

Britain: Socialist Equality Party stands in by-election forced by David Davis

Vote Chris Talbot in Haltemprice and Howden

Socialist Equality Party
25 June 2008

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election to counter efforts to divert legitimate hostility to the Labour government and its extension of detention without charge to 42 days into support for right-wing Conservative David Davis.

Chris Talbot is the only candidate in this election opposing all the repressive measures passed by the Labour government from the standpoint of mobilizing an independent political movement of working people, based on socialist policies.

None of the official parties can genuinely defend democratic rights. They are all the political representatives of big business, advancing policies that are hostile to the interests of the majority of working people.

The government claims that those opposed to the 42-days extension are guilty of elevating the rights of terrorists above “national security.” On the basis of such scaremongering, under Labour, the British state has assumed powers beyond anything enacted during the Second World War when it faced a genuine threat to its survival. Yet it attempts to justify the overturning of the historic foundations of British law by citing a threat which it admits involves a few hundred individuals at most.

Just as the claim that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction” provided the false pretext for defying international law and going to war, so too the “war on terrorism” provides the rationale for measures abrogating the rights of everyone in Britain.

Forty-two days detention is only the most draconian of the some 200 items of legislation enacted by Labour in the name of the “war on terror,” which collectively have established the apparatus of a police state in Britain.

The cornerstone of democracy is the safeguarding of the individual citizen from arbitrary action by the state as the most powerful force in the land. In contrast, the Labour government has established a new legal principle—guilty on the say-so of the powers-that-be.

In addition to overturning habeas corpus—no imprisonment without charge—the government’s anti-terror legislation has undermined free speech, freedom of movement and the right to peaceful protest. So vague is much of the legislation that even the expression of an opinion deemed unacceptable by the Home Secretary can result in prosecution. Academics have been detained for simply downloading material freely available on US government websites, as in the recent arrests of Nottingham University student Rizwaan Sabir and staff member Hicham Yezza (who is now threatened with deportation).

Not satisfied with the fact that Britain currently has the most surveillance cameras in the world, and the largest DNA database, the government has demanded more powers, including compulsory ID cards. Yet already, local authorities are routinely using the anti-terror powers to spy on residents and bug people’s phone calls and e-mails. In 2007 councils and government departments made 12,494 applications for

“directed surveillance” over often petty issues.

The full ramifications of the powers enacted under the anti-terror legislation were tragically demonstrated when plain-clothes police officers pumped 11 bullets at point blank range into innocent Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes on the London Underground in July 2005. His killing revealed that the government had secretly implemented a shoot-to-kill policy two years before, enabling the police to act as judge, jury and executioner.

Such a drift towards authoritarianism cannot be explained as merely the whim of an illiberal government. The question must be asked: Why does the government feel so under siege that it demands extraordinary powers against its own citizens?

The erosion of democracy is bound up with the turn towards militarism and colonial wars of conquest. This is a government that has already plunged Britain into three major military actions—in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq—and which is actively conspiring with Washington in its escalating confrontation with Iran.

The government knows that the drive to seize control of the world’s major oil deposits and other vital resources have made Britain a pariah internationally and the focus of justified hostility amongst millions of oppressed peoples. The fact that the British people face a terror threat is entirely the result of Labour’s criminal actions in destabilizing the Middle East and inflaming ethnic and religious tensions within the UK itself.

The turn to war finds its reflection in a domestic policy, which is similarly dictated by a global financial elite whose fabulous wealth is accrued through speculation and the exploitation of the world’s markets and resources. In return for their investments, these oligarchs demand of all national governments that they impose wage cuts, speed-ups, slash corporate taxes and gut public services and welfare provisions.

That is why the erosion of civil liberties has occurred in conjunction with the unprecedented transfer of wealth to the super-rich, which has produced record levels of social inequality. The government knows that it cannot secure a popular mandate for such an agenda. Rather, the ever-widening gulf between the rich and the poor in Britain and all over the world demands a turn to police repression and dictatorial forms of rule.

It is for this reason that the government’s constant undermining of democratic freedoms enjoys the support of the highest echelons of the state—from MI5 to Scotland Yard—and finds its most enthusiastic backer in Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper, whose former editor Kelvin MacKenzie was initially mooted as a de-facto proxy candidate for Labour.

Labour’s contempt for any form of democratic accountability in not even standing a candidate to defend a major plank of government legislation is of a piece with its decision to support the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq in the face of popular opposition that brought millions onto the streets of London and cities around the world.

From the standpoint of working people, the Labour Party is finished. Having severed any connection with the working class and repudiated its former reformist policies, all that remains is a politically corrupt clique interested only in their own self-enrichment.

