

Britain: SEP candidate addresses Greenpeace hustings

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Last Wednesday, Greenpeace held a political hustings in Oxford Town Hall. The event, which was co-sponsored by a number of other environmental and development NGOs such as Oxfam, Christian Aid, the Green Alliance and People and Planet, was entitled, “Ask the Climate Question”. It was attended by approximately 180 people.

In an attack on free speech, the organisers had originally limited the platform to just four of the seven candidates in Oxford East: Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats and the Greens.

The Socialist Equality Party protested this restriction. In a letter to the hustings organiser, Julia Spragg, SEP National Secretary Chris Marsden stated, “I urge you to urgently reconsider your arbitrary and undemocratic decision to exclude Socialist Equality Party candidate David O’Sullivan from the Climate Question Time meeting for the Oxford East constituency on Wednesday.

“In an attempted justification, you assert firstly that your meetings are ‘not political hustings, as such’. Then you claim that you decided to limit the meeting to no more than four speakers in order to ‘keep the meeting to a sustainable length’—inviting only the parties that polled highest at the last parliamentary election in Oxford East, which are Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and the Green Party.

“Your own organisation’s website, to which your email referred our election agent, disproves both these arguments.

“It reports two other ‘Ask the Climate Question’ meetings that have already been held—in the Hampstead and Kilburn constituency and Chippenham. The Chippenham report notes a ‘panel of six candidates’ and Hampstead and Kilburn the presence of ‘[a]ll six prospective parliamentary candidates for the constituency’ gathered ‘for the *election hustings* organised by volunteers from Greenpeace and other local green groups’” (emphasis added).

“One can only assume that the decision (made by whom, exactly?) to cut off the number of candidates invited to speak in Oxford at four was made because this is where the Green Party came in [on] the ballot in 2005. If the Greens had received 300 or so fewer votes and lost out to the ‘New Loony candidate’, would the cut-off for participation have been set at five?

“Moreover, you have personally advertised this meeting on the Oxford Town Hall website as a ‘Public Meeting’ of the ‘Prospective Parliamentary Candidates for the Oxford East Constituency’, not the supposed ‘front-runners’.

“Your organisation correctly campaigns on the issue of climate change. I would hope that you are equally concerned with establishing a more democratic political climate in Britain than that which presently exists”.

Even so, the organisers defended their ban up until the last moment. It was only after further protests by David O’Sullivan and the candidate for the UK Independence Party immediately prior to the hustings that they were given a place on the platform.

The chairman’s opening remarks made clear the political basis for the attempt to restrict the discussion. Far from opening up broad and wide-ranging debate on the critical issue of climate change, the various organisations are solely concerned with placing pressure on supposedly “viable” parliamentary parties to do the “right” thing.

The hustings chairman said that the objective of the meeting was to “send a strong message to our new parliament” to tackle the question of emissions. To this end, the questions posed ranged from encouraging cycling and parking zones in the city, to national restrictions on aviation. Unlike previous hustings in the city, there was no discussion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and no reference paid to the economic crisis that is dictating the agenda of the next government.

This was a meeting ideally suited to the various official parties and their representatives, who paraded their “green” credentials.

In contrast, O’Sullivan stressed repeatedly that the urgent issue of tackling climate change had to be seen within the context of a global economic crisis, the imposition of massive austerity measures in every country, and the further drive to militarism and war.

“Climate change involves nothing less than the future of

human civilisation”, O’Sullivan said. “Its resolution requires the mobilisation of global resources—economic, political, scientific and technological. It requires democratic co-operation between all nations to tackle this pressing problem”.

However, the failure of the Copenhagen Summit confirmed that this was not possible within the confines of the capitalist profit system, where the competing nation states—led by the major powers—subordinate every social problem to their own profit requirements.

“It is not a question of appealing to politicians to do something”, O’Sullivan said, but of working people mobilising independently of the official parties on the basis of a socialist programme.

Addressing a question on reducing the use of cars, O’Sullivan explained that the development of an integrated public transport system was both an environmental and a social necessity. But the reality was that what public transport has existed was being dismantled and privatised so that the major transport companies could make as much profit as possible. Oxford was one of the first cities where bus privatisation had been implemented, increasing congestion as rival bus companies sought to monopolise the most profitable routes.

Another questioner asked whether it was “ethical” that the Royal Bank of Scotland—bailed out to the tune of billions by the Brown government—was funding the extraction of oil in the Alberta tar sands, displacing the indigenous peoples.

Again, the official parties all agreed that it was necessary for the banks to develop “ethical” policies, and the need for consumer pressure to ensure this.

O’Sullivan rejected their posturing. Despite the massive transfer of public funds to bail out the banks, virtually no regulation had been imposed on these financial institutions and the bankers were still able to pay themselves massive bonuses.

“You can’t trust a word these people say”, he said. The extraction of oil from Canada’s tar sands was the outcome of the fact that oil resources are finite, and there is growing competition for control over this vital resource. This drive was being led by US imperialism, whose wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were aimed at trying to dominate this key oil-rich region. Further conflict over oil and other vital resources was inevitable under the profit system.

In response to a question on aid to the “developing world”, all the candidates expressed their empathy for international assistance, with the Labour candidate claiming that aid had trebled under the government.

O’Sullivan pointed out the real role Britain was playing in such countries. “How is Britain really helping the ‘developing world’?” he asked. “By bombing Iraq, devastating the country and killing thousands of people? Or by bombing Afghanistan?”

The real agenda of the major powers was to strengthen their control over these countries’ economies and resources, he said. That is why the various aid packages and loans were invariably tied to IMF-dictated structural reforms and/or massive interest

repayments.

In response to a question as to whether candidates supported the development of wind turbines, O’Sullivan said the SEP was in favour of developing alternative energy sources and the necessary resources had to be set aside to enable this.

But, he noted, only last year one of the few wind turbine producers in Britain, Vestas Wind Systems, had closed its plant on the Isle of Wight throwing some 600 workers out of a job. Some of the workers had occupied the plant to stop its closure and demanded that it be nationalised. But their occupation was denounced by Labour, and the police were used to barricade the workers in the plant and starve them into submission. Because the plant was considered not profitable enough, production had ceased.

In one of the final questions, the candidates were asked whether they had had their individual carbon footprint measured, and if so, what it was.

The official parties were again at great pains to stress how eco-friendly they were, reeling off a list of how often they cycled and various insulation measures they had taken in their home. O’Sullivan replied forcefully, “I am completely opposed to the idea that if individuals turn off a light bulb at night, that somehow helps solve the problem of climate change”.

In the first place, individual “choices” as to the use or otherwise of certain resources was simply not an option for the vast majority of the world’s population. Just as importantly, the biggest polluters and contributors to environmental damage were the major corporations, he insisted. No meaningful steps in reducing emissions could be taken without taking on big business; that could not be achieved within the framework of capitalism, but only through the reorganisation of economic life along socialist lines.

O’Sullivan’s intervention found a response from amongst young members of the audience. Several approached him for further discussion, agreeing that resolving the problems of environmental degradation and climate change required a struggle against the capitalist profit system.



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