

Britain: The significance of the Haltemprice and Howden by-election

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What is the political significance of the Haltemprice and Howden by-election?

Former Conservative Shadow Home Secretary David Davis forced the election by resigning as an MP. He did so with the stated intention of demonstrating the degree of popular opposition to Labour's anti-terror legislation, which extends the period of detention without charge to 42-days. Moreover, he linked this to broader opposition to the erosion of civil liberties.

The by-election result clearly shows that it was Davis, rather than Britain's media and the Labour Party, who had correctly judged the sentiments of the electorate. Davis was always sure to win in this safe Conservative seat, particularly as the Liberal Democrats were backing him, and Labour refused to put up a candidate because they feared they would suffer a humiliating collapse in their vote. In the end, Davis won 17,113 votes, representing some 70 percent of votes cast on a 34.5 percent turnout. In addition, the Green Party came second with 1,758 votes, having campaigned on a civil liberties platform. The right-wing English Democrats, who came third with a slightly smaller vote of 1,714, also opposed 42 days.

No matter how the media tried to portray the by-election as a "stunt", poking fun at the participation of 26 candidates, their support for Labour's authoritarian measures has been decisively rejected.

However, the by-election was more than merely a referendum on Labour and its attacks on civil liberties. In all respects, it has exposed the inner decay and rotteness of those tendencies and individuals who claim to defend civil liberties based on liberalism. In particular, the by-election has refuted the pretence of the left wing of the Labour Party and the trade unions that they defend the social and political interests of working people.

It has been a long time since any but the most politically naive believed that the Labour and trade union bureaucracy was pursuing a struggle for socialism. However, the "lefts" still occasionally have made a show of opposing the most overtly pro-business and anti-democratic measures enacted by Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

Just 36 Labour MPs voted against extending detention without charge to 42-days. Many of those who had been expected to rebel were bought off, and voted with the government. In the aftermath of the vote, there was virtual silence inside the Labour Party, leaving Davis alone in mounting any continued political opposition to the legislation.

In addition, the bulk of the rebel MPs have maintained this silence ever since. Only two sitting Labour MPs broke ranks—Bob Marshall-Andrews and Ian Gibson—together with Labour left veteran Tony Benn. In addition, they did so by backing Davis as the champion of civil rights. Both Benn and Marshall-Andrews spoke on platforms alongside Davis, insisting that a veil must be drawn over his overt hostility to socialism, his support for anti-union laws and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Marshall-Andrews even declared that voting for Davis was very different from voting Tory. Yet, that is precisely what he and Benn campaigned for.

In as much as one can still identify a liberal media in Britain, it is represented by the *Guardian*, *Observer* and *Independent* newspapers. A number of *Guardian* and *Observer* journalists took the line of Benn and Marshall-Andrews, backing Davis. Other commentators in all three publications supported Jill Saward, who campaigns to support victims of rape and sexual violence. Her decision to stand on a platform supporting 42-days detention, more Close Circuit TVs

and the building up of a massive DNA database was backed by Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper.

They hailed Saward as the "serious" challenger to Davis—a claim also echoed in the *Daily Mirror*, *Financial Times* and elsewhere. Her vote of just 492 undermines this assertion. It should be noted that the highest placed candidate to make any statement in support of 42-days detention was Miss Great Britain, Gemma Garrett, who did not really campaign on the issue.

The decision to support Saward was cynical in the extreme. As far as these ostensibly liberal pundits were concerned, she functioned as a proxy candidate behind which they could maintain their support for Labour and justify its authoritarian agenda using the emotive issue of sexual violence.

What remains of the Labour left and liberal milieu is a pathetic rump that has hitched itself to Davis's bandwagon. There are two possible outcomes to this. Either, these layers will move directly behind the Conservative Party, as some former lefts have done in the case of Nicolas Sarkozy's Gaullist regime in France. Or, as they did in Haltemprice and Howden, they will insist that the defence of civil liberties is a "non-party" issue. In both cases, the end result would be to abort the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

In the face of a concerted effort to channel hostility to Labour behind Davis, Britain's left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party said nothing. They placed their opportunist relations with the Labour and trade union lefts above any issues of principle.

Whatever becomes of the nascent movement of Tories, Labourites and advocates of liberalism presently orbiting around Davis, a political vacuum has opened up on the left. Working people must seek a new political direction. The Socialist Equality Party and its candidate Chris Talbot were alone in opposing Labour's attacks on both the democratic rights and the social gains of working people. In doing so, we laid down a marker for the future.



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