It is vital that workers and youth reject Labour's terror policies and mobilize against the government. But this cannot be done by lending any support to David Davis and his claim to be the champion of civil liberties.

With Labour facing electoral meltdown, enormous efforts have been made to rehabilitate the Conservative Party. But this leopard has not changed its spots.

If the Tories can pose as a more liberal alternative, it is only because Labour has moved so far to the right. The attack on democratic rights began under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, which pioneered the assault on welfare and social provisions in the name of the free market.

This is the party of the anti-union laws used to such devastating effect against the miners in the 1984-85 strike, which saw more than 10,000 arrested, and of the notorious SUS laws that provoked inner-city riots. It has no right to lecture anyone on civil liberties.

The assault on habeas corpus did not start with the powers of six-weeks detention. Though the Tories have made a show of opposition to the government on aspects of its anti-terror policies, the origins of Labour's legislation are in measures first drawn up under the Conservative government of John Major. And it was the Tories who, under the earlier Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), extended the period of detention without charge from 48 hours to seven days. Davis—who along with his party supported the 28-days extension—has admitted that many Tory MPs were reluctant to oppose 42-days and that he resigned because he believed they would finally acquiesce as the general election approached.

Above all the Conservatives share responsibility with Labour for the disastrous and bloody wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and are equally committed to policies designed to enrich the major corporations at the expense of working people.

David Davis can only dare to claim the moral high ground because not a single Labourite has been prepared to break with the government on 42-days or any other issue.

Instead, a handful of supposed Labour "lefts", together with the Liberal Democrats, are supporting his campaign on the spurious grounds that this is an issue that stands above politics. The political worthlessness of the Labour left is epitomized by Tony Benn, who helped launch Davis's campaign for re-election. Benn has said he was free to do so because Labour's refusal to stand a candidate meant he was not breaking party rules!

Nor have any of Britain's middle class radical groupings—such as the Socialist Workers Party or George Galloway's Respect organization—indicated they will run an independent challenge against Davis, no doubt because it would bring them into conflict with the Labour "lefts" to whom they habitually defer.

Whatever Davis's intentions in forcing the by-election, it has only highlighted the decay of all the official political parties under the weight of social tensions.

This degeneration has taken place in advance of what all informed forecasters predict will be a world recession without precedent since the 1930s. Even as millions are hammered by spiralling fuel and food prices, crippling mortgage payments and personal debt and face the threat of unemployment, the financial speculators continue to glut themselves while government bankrolls their nefarious activities with taxpayers' money.

In the next period, there is no question that legislation passed in the name of fighting terrorism will be used against those seeking to defend their livelihoods against the major corporations and the government. Only this month, the government activated emergency procedures contained in the Civil Contingencies Act in the face of the Shell lorry drivers' dispute.

Davis and his supporters routinely evoke the Magna Carta of 1215 as if civil liberties were a timeless and immutable feature of British political life. They do so in order to conceal the class issues involved in the defence of democratic freedoms.

The extension of habeas corpus and other democratic rights to working people was only won after bitter political struggles stretching over hundreds of years.

It was only when the working class organised as a distinct social and political force that Britain's rulers were forced to make concessions. The fight to extend voting rights began with the Chartist movement in the 1830s, and universal suffrage was only finally secured in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Equally, the right to organise in trade unions necessitated the defeat of concerted legal attacks and culminated in a political break with the Liberals and the formation of the Labour Party in order to secure working class representation in parliament.

Socialists played a leading role in all these struggles, because they understood that the genuine extension of democracy meant the creation of a society free from oppression, poverty and want.

Utilising the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, a systematic campaign was mounted to vilify socialism and all measures to secure social equality. This has provided the crucial ideological framework for the assault on civil liberties.

The Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy have led this offensive, in order to legitimize their own embrace of Thatcherite economic and social nostrums. It is the resulting political disenfranchising of the working class that has enabled the powers-that-be to impose one attack after another.

The defence of democratic rights demands above all else the building of a new and genuinely socialist party.

The situation cannot continue where the super-rich enjoy a monopoly over political life. There can be no democracy worthy of the name while grotesque levels of private wealth are wielded as a weapon against society; while millions have no say over how their workplaces are run and a handful of corporate chiefs and city speculators can strip them of their livelihoods and plunge countries and entire continents into poverty and war.

The Socialist Equality Party advances a programme for the fundamental reorganization of economic and social life. We call for the replacement of the profit system and private ownership of the means of production with public ownership and production to meet the needs of society as a whole.

Above all the struggle against capitalism is international and requires the unification of the working class across all national, religious and ethnic divisions. The SEP is the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialism. We urge a vote for Chris Talbot in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election, and call on all those who support our programme to participate in and help finance our campaign.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact