

Britain: The May 5 general election and the failure of Labourism

Chris Marsden
5 May 2005

The following is the report delivered by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Britain, to a May Day meeting in London last Sunday.

Britain's general election is being held under extraordinary conditions: where the transformation of the Labour Party into a right-wing formation is not only complete, but also under circumstances where this has resulted in the alienation of the vast majority of the working class from its traditional party.

This is an unprecedented situation, quite unlike 1997, when even though Tony Blair had proclaimed the birth of New Labour and formally junked the party's Clause Four commitment to social ownership, millions still hoped that it would be a humane alternative to the Conservatives.

It is not even comparable with 2001, when Blair won a second term despite a huge decline in support in Labour's heartlands. Then, disappointment and disaffection characterised the response of many. Today, it is more correct to point to widespread loathing for Blair personally and for New Labour as a whole, coupled with a striving to articulate political opposition.

Despite the repeated attempts to downplay the issue by the government and broad sections of the media, the key issue in determining this political shift is Labour's dragging Britain into an illegal war and subsequent occupation of Iraq and the accompanying assault on democratic rights at home.

In the last few days, the election has been dominated by the fallout from the publication of the legal advice of Lord Goldsmith given to Blair, but not circulated to his cabinet or to parliament, which raises grave doubts as to the legality of the Iraq war.

This weekend there were further leaks of foreign office advice in a similar vein given a year before war was declared. Most damning of all is the publication by the *Sunday Times* of the minutes of a July 23, 2002 meeting—just prior to Blair's infamous meeting with US President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas, at which it is alleged that he pledged Britain's participation in a military attack on Iraq.

Blair, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, Attorney General Lord Goldsmith, senior military and intelligence personnel and top Blair advisors Alastair Campbell and Jonathan Powell attended the meeting.

The *Sunday Times* reveals that the war against Iraq was specifically discussed well before it was declared as intended to bring about "regime change"—which is illegal under international law—and that Britain would take part.

According to the memo, Blair stated, "If the political context were right, people would support regime change."

The *Times* reports that Blair added that the key issues were "whether the military plan worked and whether we had the political strategy to give the military plan space to work."

The *Times* adds: "The political strategy proved to be arguing Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) posed such a threat that military

action had to be taken. However, at the July meeting Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, said the case for war was 'thin' as 'Saddam was not threatening his neighbours and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran.'

"Straw suggested they should 'work up' an ultimatum about weapons inspectors that would 'help with the legal justification'. Blair is recorded as saying that 'it would make a big difference politically and legally if Saddam refused to allow in the UN inspectors.'

"A separate secret briefing for the meeting said Britain and America had to 'create' conditions to justify a war."

The memo confirms our insistence that the allegations that Iraq was a major threat to world peace and that war was justified by its breaching the United Nations resolution were an excuse to implement a predetermined decision to support the US in a predatory war of conquest.

It is now beyond question that the road to the Iraq war was paved with deceit, evasions and outright lies, and that Blair should be prosecuted for war crimes along with Bush and other architects of the invasion.

It must be stressed that no one should be deceived by the efforts now being made by large sections of the political elite to portray Iraq as solely Blair's war and to distance themselves from it.

The exclusive focus on his role, however politically criminal, is in order to conceal the fact that war was the decided policy of the dominant sections of the British ruling class and that it was voted for by Parliament.

Most of the Labour rebels were anxious to abandon their opposition and were more than ready to accept Goldsmith's advice as good coin in order to do so, even though there were many other legal experts who insisted that war was illegal and the evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and was a threat to world peace was a transparent fraud.

But ask yourselves, why were the Labour MPs fooled when millions of people in Britain and internationally were not? The answer is because they wanted to pretend to be convinced that this was a just and legal war, so that they could rejoin the fold.

Why were the Tories supportive? Because they were just as committed to war as Blair. Indeed, Conservative Party leader Michael Howard said on BBC's "Question Time" that he would have supported war even knowing everything he does now about the lack of WMDs, dodgy intelligence and legal concerns.

And the Liberal Democrats may now seek to make capital on their vote against war, but they cannot answer why they loyally supported the government once war was declared.

It is not a matter of indifference that Blair was less than candid in what he told Parliament. But the essential issue here is not that Parliament was deceived, but that Parliament refused to uphold democratic norms and authorised an illegal war of aggression on the flimsiest of pretexts—United Nations Resolution 1441.

