General election presages sea change in British politics

Socialist Equality Party of Britain
14 June 2001

Despite the appearance of continuity, Labour's election for a second term heralds a sea change in political relations in Britain. Prime Minister Tony Blair and New Labour, as the favoured party of business, have been placed in office without a popular mandate, pledged to carry through the destruction of the welfare state and public services.

The British electoral system, which operates on a first-past-the-post system, always gives a distorted picture of the political state of the nation. The number of seats won by a party is largely determined by shifts within a narrow layer of the middle class, particularly in key marginal constituencies. This was especially the case in last Thursday's election. Labour's 42 percent of the vote gave it 64 percent of the seats in Westminster, whilst the Tories' 33 percent share gave them 26 percent and the Liberal Democrats record 19 percent won them just eight percent of the seats.

Prior to the poll, Blair had reiterated his appeal for "One nation Conservatives" to back Labour as their natural home. This secured Labour's victory, as the party consolidated its support amongst the better-off sections of the middle class. In the media, Labour won the backing of over 91 percent of the national daily press, in circulation terms, and the support of such former Tory stalwarts as the *Economist*, the *Financial Times* and the *Times*.

The main feature of the election was the massive abstention. Just 59 percent of the electorate voted, down from 71 percent in 1997. Labour won 10.74 million votes this time, nearly three million fewer than in 1997, and less than the 11.56 million Neil Kinnock received when he led the party to defeat in 1992. Labour's share of the vote in predominantly working class areas declined, as millions in the major urban conurbations stayed at home. Winning the support of just 25 percent of the electorate means more people abstained than voted for New Labour.

Turnout fell across the social spectrum. In the poorer working class areas it was down on average by 12.8 percent, but even in the better-off areas it fell by 12.1 percent and in marginal seats by 11 percent.

Whilst routinely acknowledged as the worst turnout since 1918, even this historic comparison is too optimistic. According to Professors Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts and Stuart Weir writing in the letters page of the *Guardian* June 12, "It is worse than that. It is the lowest turnout ever in the UK because in 1918, 40 percent of men got the vote for the first time, as did some women, and people were being moved around because of the war. So about 60 percent of the new total electorate were completely unused to voting.

"Comparisons with 1918 are therefore bogus. We are at a nadir in our history as a liberal democracy."

Recognising that a low poll would compromise not only the incoming government, but also the entire political process, the last days of the election campaign were taken up with appeals from all the major parties for people to vote. Blair urged voters to go to the polls, saying that it did not matter how people cast their ballot, just that they should do so. In the past, people had "died for the right to vote" he said, and today's generations owed it to their forefathers to treasure this precious right.

However, there was no attempt made to concretely identify who had fought for the right to vote, or why. While Nelson Mandela was wheeled out to explain the struggle of black Africans against apartheid, the history of the British working class and its struggle for democracy and equality remained a closed book.

Since the emergence of Chartism in the 1830s, it was the fight to secure the social and political rights of working people against the propertied classes that primarily motivated the struggle for the extension of the franchise. The Chartists constituted a mass political movement, containing both a revolutionary and a liberal democratic wing and contained petty bourgeois and proletarian forces. Its most radical elements saw winning the franchise as a means through which the working class could constitute itself as a political force in the land. The Chartists faced severe state repression, and the movement was finally neutered following a limited extension of the franchise to sections of the middle classes.

The fight by working people for political representation in

parliament emerged some 60 years later as a major factor in the creation of the Labour Party. Once again, political action was determined by the elemental striving of the working class to secure its interests against the employers. The trade unions were forced to break from their previous support for the Liberals under pressure from their members, who were demanding they oppose a raft of anti-union and anti-strike legislation. The Labour Party was formed as the political wing of the trade unions, but its programme articulated the standpoint of a privileged labour aristocracy, who were far from being political opponents of the profit system.

Labour's essential service to the ruling class was to insist that the social and political emancipation of the working class could be arrived at through a gradual process of parliamentary reform. Labour's perspective was one of seeking a more favourable accommodation with the employers, through limiting the class struggle to militant industrial action combined with parliamentary activity. The establishment of socialism was seen in evolutionary terms, if at all, and was something for the far distant future.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, voting was never regarded by working people as an abstract right, but as a means of defending *their* interests, by placing what they considered to be *their* party in power.

The transformation of Labour into an explicitly big business party and the alienation of the broad mass of working people from the political process are thus intimately related. Social inequality is at record levels, with growing numbers facing hardship and financial insecurity. Whilst the main parties vie for support amongst the wealthy, the working class has been politically disenfranchised and is bereft of any means of articulating its independent interests.

The only party to make significant gains nationally, in terms of seats, was the Liberal Democrats, but the two percent increase in its vote hardly constitutes a shift back towards politics by the mass of the population. The large vote for the two independent candidates protesting the running down of the National Health Service expressed political frustration rather than the adoption of an alternative perspective.

In general, radical groups such as the Socialist Alliance, the Scottish Socialist Party and the Socialist Labour Party fared poorly. Few were convinced by their calls for the creation of a Labour Party Mark 2, and a return to "Old Labour" values. It is not possible to construct a new party of the working class on this basis.

For a significant section of the working class, the idea of Labour as a reformist party is either a distant memory or something their parents, or grandparents, tell them about. Blair and New Labour represent the completion of a political process stretching back into the late 1970s. Beginning then, forces within the Labour bureaucracy set out to break the party's historic connection with the working class and reinvent Labour as a British version of the American Democrats, or a European-style "People's Party".

Politically literate workers can see that this has happened, but must understand what went wrong with their old party, and why, if they are to build another one. This is precisely the point that the various radical groups cannot seriously address.

It would be a mistake to believe that in itself the abstention from official politics represents a progressive development. Thus far, the response of working people to these political changes has been mainly passive. Many saw no reason to vote because they regard all the parties as the same. Amongst those who did vote for Labour the mood was one of reluctantly giving Blair one last chance to redress the social wrongs committed by the Tories during their 18 years of rule.

Moreover, the vote in Oldham, where the British National Party won 11,000 votes in two constituencies, shows that in the absence of a conscious political response by the working class, fascistic groups can exploit social tensions for their own purposes.

But neither should one conclude that the growth of such extreme right wing forces is inevitable. On the contrary, the general political mood is characterised by an inchoate desire for a greater degree of fairness and social justice. The right wing can only dominate to the extent that the vacuum opened up on the left remains unfilled.

The combination of a downturn in the world economy, sharp divisions over whether Britain should adopt the European single currency and Blair's commitment to sweeping privatisation of the public sector is a recipe for major political upheavals.

Under these circumstances, the edifice of official politics, divorced as it is from the overwhelming majority of the population, will prove incapable of containing the class struggle within the old forms. The efforts of the bourgeoisie to refashion the Labour Party will prove to be its undoing. A new era is dawning in British politics, in which workers, seeking to defend their living standards and democratic rights, must look towards the socialist and internationalist perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.