

Britain: Respect breakthrough in English local elections

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The election results achieved by Respect in the English local elections on May 4th - with the election of 16 local councillors - were qualitatively better than anything achieved for many years by any party of the left. Previously Respect only had three councillors (two in Preston in north-west England and one in Tower Hamlets in London) it now has a total of 18 (two of the existing councillors was not up for re-election this year).

The approach of Respect to the elections was to target the two East London Boroughs (London local council electoral districts) of Newham and Tower Hamlets where it did best in the general election last year.

These are large Boroughs, each covering two parliamentary constituencies. Newham has 240,000 inhabitants and Tower Hamlets 196,000. They are both deprived working class inner city areas. Tower Hamlets has a large Bangladeshi population (though not a majority) and quite big Afro Caribbean and Somali communities. Newham has a much bigger white population (a substantial majority) with a diverse mix of migrant communities.

Tower Hamlets contains the Parliamentary constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow - which was won by George Galloway for Respect in the general election. Respect stood candidates in all 51 seats in Tower Hamlets and all 62 seats in Newham.

Respect also stood in a small number (14) other seats in London and a small number of seats (25) in the rest of the country. This made 153 candidates in all.

It was a strategy both designed to tackle the hugely undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system in these elections - which discriminates heavily against small parties since you have to get somewhere between 30% and 40% of the vote to get elected (depending on the number of candidates) - and also to build on the general election results. This proved to be an effective strategy.

The results in Newham and Tower Hamlets were remarkable by any standards for a left party. Respect won three seats in Newham and 12 in Tower Hamlets. To get these seats it polled a massive 86,000 votes across the two Boroughs - 23% of the vote.

The highest percentage vote for a Respect candidate in Tower Hamlets was 46%. The only seat Respect won outside of London was in Birmingham Sparkbrook - a deprived inner city working class area with big Pakistani and Kashmiri communities - where Salma Yaqoob (a remarkable young Pakistani woman who is a leader of the anti-war movement as well as Respect) won with a massive 55% of the vote. The full results for her ward was: Respect 4,339, Labour 2,700, Liberal Democrats 990, Conservatives 343, Greens 309, BNP (fascist) 109.

Respect also came close to winning in a number of other seats as well - Bristol and Sheffield for

example. In Preston it missed winning another seat by only seven votes.

The only other left party to make any gains at all (or win any seats) was the Socialist Party (ex-Militant/CWI) - which increased its number of councillors by 1 from 4 to 5.

There has been some scurrilous comment from some on the left about the fact that all the new Respect Councillors are from an Asian and Muslim background - referring to Respect as a Muslim party. Respect rightly rejects such comments, which verge on racism. Respect is extremely proud of its Asian candidates and its Asian councillors. If they had all been from a Christian background there would be no such comments.

In fact a number of the non-Asian candidates got very good votes but none were actually elected. John Rees, the National Secretary of Respect, got 974 votes in Tower Hamlets, which was only just below the vote for the Respect Asian candidates and which beat all other parties except Labour. The Tories top vote was 264, the Liberal Democrats 876, and the Greens 253. The candidate who came second in Sheffield with 1208 votes was a non-Asian woman and the Bristol candidate who came second was a non-Asian man.

There was, therefore, an element of chance that it came out as it did, though where constituencies were chosen with big Asian populations there was, to one degree or another, an advantage for an Asian candidate built into the situation.

It should not be assumed, however, that the votes for Asian candidates were all from Asian voters - or even predominantly so in some cases. It was more diverse than that. This was clear when the new councillors attended a meeting the Respect National Council soon after the election. One of them, for example, who is a nurse, was able to demonstrate how she had made the defence the Health Service the centrepiece of her campaign and how she has drawn support for all sections of the community as a result.

In fact the platform on which Respect stood in these elections was a socialist/anti-neoliberal platform not significantly different to that of other left organisations that stood - including that of the Socialist Party. It was against the war and the occupation, against privatisation and liberalisation, against racism and in defence of asylum seekers, for the renationalisation of the railways and the public utilities etc.

It should also be remembered that most of the Asians who vote for Respect were previously Labour voters. And people from a Muslim background are a natural constituency for Respect because Respect came out of the anti-war movement and is seen and the most consistent and effective anti-war party.

Winning such a big Asian vote, however, does pose a challenge for Respect. Not in that it has too many Asian voters - Respect wants to win every Asian vote it can get - but because it needs to increase its appeal to sections of the community where it has not been so successful. This includes the Afro-Caribbean and African community, the trade unions and sections of the white working class. Steps are being taken to address this problem.

At the same time Respect needs to improve its geographical spread. And there will soon be an opportunity to do this as well. In Britain a proportion of local Councils are up for election every year on a rolling basis. In next years local elections London will not be involved - and Respect will attempt to strengthen its position in other parts of the country.

Having a much larger group of councillors - and being the "official opposition" on Tower hamlets Council, which is what it is (Labour has 26 seats, Respect 12, Tories 7 and Liberal democrats 6) - also means that Respect will have to tighten its structures and its accountability procedures if it is to develop its local Council work successfully - and there are already signs that this is being done as

well.

These election results are a big step forward for Respect. They have opened up a new stage in the development for Respect with the new councillors creating a new political focus - making it harder for the media to present it as George Galloway's party. The future of Respect will depend on how successfully it builds on them.

P.S.

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