

Britain: The middle class politics of POWER2010 and Take Back Parliament

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POWER2010 is an organisation claiming that if enough pressure is placed on Parliament, progressive changes can be made to state institutions and electoral voting procedures. In the run-up to the British General Election it was responsible for fostering illusions among young people, particularly students, in the Liberal Democrats and its leader, Nick Clegg, principally because of their support for proportional representation in electing the House of Commons and their proposal to replace the House of Lords with an elected chamber.

Within minutes of the release of first BBC exit poll on the night of the May 6 General Election, the organization came together with a mix of other middle class protest groups to launch Take Back Parliament. These included the Electoral Reform Society, Unlock Democracy, New Economics Foundation, Friends of the Earth, Operation Black Vote, Greenpeace, various women's groups and others.

On May 8, Take Back Parliament organised an estimated 2,000-strong march to the prime minister's residence on Downing Street. Its participants wore and waved pieces of purple material—the colour worn by the suffragettes—and handed in a petition with 55,000 signatures, mostly collected online.

The organisers took the opportunity to lobby the Liberal Democrat leaders meeting to discuss with which of the two major parties the Lib Dems would form a coalition government. The main demand of the protest leaders was that whatever the final composition of the government, Clegg should use his newfound influence to keep his pre-election promise and introduce proportional representation.

In the weeks since, an email campaign has been organised and hundreds have attended provincial "Fair Votes Now" rallies, with each individual sporting an item of purple clothing. Leading Liberal politicians have ostentatiously worn purple neckties.

While the electoral setup in the UK, like in capitalist countries around the world, is dominated by wealth and power and is undemocratic, there is nothing at all progressive about POWER2010 or Take Back Parliament. Its political aims express the interests of a privileged layer of the middle class, which is frightened by the popular hostility towards the government and opposed to the development of a socialist political movement of the working class against the capitalist economic and political establishment. It holds out no way forward for the millions of workers, youth and broad sections of the middle class now being driven into poverty.

POWER2010 is not the first group of its type. The constitutional reform group Charter 88 was launched in 1988, with the declared aim of opposing the over-centralising tendencies of the Conservative Thatcher government and its erosion of civil liberties. Its leading figures were later at a loss to explain why these anti-democratic tendencies continued and even deepened under the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

It is now clear that the unprecedented low voter turnout in 2001 triggered much nervousness among a section of the ruling class. The euphoria that met the election of Blair in 1997 had mainly dissipated and Labour only won the General Election that year because of the deep resentment still felt towards the Tories. The reasons for this political disaffection become clear when the staggering social statistics for that period are examined.

The percentage of individuals living in households in income poverty in the UK rose from 15 percent in 1981 to 24 percent in 1993-94 and 22 percent in 2002-2003. In 2002-2003 there were 129,000 accepted as being homeless and in "priority need"—an increase of 10 percent over 2001-2002. Persistent poverty (defined as living at least three years out of the last four in poverty) is high in Britain compared to the rest of Europe.

Between 1998 and 2001, 11 percent of UK citizens lived in persistent poverty. This compared with 5 percent in the Netherlands, 6 percent in Germany and 9 percent across Europe. These figures show the social gulf that had developed between the corporate and political elite and wide layers of the working class. These figures have only worsened in the last eight years, particularly with the onset of the global economic meltdown.

The most astute sections of the ruling class and its petty-bourgeois apologists recognised that this social polarisation made the bourgeois parliamentary system more unstable and discredited in the eyes of millions of workers. As a result they began seeking ways to prop it up. In 2004 the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, a Quaker institution well known since the Edwardian period for its social studies into the living conditions of the poor, set up the POWER Inquiry and funded its year-long investigation.

"POWER—An independent inquiry into Britain's democracy" explained that its mission was "to explore how political participation and involvement can be increased and deepened in Britain. Its work is based on the primary belief that a healthy democracy requires the active participation of its citizens."

It later stated, "The Inquiry was set up with the aim to understand why the decline in popular participation and

involvement in formal politics has occurred and to provide concrete proposals to reverse the trend.”

