

Britain: Resist government by the rich, for the rich

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Other than a Tory majority this Conservative-Liberal coalition is the worst possible outcome of the general election, since it is the most effective platform available for cuts, austerity and unemployment. Cameron and Clegg tell us that the coalition has been formed ‘in the national interest’. That’s the code phrase for their own class.

The façade of equality within the coalition projected by making Clegg Deputy Prime Minister is a deception perpetrated by a Tory leadership which was determined to get their hands on the reins of power by any means necessary. It is an embrace of death which is already tearing the Lib Dems apart.

In return for the trappings of office the Lib Dems have decided to underpin a reactionary coalition and sign up to the onslaught on jobs, pensions and services which the Tories have been preparing.

The cuts agenda and deficit reduction are the cornerstones of this anti-working class coalition. Yet in the election campaign the Lib Dems supported Brown’s approach to the crisis, which was for a limited level of government stimulus (and quantitative easing) in order to maintain demand in the economy for another year. This was inadequate, and did not avoid cuts, but it had temporally cushioned the crisis — though it was based in the illusion that the economy would recover next year and that the working class could then be made to pay the bill.

However this was an important difference which would have kept more people in work and created better conditions for a fight back. It has now been junked in favour of Tory proposals for an immediate £6 billion slashing of public expenditure with much more to come. This can only make the economic situation worse and a full-scale double-dip recession more likely.

The backdrop of crisis across Europe throughout the election period should have served as warning on this. There was rioting in Athens and so-called ‘contagion’ was threatening Spain, Portugal, and Italy. To this mix was added fresh instability in the banking system and the markets and the threat by Sarkozy to pull France out of the Eurozone unless Merkel accepted the EU’s €750bn bailout fund for the single currency.

The Lib Dems capitulated to the Tories knowing that there was alternative deal with Labour and the nationalist parties on offer — the so-called progressive alliance.

Unprincipled Liberals

This was not a project that we would have called for or supported but we are not neutral on whether the Lib Dems line up with the Tories or against them even though neither of these parties represents the interests of the working class. Caroline Lucas [1] put it well, saying that neither side was progressive and that she would have supported any measures put forward on a case by case basis.

For the Lib Dems this represented a spectacular betrayal of their own principles. The Labour offer held out a real possibility of replacing Britain's bizarre and corrupt electoral system, which has under-represented them for so long, with some form of Proportional Representation (PR). This is something which the Lib Dems have correctly called for over many years. It would completely change the scandalously anti-democratic "first past the post" system which deprives millions of voters of representation in parliamentary elections. It does not represent workers' democracy, of course, but it is an extremely important working class democratic demand.

A Labour-Liberal coalition would have been a less effective platform for cuts which is one of the reasons the Lib Dems gave for rejecting it. Such a government would have come under massive pressure from the media to implement a cuts agenda. It is true that the arithmetic was tight with the Labour option and that it would probably not have lasted 5 years. But it could have lasted long enough to ensure that the next election would not be under the "first past the post" system.

What the Lib Dems have ended up with is a coalition in which all the cards and the key ministries are in the Tories' hands. The Tories have offered them a referendum on the Alternative Vote system. It is not PR since it is not proportional and is arguably no better than first past the post since it would have no effect on the constituencies dominated by Tory or Labour inbuilt majorities which are the distorting factor in the first past the post system.

One thing the Lib Dems extracted from the Tories was early legislation on fixed term Parliaments. This would mean that the next general election is scheduled to be on Thursday May 7th 2015.

This is a very important electoral reform measure in itself, although five years is too long for a government to hold office. Its purpose in these circumstances is a good illustration of the Lib Dems' cynicism. They wanted to make sure that the Tories did not use them to get into power only to spit them out again when they thought they could win a full majority. The outrageous proposed change of parliamentary procedure to require 55% of the vote to pass a motion of no confidence in a government is another example of the Lib Dems' desperation to be in office. Whether these safeguards can guarantee a stable government for five years of economic distress and attacks on the working class is another matter.

There are some limited progressive measures in the deal between the parties: the abolition of identity cards; the postponement of the inheritance tax relief and a rise in capital gains tax. Most of the rest of the coalition agreement is Tory policy. Trident, the one issue on which the Lib Dems were out of step with establishment politics, is to stay. There is an unspecified commitment to raising the tax threshold, which is sure to be kicked into the long grass. It is also clear that a substantial rise in the regressive VAT is in the offing.