Large swathes of the Labour Party now see Blair as a liability rather than an asset, but if they replaced him with Gordon Brown nothing fundamental would change. It would be a rescue operation similar to when

the Tories dumped Margaret Thatcher, which did not see an end to the essentials of Thatcherite monetarism.

The issue for the working class is not to be fooled by the efforts of the political elite to distance themselves from the Iraq war, and to elaborate a strategy and build the leadership necessary to oppose the ongoing drive to militarism and war, whether such colonialist aggression is dubbed legal or not, or whether it is conducted under cover of UN backing.

Political changes

Political changes can be protracted developments that do not take a finished form for a long time.

Even now the working class is far from responding to the betrayal it has suffered at the hands of Labour by launching out on a new and genuinely socialist path. Tremendous confusion still exists and the opposition to Labour remains largely inchoate. But this should blind no one to the extent to which the alienation of the working class from social democracy has become manifest in the last four years.

Despite the fondest hopes of Blair and company, events such as the Iraq war do not pass without shaping the consciousness of masses of workers. The millions who protested against war have not resigned themselves to what took place. It has left Labour without any genuine mass base of support.

Should it still be re-elected, this will only confirm that most people see no alternative to Blair on offer from Labour's opponents—none of whom enjoy any great standing amongst working people. Indeed, the Tories remain Labour's greatest electoral asset.

According to one recent ICM poll, more than a third of under-35s said they were disenchanted with the entire political process. Furthermore, 60 percent of so-called floating voters lacked a firm allegiance to one party, while only 17 percent of Labour and 13 percent of Conservative voters said they were "strong supporters."

The turnout in 1997—the height of Blair's popularity—was 71 percent. In 1992, general election turnout was higher at 78 percent. By 2001 it had dropped to 59 percent. In less than a decade it had dropped by 19 percentage points to an historic low, so that the last time it was elected Labour had the vote of just 25 percent of the voting population. Some estimates this time are that turnout will hover around the 50 percent mark, hence the massive efforts to offset this by use of the postal vote.

Even so, the decline in support for Labour has not benefited the Tories, who would need to double their MPs in order to form a government. Despite Blair being massively unpopular, and considered by many to be a liar who cannot be trusted, Howard is even less popular!

The Conservative leader's attempts to win support by whipping up fear and chauvinism on the question of asylum-seekers and immigration has backfired badly, to the extent that leading Tories have expressed concern that people have heard enough on the question and that they are in danger of being seen as a single issue party.

Now Howard is reduced to calling for a vote against Blair because he lied in order to justify a war they themselves fully supported!

For their part, the Liberal Democrats may pick up the votes of some disaffected Labourites because of their initial opposition to the war and advocacy of a few pathetic reforms. But this is hardly the beginning of a dramatic shift in the political allegiance of the working class.

A recent BBC poll confirms the full extent of workers' alienation from the political process and all its parties. It found that 81 percent of respondents saw no real difference between the parties.

Whereas in 1964 around half of all voters had strongly identified themselves with a particular party, by 2001 only 16 percent of voters

identified themselves strongly with Labour and only 14 percent with the Conservatives.

The more conscious sections of the labour bureaucracy are fully aware that they have lost the support of the working class and, at this point at least, this is the real danger they confront. That is why Robin Cook wrote in the *Guardian* on March 18: "The Abstention party is the biggest threat, not the Tories."

In it he notes that today 40 percent of voters are pensioners, even though they make up only 30 percent of the electorate, and that "all recent polls reveal voting intentions among the rest of the population pointing to a further drop in turnout from the last general election, which itself was the abysmal low in the history of the universal franchise."

He continues, "[W]idening public disaffection with the political process has profound implications that stretch well beyond the immediate election. The recent audit by the Electoral Commission found barely a third of the population believed that they really can change the way the country is run by getting involved.

"Alienation on such a scale is profoundly dangerous. In the long term, ebbing public confidence in democracy will erode it of legitimacy. In the short term, it leaves our electoral process vulnerable to the sudden rise of flash parties with a populist agenda, of the kind which in the Netherlands swept their Labour government from office."

Cook then explains the impact of Blair's pro-business policies, which he says steals the clothes of the Tories: "The problem with this political cross-dressing is that ultimately it leaves our own supporters confused about what Labour really stands for.

"As a result, for two years opinion polls have discovered that Labour supporters now regard it to the right of their own opinions.... The net result is that the proportion of the electorate who perceive much difference between the two main parties has fallen from more than 80 percent under Thatcher to less than 30 percent under Blair."

