these difficulties. It shows that Respect has to be built across the capital, with branches in every borough, if we want to become a real force in London. The vote in City and East, however, demonstrates that we can build in other areas by developing an active base carrying out regular and consistent work within the local community. Of course, our priority areas are Tower Hamlets and Newham in the east where we have to continue to build and consolidate, but no national party can be built on the basis of support limited to two or three areas.

The London results

Neither the victory for the Conservatives, nor the election of a BNP member to the London Assembly, contradict the argument that there is a need and a realistic possibility of building a left-wing alternative to New Labour. In fact, the election results demonstrate the need for such a party more than ever. The neo-liberal policies of New Labour will lead some to try out the Tories and will even drive some working-class whites into the arms of the racist and fascist BNP. A party espousing policies that benefit working-class people, rather than big business is the only way to cauterise that flow.

An election is only a snapshot of political developments and these results should not be seen as a generalised move to the right. Given the absence of any authoritative left-wing party it is not surprising that many voters plump for the "other" party in the hope that things may improve marginally.

But the vast majority of traditional Labour voters still vote Labour or abstain. There is a sizable proportion of working-class voters, especially newer immigrants in low paid jobs, who no longer have any allegiance to Labour.

Notwithstanding the election of Johnson and the election of one BNP member to the GLA, the London elections show that the situation is much more complicated -than simply being a reflection of a shift to the right.

Livingstone's 1st preference vote increased by 208,336. His combined 1st and 2nd preference vote increased by 340,358. While there was massive discontent with New Labour's policies and with Livingstone's own performance, the fear of Johnson winning drove Livingstone's supporters out in massively increased numbers.

Unfortunately, this increased turnout for Livingstone could not match the increased Tory turnout, which added over half a million votes to their 2004 result. Following the election of Cameron as leader the Tories have cynically repositioned themselves towards the centre ground of politics to increase their appeal particularly to a new generation which did not know Thatcherism.

Alongside this the selection of Johnson as Mayoral candidate has seen a confidence returning to the Tory supporters, especially in the suburbs. Livingstone appeared jaded, grey and on the back foot in the campaign and the Tories scented a huge scalp. They turned out in force to take it.

This produced a fairly narrow Tory victory for Mayor. This shows that, notwithstanding the increasingly personal nature of political contest in Britain, there was still a clear left-right contest taking place. Voters for the most part understood this. No matter the serious concerns that many on the left would have with Livingstone, it was clearly understood that Johnson had to be beaten.

Whilst the vote for Livingstone went up in the inner city areas it could not compensate for the doubling of the Tory vote in some of the suburban constituencies. The Mayoral election was overwhelmingly a class vote. There was a clear ideological aspect to the vote, fuelled by the massive attacks on Livingstone led by the Tory-supporting Evening Standard. It was understood that the multicultural nature of London and its public services were seriously at risk. Johnson's victory will demonstrate very quickly how justified that fear was. It was a huge victory for the Tories and a defeat not only for New Labour but also for all those to its left - particularly when taking into account that the BNP are now on the Assembly.

Part of a wider trend

New Labour's defeat came directly out of the New Labour project itself. It is part of a wider and more fundamental picture involving the direction of social democracy at the European level. Over the last two decades European social democracy, without exception, has abandoned its traditional roots and adopted the full neo-liberal agenda. Now, one after another, these parties are suffering the backlash from this and falling into disarray. Italy is the most recent example where social democracy, after a disastrous period of coalition with a centre right Prodi administration, has collapsed and now we have a Berlusconi government and a fascist mayor of Rome. France is another example of a centre left government opening the door to the right, bringing Sarkozy to power. In Germany at an earlier stage it resulted in the election of Angela Merkel.

Right across Europe social democratic parties have moved to the centre ground and the ideological difference between them and the centre-right parties has disappeared. Politics are reduced to sound-bites and spin. In Britain, New Labour comprehensively rejected its traditional electoral base and, initially, successfully reached out to middle England - to win three elections with such support. But such support can disappear as fast as it comes. Unless governments rest on ideologically-based core support they are continually vulnerable to the latest twists and turns of the political situation or stunts pulled by their opponents.

Does this mean the end of new Labour? No. It might mean the end of this particular phase of New Labour in the sense that they are heading from office at a rate of knots. But any idea that they might draw the conclusion that the neo-liberal path has been wrong and that they should now turn back towards some kind of old Labour model is unlikely to materialise.

This will become clear enough when the new policy review is published in the next week or two. They are more likely to conclude that they have not gone far enough and the way to get their voters back from the Tory Party is to embrace the market even more.

The response of the left to all this right across Europe should be clear enough. The need to build broad parties of the left, based on broad socialist policies, designed to embrace all those looking for a political alternative could not be more sharply posed. This is not an easy project. It requires determination, élan, openness, patience and consistency. But it has to be done.

The way forwards after the election

The basis for a broad pluralist party of the Left clearly exists, despite the current divisions on the left and despite a reduced vote in the London elections. If we take the very good results in Birmingham and East London, along with some of the other results outside of London and the 3.6% won by the various left parties on the London list, there is clearly the basis for a much bigger party of the left than has been built up until now.

Respect therefore has a two-fold task in the post election situation: to consolidate the important and central bases in Birmingham and East London and start to extend outwards into other areas with the objective of establishing a national spread for the organisation.

This requires a rapid turn back from election work to party-building work through patient but energetic and lively local activity together with strengthening our national profile. We need to recruit and consolidate new members and build branches where they don't yet exist. The structures of Respect must be strengthened. The paper should be utilised to win more supporters and sympathisers. We should begin to prepare for a conference in the early autumn which can consolidate the organisation and reach out to others.

We must renew our approach to all those people in the communities with whom we have been working during the election but also find new areas to work in. We must reiterate our commitment to reach out to and work with all others on the left who want to build a left alternative - the young people of the environmental movement, those opposing racism and islamaphobia, and local community activists.

This also means approaching trade unionists and other sections of the left to argue for a regroupment broader than Respect, which can reflect the full potential available to the left and which can more adequately address the crisis of working-class representation. We should participate in initiatives like the "Convention of the left". Forging links with serious organisations on the left will not come easily or quickly, but we must show ourselves committed to the project of working with others to build a bigger, united left-wing party. In the meantime, we work to build our support in an open and inclusive way.