It boasted, “The Commission is made up of all people from the left, right and centre of politics, and mostly with no particular party political affiliation.”

Lord Shutt chaired the inquiry’s steering committee and Pam Giddy became its director. Giddy had been director of Charter 88 from 1999-2001 when its campaign was centred mainly on reform of the House of Lords. The commission interviewed literally hundreds of people throughout 2005. These included politicians such as Nick Clegg, Labour’s Hazel Blears and the late Robin Cook, Brendan Barber of the Trades Union Congress and other trade unionists, leading sportsmen and women, academics, youth clubs and organisations for the disabled, community groups and many more. The organisers helpfully offered assistance to those that showed interest. It “asked key questions, then explained how individuals or groups might go about developing answers, and offered resources and support.”

Having in this way essentially determined the findings beforehand, these were then presented to a “Citizens Panel” made up of 30 people from the Newcastle-Gateshead region in the north-east of England. This was an attempt to provide the final report with a false popular legitimacy before being published as a 260-page document, “Power to the People”.

Giddy claims that while POWER incorporates all the earlier aims of Charter 88 it has developed and defined them. In fact, under the guise of “rebalancing” the relationship “between Parliament and the People”, the aim of the Power Inquiry is to provide some new democratic trappings for the capitalist state as it deepens its attacks against working people. Little wonder that a recent POWER flyer reads, “Powerful figures have shown a great deal of interest in the Inquiry and its findings.”

Significantly, the inquiry has nothing to say about the economic and social crisis that is destroying people’s lives in Britain. Nor does it address the anti-working class policies of the Labour Party and trade unions, the imperialist wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, mass unemployment and the destruction of the education system. POWER2010 and Take Back Parliament are orientated to other class forces.

Among the changes the report urges the ruling class to adopt are the “drawing up a Concordant between Executive and Parliament indicating where key powers lie and providing significant powers of scrutiny and initiation for Parliament”, strengthening parliamentary select committees “so they have the power to veto appointments while subpoenaing and cross examining key witnesses like the US senate hearings”, closer “scrutiny of the discussions between business people and the executive”, a Petitions Committee like the one in Scotland “where the government considers whether a petition should be taken further and if so how best to take it forward”.

It centres on a call for a fairer voting system through proportional representation, by which the number of parliamentary seats are distributed according to the total aggregate votes cast for each party nationally, as opposed to the present “first past the post” vote in each constituency.

Marxists are no defenders of the present electoral system, but the

issue of proportional representation is advocated in isolation from all other issues. In the end, this is a means by which the upper middle class hopes to increase its influence and champion its narrow interests within the capitalist state. Similarly, the call to take powers away from the European Union is only in order to transfer them to the national and regional institutions of the British state. Neither the US Senate hearings nor the Petitions Committee in Scotland has prevented the massive increase in exploitation of the working class that has taken place in both of these countries over the last period. On the contrary they have provided a political veneer of “democracy” for this process.

Most importantly, while making continual references to parliament and democracy the POWER report never addresses the nature of the capitalist state. Britain is a *bourgeois* parliamentary democracy. The report gives the impression that Parliament stands above society like some benign umpire. It is not. Parliament is a state form through which the capitalist class enforces its exploitation of the working class. In normal times it can afford the democratic façade, but as capitalism’s crisis deepens it begins to shed this mask.

It is at this very point that the bourgeoisie relies most on the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and other petty-bourgeois forces to disarm the working class politically, while it works behind the scenes to strengthen the state’s paramilitary and secret police forces.

The revolutionary movement fights to defend all those democratic gains won through past social struggles. It places itself at the forefront of every effort by workers and the oppressed to defend their rights against attacks by the bourgeois state and other right-wing forces. But it does this while explaining that the only way workers can defeat these attacks and achieve genuine democracy is by basing its struggles on an international revolutionary perspective for the overthrow of the capitalist state and the establishing of a workers’ state as part of a European and world federation of socialist states.



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