Of course Cook must oppose such correct conclusions being drawn by workers and portray the only danger arising from Labour's loss of support as coming from the right.

Finally, he adds, "Every Labour MP knows that this perception is a grotesque distortion of reality, but we will not shift it unless the leadership starts to explain how Labour's substantial achievements are all rooted in its distinctive values of equality, solidarity, social justice and liberty."

This is the pie in the sky that Cook is forced to promote in order to justify his opposition to a political break with the bureaucracy.

He wrote last month insisting that the danger of a Tory return means there must be no vote for protest candidates due to opposition to the war:

"There have been enough casualties already from the invasion of Iraq. Do not make vulnerable people in Britain victims also. It is they, not Tony Blair, who would be punished if there is no longer a Labour government."

Cook has spent the election touring marginal seats giving out the same message, prostituting whatever credibility he earned by resigning from the cabinet over Iraq to urge former Labour voters angered by the war to remain loyal like him.

He also pronounces on the issue of Goldsmith's advice, writing two things of interest.

He acknowledges the claim Parliament was fooled into supporting war, stating, "I remain sceptical though about the claims that the vote in Parliament over the Iraq war would have been much different if it had known that the attorney general had doubts."

And he again insists: "The Conservative party deserves to be punished for its dereliction of duty over Iraq, not rewarded with the keys to Downing Street by the opponents of war whom it let down."

No return to "old" Labour

Where does this leave the working class?

It is not a case of convincing most workers that they need an alternative to Labour, but of insisting that no such alternative is provided by any section of the bureaucracy and explaining what kind of alternative is needed.

Alienation from its old party does not automatically produce a development of socialism in the working class. That is the product of the complex and protracted intervention of our party and its education of the working class in Marxism. Central to this task is to oppose the notion that the degeneration of Labour can be answered by a return to old-style reformism, or the creation of a new party led by the handful of Labour lefts supported by the trade unions—with those who do, as always, ignoring the fact that the trade unions are just as degenerate as the Labour Party.

It is not just the Liberals who have adopted a “slightly to Labour’s left” stance in order to appeal for support. The political landscape is littered with groups calling for a return to Old Labour policies.

It is true that none have been particularly successful, not least because for one or two generations of workers Labour reformism is now an unknown quantity and they have little confidence that it can be revived.

Groups advancing themselves as the true inheritors of “Old Labour” declare themselves to be the spokesmen for a return to a bygone era. But they cannot be ignored, because they sow dangerous political confusion amongst the working class that prevents it from drawing the necessary conclusions from Labour’s degeneration.

George Galloway, the expelled Labour MP, heads the Respect-Unity coalition that is currently the most high-profile of these groups. He describes Respect as the “ghost of old Labour,” and the natural home for those who have been abandoned by the party they loved.

If it were a ghost, then Respect would be more weighed down with the chains forged by its misdeeds than poor old Jacob Marley. For its essential role is to prevent workers from breaking with reformism and adopting a socialist programme.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which is the driving force behind Respect, insists that only reformist policies are possible because that is all that the working class is prepared to accept. It advocates a return to the neo-Keynesian politics based on national economic regulation championed by the labour and trade union bureaucracy in the postwar period.

To cite one example, Respect’s secretary, John Rees of the SWP and its economics advisor, one Graham Turner, wrote in the *Guardian*, April 18, 2005, “The Respect party believes it is time to halt the free-market drift that has exposed the country to the folly of unbridled speculation. Britain needs a less divisive and less corrosive economic strategy. Credit controls need to be strengthened.

“It is time to give serious consideration to a Tobin tax on foreign exchange transactions too. The technology exists to make it work, and it might allow central banks to reassert a degree of control over a world economy that has stumbled from one crisis to another since 1997.

“Above all, the government has to recognise that kowtowing to big business is simply not sustainable. The public sector should have an important role to play in rolling back the power of corporations, to enhance workers’ rights and reduce the disturbing and ultimately destructive dependency on borrowing to drive economic growth.”

This policy does not differ in any respect from what Labour was advocating in the 1960s and 1970s. It is a policy based on a continuation of the profit system and an insistence that the working class must look to the British state apparatus to defend its interests, rather than to the international working class. It is a humble appeal to the Labour government to, and I quote, “redress the balance of power between big business and workers.”

