

Britain: SEP candidate Chris Talbot addresses school students

Our correspondent
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Socialist Equality Party candidate Chris Talbot spoke to politics students at Wolfreton School Sixth Form Centre in Willerby, which is part of the Haltemprice and Howden constituency.

Talbot said that 26 candidates were standing in the by-election, but that he was the only one offering a socialist perspective. The Socialist Equality Party was calling for a party for working people based on socialist policies.

The by-election, Talbot said, had been called on the issue of detention without charge for 42 days. David Davis makes a distinction between the existing provision to detain suspects for 28 days and the extension to 42 days, Talbot explained, “But we do not.”

Detention without charge, whether for 28 or 42 days, is a fundamental attack on civil liberties. It is one of a whole raft of attacks on democratic rights, Talbot continued. The UK now has one of the largest DNA databases in the world. There is the issue of identity cards, the massive increase in surveillance by intercepting emails and the use of CCTV cameras.

“These are the trappings of a police state and must be opposed,” Talbot said.

“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 overturning the historic foundations of British law by citing a threat of terrorist attacks which it admits involves a few hundred individuals at most.”

“The fact that the police are now saying that young people carrying knives and knife crime are now a bigger threat shows that the terror threat has been growing a bit thin.”

The climate of fear that the government was creating, he said, was like the issue of weapons of mass destruction that the government raised to justify the war against Iraq.

The claim that we are facing a “war on terror” is being used to remove basic rights like habeas corpus, the freedom of speech, freedom of movement and the freedom to demonstrate.

“Academics have been detained for simply downloading material that is freely available on US government web sites,” Talbot told the students. He cited the case of the recent arrests at the University of Nottingham where Rizwaan Sabir and staff member Hicham Yezza were held for six days. Both were ultimately released because there was no case against them, but Hicham Yezza is now threatened with deportation.

“Why does the government,” Talbot asked, “feel so much under siege that it demands such 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.”

“As we have explained, the government knows that its drive to seize control of the world’s major oil deposits and other vital resources has made Britain a pariah internationally and the focus of justified hostility amongst millions of oppressed peoples.”

Preparations were now being made for war with Iran.

It was impossible to understand the emergence of a threat of terrorism in Britain outside of an historical analysis of the way in which this threat had arisen, Talbot said. The United States and Britain had both funded and supported Islamic fundamentalist organisations in Afghanistan. They worked closely with Pakistan intelligence services to recruit youth to a jihadist movement, which sent them to fight over the border in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union.

“Labour’s criminal action in destabilizing the Middle East by its invasion of Iraq and the Islamophobia that has become a regular feature of the British media has created a climate in which a small number of disaffected youths can be recruited for terrorist actions.”

The attack on civil liberties, Talbot continued, is also rooted in the growth of a wealthy financial elite.

“Over the last two decades Labour has abandoned its ties to the working class and any suggestion that it supports socialist measures.”

A recent report from the Rowntree Foundation has shown that social inequality is at its greatest for 40 years, Talbot explained. “The polarisation of wealth between a very rich elite and the working poor will see the disappearance of the middle class in the near future, according to the authors of the Rowntree report.”

The rich elite whom the Labour Party represent demand wage-cuts, speed-ups, the slashing of corporate taxes and the gutting of public services, Talbot said. “No government can have a popular mandate for the continuation of such a wide division of wealth. That is why the turn towards police repression and eventual dictatorial forms of rule are necessary.”

The biggest backer of the government’s attacks on democratic rights is the billionaire Rupert Murdoch, Talbot said.

“A key question that makes the attacks on civil liberties so dangerous is the credit crunch and the near collapse of the

financial markets. Labour boasted that it had overcome the contradictions of capitalism. But all it did was to follow the US government in making consumer spending financed by record levels of personal debt the driving force of the British economy.”

Talbot outlined the way in which the UK economy has been hit by the credit crunch and is sliding rapidly into recession. “Only today the UK chambers of commerce warned that Britain is on the brink of recession and suggested that unemployment could rise to 300,000 by the end of the year.”

