

Deeping crisis in Britain's left electoral alternative

A wake-up call for Respect

Friday 21 September 2007, by [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 10 September 2007).

A letter from Respect MP George Galloway to the organisation's national council has triggered a thorough-going discussion in the party. The article below, published shortly before Galloway's letter became public, outlines Socialist Resistance's proposals for solving the crisis in Respect.

The Brown bounce is now a central feature of British politics. Taken alongside new Labour's strong showing in the Ealing Southall and Sedgefield by-elections, - where the Tories came third behind Labour and the Lib Dems, - it has made a snap general election a near certainty.

Of course it means what we mean by "snap". The issue is whether it will be in the autumn of this year or the spring of next year - - depending on Brown's assessment of the durability of the "bounce" and when the problems are likely to set in.

October of this year must still be a possibility since from Brown's point of view he is riding high and things can only go downwards from here. The crisis of the Tory Party is absolutely profound and they would be in complete disarray if faced with an October election.

But Labour is not ready in organisational terms, so the most likely date must be to coincide with the London Assembly elections in May 2008. One thing is as certain as it gets in politics. By this time next year there will have been a general election - and the most likely winner will be Gordon Brown.

Brown's agenda is to look different to Blair (in fact his main electoral asset is that he is not Tony Blair) but this does not mean there will be any change from a reactionary government with a hard-line neo-liberal agenda.

Brown aims for the continuation of all the main features of New Labour:- deregulation, privatisation, the war, the replacement of Trident, the new relationship with the employers, and the old relationship with the USA. On civil rights Brown is not only proposing yet another terrorism bill - but is re-raising the issue of detention without trial and its extension from the current 28 day to the originally proposed 90.

But an election in the next year, whatever month it is held, would also be a huge challenge for the left and in particular for Respect.

During the summer Respect did extremely well in winning a hotly contested council by-election in Shadwell in a very sharp political fight with Labour. This shows that Respect's validity remains intact: in fact its validity is enhanced by the arrival of Brown.

It shows that Respect's support remains strong where it has won bases and bastions out of its anti-war stance and the anti-war vote.

In the parliamentary by-election Ealing Southall, however, the story was very different. Respect secured a very poor result, winning no more than any left candidate would get who went into a campaign without adequate preparation and no local base.

The lesson from Southall is that whilst Respect has hung on to its anti-war vote in East London, and no doubt this is the case in Birmingham and several other places, it has not reached out into new areas or generalised its electoral influence across the country.

This is a major problem with a general election and the GLA election round the corner. If Respect does not start an effective election campaign now it could face disaster in a year's time.

In fact far from preparing itself for a huge campaign Respect has declined as an organisation over the past two years despite warnings from some of us who argued as best we could at the last Respect conference that this was a problem. Then the leadership denied or tried to minimise the importance of the decline in membership and the withering of branches outside of key target areas. But the problem is it was real and it is no better now.

The lesson from Southall is that Respect cannot win in a new constituency unless it has built a base well in advance - and that means establishing a viable and active local branch before the election and afterwards.

As we remarked in our last issue (of Socialist Resistance, number 46) despite a discussion at its last National Council on the failure of the McDonnell campaign and the crisis of the Labour left, and despite a number of suggestions on ways that Respect could respond to the situation, the organisation's leadership took no initiative. Yet the failure of the McDonnell campaign was and remains a major challenge to those who cling to a reclaim Labour perspective.

I made a proposal in June for an initiative towards the Labour left, the trade union left, and the CPB in the light of the McDonnell defeat which could continue the discussion started by the conference organised earlier by the CPB and the one organised by the RMT,- both of which took up the issue of labour representation in one way or another.

As far as I know this has not been discussed. Yet Respect cannot advance beyond its present stage without winning people from the Labour and trade union left. It cannot be successful in the medium to long term unless it wins the best sections of the trade unions into its orbit.

The much-vaunted Fighting Unions conference also lacked focus and failed to make any progress on this key issue: we need a far more targeted, engaging and inclusive approach if we are to succeed in the unions.

At the moment the RMT is considering whether to stand union candidates in the GLA elections. Respect should do everything it can to reach an accommodation with the RMT which would avoid such a clash.

We have to convince the trade union left - and that means people like RMT General Secretary Bob Crow - that there is a democratic space within Respect in which they can function and have an influence. We cannot simply say "here is Respect, it is the best thing around (which is certainly true) and you should join it or affiliate to it".

We have to accept that Respect is a start, but only a start in building a genuinely broad left wing alternative to New Labour.

If Respect is to mount a serious challenge in the general election the following is crucial:

- * Respect needs to build itself as a national organisation. This means having much more of a national profile. It also means much more attention to building local branches. It needs effective fund-raising.
- * It must have an elected leadership which is seen to prioritise building the organisation and which works to create an inclusive, democratic space in which people from a variety of political currents can cooperate in leading the organisation.
- * It needs a much more effective means of propaganda, preferably a newspaper, as well as a much more dynamic website, broad sheets and leaflets, which can get Respect's ideas and policies across in a more systematic way and persuade other elements on the left that we are serious about building an organisation on a firm political basis.
- * It needs a much more serious approach to recruitment. As some of us argued at the last conference 2,000 members is a major under-achievement for an organisation with the potential of Respect.
- * It must have clear socialist politics. This does not mean that we have to mention socialism at every opportunity, but Respect has to operate within a consistent socialist framework. The current leaflet for the GLA campaign, for example, is politically bland and does not mention socialism at all! Almost all of it (apart from anti-privatisation) would be acceptable to a Lib Dem, and all of it would be acceptable to the Greens.
- * Respect needs strong material on the environment and on climate change if we are to challenge the Greens across the country. The strong positions on climate change we have adopted are marginal in most of Respect's very limited literature. Whilst being strong on the environment we have to be politically distinct from the Greens - otherwise what is the point?
- * Respect also needs to address the issue of democracy, including electoral reform which Brown is saying he will raise as a part of a constitutional convention and the need for a referendum on the European constitution, which he has insisted he won't. Electoral reform is a key issue for the success of smaller parties.
- * On the basis of this platform, Respect should be seeking urgent discussions with left trade union leaders such as Bob Crow, and other currents and organisations to lay the basis for a new and more inclusive alliance at the next election, laying the basis for a new left party.

P.S.

- * From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 392 - September 2007.
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