Defining groups such as the SWP or Respect as centrist or even “right centrist” does not suffice. They are unalloyed reformists who want

nothing more than to take part in a political regroupment of Labour and trade union “lefts”—those who share their fear that the right wing of the bureaucracy is losing control of the working class.

The reformism of the SWP has been pointed out recently by none other than its erstwhile ally Galloway. “Gorgeous George” is interviewed by John Harris, a journalist who has written a book calling for tactical voting in certain constituencies in order to place pressure on Blair, *So Who Do We Vote For Now?*

He asks Galloway whether “it felt strange, metaphorically shaking hands with people that he had once apparently despised. ‘Well, no,’ he said, as a smile crept across his face. ‘As you probably know, I can shake hands with anyone.’”

Galloway is infamous for having shaken hands with Saddam Hussein.

Harris presses the point, however, confiding, “I don’t like Trots at all. And I know you don’t, from reading your book.”

Galloway replies:

“‘No I don’t,’ he said. ‘I have a long track record of opposition to them.... I think, first of all, in this post-Soviet world, we have to redefine our terms. We’re no longer really talking about Trots. What we’re really talking about is ultra-leftism. If we come across ultra-left groups, we certainly know about it. And the SWP doesn’t behave in an ultra-left way. If it did, it wouldn’t have been the driving force behind the Stop the War movement, which brought two million people onto the streets. Millions of people have been engaged in that movement—and if the SWP had run the STWC in an ultra-left way, that would not have been possible. There aren’t two million Trotskyists in Britain.

“‘Like everyone else, they’re changing.... Their leaders are changing. Old ideas are seen to have failed, new ones come along. I think what you’ve got now is an SWP that wants to work in a broad way. I think they’ve taken a parliamentary road; so you should rejoice, rejoice, and not be churlish about it’” (p. 146).

“Rejoice” indeed—the very same instruction delivered by Thatcher to critics of the Falklands war after South Georgia was recaptured in 1982.

It should be noted that the SWP was at least embarrassed enough by Galloway’s remarks to seek to conceal them. In Lindsey German’s review of the book, she states only that Harris “has a good laugh with George Galloway.... Respect is taken relatively seriously in this account. Galloway is a big hit, although the SWP is less so.”

Well the laugh was at the expense of the SWP, which has become an object of ridicule and a willing tool of political opportunists such as Mr. Galloway.

But like Labour’s degeneration, this development also cannot be attributed to the actions of bad individuals. The open turn towards the bureaucracy and embrace of an explicitly national reformist programme—all but shorn of revolutionary rhetoric—is a universal phenomenon amongst the former radicals.

These groups long ago abandoned any effort to build an independent Marxist party in the working class, insisting that the Stalinist and Labour parties could be pressurised to the left and forced to implement the socialist transformation of society. Today, at the very point where millions of workers are breaking from their old parties, the orientation to the bureaucracy is stripped of its pseudo-Marxist veneer and advanced instead as a means of renewing reformism.

In the course of this shift, the ex-radicals in many countries have earned themselves an important place not only within the apparatus of the labour bureaucracy, but in the highest echelons of power.

Such is the degree of their political integration that it is even spoken of within their own ranks. For example, I came across the appeals made by two rival candidates for the post of convener in the Scottish Socialist Party, Colin Fox and Alan McCombes.

The SSP has six members of the Scottish parliament. In his appeal for votes, Fox, who won the post, mentions Parliament no less than eight

times, insisting:

“My conviction is that creating socialism will be driven from outside *Parliament*. But *Parliament* is extremely useful in helping build these extra-parliamentary forces. *Parliament* provides us with a good platform; it allows us to speak to many more people than ever before.

“There can be no artificial divisions created between the SSP in *Parliament* and our grassroots.”

It is not hard to see why Fox is so insistent on the role of Parliament, because his opponent, McCombes, writes, “I entered the contest late—just five days before nominations closed. I did so under pressure from many grassroots party members. They asked me to stand as an antidote to the gravitational pull of the Scottish parliament upon our party...”

“We should continue to fight for improvements and reforms within the Parliament. But we cannot allow our vision to be stunted and confined within the parameters laid down by the British state.... We should now redress the balance of our work and turn the SSP more decisively towards the world outside Holyrood.”

Whatever the qualms expressed by McCombes, a man it must be said who has masterminded the SSP’s embrace of Scottish nationalism and of Holyrood, one can safely predict that Parliament and the warm embrace of official bourgeois politics will continue to exert its “gravitational pull” on the SSP—as it does on their counterparts Respect and others internationally.