“These are the conditions in which there can be mass protests, social unrest and the demand for a political party that represents the interests of working people.”

Talbot briefly explained the history of the Socialist Equality Party and the struggle of the Fourth International against Stalinism.

“After the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, there has been a systematic campaign 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 unions have led this offensive,” he added, “in order to justify their own embrace of Thatcherite economic and social policies. The working class has been politically disenfranchised. Democratic rights can only be defended by building a new and genuinely socialist party.”

The report elicited a lively debate, with some students supporting the Labour Party’s measures and some opposed. One student was an active young Tory hopeful, who referred to both David Davis and party leader David Cameron by their first names and claimed to offer a better balance between protecting civil liberties and opposing the danger of terrorism.

One student asked, “How do you protect citizens in this country? You can argue about whether the Iraq war was justified or not. You can talk about historical factors or whether the entirety of Western civilisation is at threat or not. But ultimately we do have a threat from internal terrorism.”

Accompanying Talbot, SEP National Secretary Chris Marsden replied, “If you abrogate civil liberties for one group in society then you abrogate everyone’s civil liberties. If you say that you can do it in one instance then you set a precedent.

“Why do you need to keep someone locked up in a room to prove them guilty? If you have to do that you haven’t got a case. You don’t prove someone guilty by a constant process of police interrogation. First of all, it’s wrong in principle and secondly you will get people admitting to all kinds of things. That’s basically what happened with the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six in the 1970s. They spent years in prison on the basis of confessions that were extorted from them while they were kept in detention.”

Another student said, “Most people would agree with what you say because 42 days is wrong. But there has to be some way of stopping terrorism. There must be some number of days detention which is appropriate.”

Marsden replied, “If you accept the law-and-order agenda, if you accept that all society’s problems including terrorism can be solved by ever greater doses of police surveillance, arresting powers, detention without charge and a general erosion of civil

liberties, then what happens is that the opposite occurs. It contributes to the general breakdown of society and fuels the sense of outrage that the fundamentalists feed on.”

Teacher Ian Richardson said that he would like to move the discussion in an historical direction.

He said, “Any suggestion that Leon Trotsky was a supporter of civil liberties is incredibly naïve and wrong. Trotsky was a believer in the terror. Trotsky had no time for democracy. So I think to equate the fundamentals of your movement now with a campaign for civil liberties is laughable.”

Talbot replied, “I do not accept the points you make as historically accurate. Trotsky was in favour of democracy and the application of the terror was in the period of war conditions when all the major powers were surrounding the Soviet Union and had sent armies into its territories to back up the White Armies. None of the opponents of the Soviet government who were put in jail were treated in the way that oppositionists were treated under Stalin in the 1930s.

“It just isn’t the case that Trotsky went around liquidating his opponents. Trotsky could have mobilised the Red Army in the struggle against Stalin. He didn’t do that because he thought it was necessary to convince people politically. He knew that if he resorted to the army he would become the head of a bureaucratic regime like Stalin.”

Marsden added, “Trotsky understood the growth of bureaucracy and the degeneration of the Soviet Union as a function of its isolation by the imperialist powers. That isolation was exacerbated by the criminal policies pursued by the Stalinists. The Stalinists led the Soviet Union into a dead end in which there were not the material prerequisites for the Soviet Union to develop socialism. His perspective was for the extension of the revolution into the rest of Europe and to use the tremendous technological and economic capabilities of Germany, France and Britain for the benefit of the peoples of the world.

“Winston Churchill abrogated habeas corpus when he detained ‘enemy aliens’ during the Second World War. He said it was justified only by great public danger. Now we’re being told that, because Trotsky did the same under conditions of civil war, with imperialist armies of intervention on Soviet soil and White Armies marching on Moscow, that we can’t speak on civil liberties. We live at present in a parliamentary democracy facing no comparable threat, in which there are all sorts of rights which were won in the course of protracted struggles by hundreds of thousands of people and established in law. If they are eroded and threatened, then you must oppose this.”



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