Aiding the racists

On immigration the Lib Dem proposal for an amnesty after 10 years has been junked in favour of the reactionary Tory proposal for a cap on non-EU immigration. One of the vile features of the election

campaign was the repeated racist attacks by both the Tories and Labour equally over their amnesty proposal. Behind these attacks was the bankrupt attitude which rendered all three main parties unable to tackle the far right during the election campaign other than to compete with them on how many migrants they could stop coming in and how many they could throw out.

This makes them directly responsible for the advances made by the BNP and UKIP in the campaign. The reason why both the BNP and UKIP won worrying scores at the national level was because the main parties insist on competing with them rather than opposing them.

The war and the environment were marginal issues in the election campaign and nothing has changed with the coalition agreement. The Lib Dems have also collapsed on nuclear power. The Tory policy of a new generation of nuclear power stations is coalition policy with the Lib Dems having the right to abstain when it comes to a vote. The agreement is against a third runway at Heathrow and other London airports — but there is nothing about Boris Johnson's proposal for a new airport in the Thames estuary.

The most divisive issue facing this coalition government is that of the European Union (EU). It means the Euro-sceptic Foreign Secretary William Hague sitting in Cabinet alongside life-long EU enthusiast Lib Dem ministers. The agreement not to go into the Euro zone in the current Parliament and a referendum on any transfer of powers to the EU is unlikely to contain this issue even inside the Tory Party.

The coalition is hugely controversial in both of the parties involved. The right-wing of the Tory party regards it as a sell-out as do most of the rank and file of the Lib Dems. This means that the coalition will come under massive pressure once the decisions on cuts start to be taken particularly since neither party has a mandate from the electorate for the cuts they are intending to make.

Labour is already indicating that it is unlikely to oppose the cuts in general but may object to some of the details. They say they want to be a 'responsible opposition'. This would be a scandalous capitulation to the concept of "national interest" peddled by the Con/Lib Dem coalition and the media but it is in line with the way they have governed and fought the election in the interests of business.

The performance of the left in the election was a disaster. It is true that the two great positive outcomes of the election were the defeat of Nick Griffin in Barking and the election of Caroline Lucas in Brighton. We congratulate those involved in both campaigns. The Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) result was weak. It made no impact on the election at national level and is unlikely to be the basis for anything after the election.

Respect polled far better than any other part of the left but lost its MP and most of councillors. It will need to regroup and revisit its strategic approach.

The need for an effective party to the left of Labour remains a crucial element of the fight back. One lesson this the 2010 election is that the left should redouble its effort to create a united and pluralist party of the left.

This makes the response of the trade unions to the situation of first class importance. Most unions have so far remained largely passive in the face of cutbacks. This has to change as a matter of urgency. The unions must demand that gaps in the budget created by the banking crisis are tackled through the cancellation of Trident; ending the war in Afghanistan; withdrawal from Iraq and energetic collection of taxes from big business, the banks and the rich. As a minimum corporation tax should be raised back to at least the levels levied under Thatcher and the key demand for a

million green jobs supported.

We must seek to build a mass campaign in the trade unions and Labour Movement to press for the rapid implementation of progressive electoral reform based on PR. The Labour movement must also rally against the dangerous slide towards racist, anti-immigrant policies. Years of the unions trailing meekly behind Blair and Brown have brought us to the very brink of a Tory government. Only the movement of the working class and the creation of an effective coalition against the cuts can save the working class from fresh, massive and damaging attacks.

We call for:

- • Local anti-cuts campaigns to defend public services.□
- Local and national protests on the day of the emergency budget.□
- National unions and the TUC to call national demonstrations to defend public services.

Socialist Resistance

P.S.

* From Internataional Viewpoint Online magazine : IV424 - May 2010.

* Socialist Resistance was founded in 2002 by British Marxists who supported the recomposition reflected by the Scottish Socialist Party, the Socialist Alliance and the Respect party. In July 2009 its supporters refounded it as the British section of the Fourth International.

Footnotes

[1] First and only MP for the Greens, also leading member of Stop the War coalition