Socialist must of course seek to utilise the arena of parliament and elections wherever and whenever possible, but here once again the ex-radicals have been fully converted to the merits of the electoral system at the very point where it has been so terribly discredited and undermined.

The objective basis for a renewal of socialist politics

The very fact that the starting point of all of the former radicals such as the SWP is the construction of a new party from out of the raw material provided by the decayed remnants of Labourism and Stalinism—such as Galloway—condemns them, like Frankenstein, to create monsters that are doomed to a terrible end.

More fundamentally still, the programme they advocate has been rendered unviable by the development of globalisation. This is not changed by the existence of reformist illusions amongst workers.

We do not join the radicals in bemoaning the collapse of Labourism and Stalinism, or stand prostrate before the low level of political consciousness amongst workers and make this the starting point for our perspective.

We base ourselves first and foremost upon an appraisal of the objective contradictions within capitalism—between globally organised production and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states, between private ownership and mass socialised production—that are leading inexorably towards its breakdown and the onset of revolutionary struggles.

This places an absolute premium on the essential work of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* in raising the political and indeed cultural level of the working class so that it can meet up to the objective tasks it confronts.

We must continue to strive to raise the level of political understanding of workers and youth, confident that the objective situation is working in our favour. We base ourselves on a powerful political legacy, the struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International against opportunism and for an international socialist perspective.

In this regard I would also like to draw attention to a report in the *Weekly Worker* of a split—one naturally without principled content—in the

United Socialist Party (USP).

The apparently not-so united party is another example of an attempt to form a new party based on a group of trade union and Labour lefts and pursuing reformist policies. It was initiated by the Stalinist leadership of the Liverpool dockers around Jimmy Nolan and Terry Teague, in alliance with a few of the 47 ex-Labour councillors that were surcharged in the 1980s. It has broken up because the leadership rejected the right of former and current members of various radical groups who gravitated towards it to form factions and the insistence that the party has a rigidly centralised structure.

This latest sorry affair is made a little more interesting because the most steadfast defenders of the “no platforms and factions” stand of the Stalinists veterans are former members of the Workers Revolutionary Party, including that irrepressible advocate of allowing a thousand flowers to bloom, Dot Gibson.

Gibson, as some of you will be aware, was a leading member of the faction of the WRP led by Cliff Slaughter that rejected the international authority of the International Committee of the Fourth International, broke with Trotskyism and sought a regroupment with a variety of petty-bourgeois and often openly anti-Marxist tendencies.

She has negotiated her role as an apologist for the local Transport and General Workers Union following the lockout of the Liverpool dockers in 1996 into a position as editor of the USP paper—a party it should be noted that began life as the grandiosely titled Movement for a Mass Workers Party.

Gibson is cited arguing against platforms having a right to organise within the party because, “Those who want the already internal groups to join as ‘platforms’ also want ‘people power’—both are alien to a workers party.”

She continues, “The party cannot be otherwise than an arena of stark struggles arising from the fact that we live in a capitalist society and the rights of party members are there to make sure that the party itself does not lose its way and abandon its aim not to accommodate individual’s whims or wounded feelings or allow the pressure of current society in through the back door.”

Gibson, it appears, has not forgotten the negative lessons taught to her by the WRP in the period of its degeneration on how to defend the monopoly of a corrupt leadership. And her description of the political dangers associated with “wounded feelings” confirms that she has also learned her lesson from the role she played along with Slaughter in breaking the WRP from the International Committee by exploiting the subjectivism and disorientation of many of its members.

In order to justify this slight digression, let me note that Gibson also insists, “A new workers’ party can only come out of a break in the Labour Party and the trade unions.”

The movement of the former radicals in the direction of reformist and nationalist politics and towards the bureaucracy is in precisely the opposite direction that the working class must take. The struggle for socialism depends upon making a political break with Labourism and building a new leadership, capable of uniting workers internationally against a ruling elite and a system of exploitation that operates on a global basis.

That was the spirit that inspired the establishment of May Day as international workers day. It is a perspective that must now reanimate the workers movement on new and healthier foundations.

The degeneration of the old labour movement has left the working class without any means of combating the bourgeoisie—not just organisationally but also ideologically. But this is not an end to the matter.

Rejection of a failed perspective and failed organisations opens the way for precisely such a new and revolutionary political orientation. And ours will be clearly seen as the only party that advances such a programme.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact