

The Bradford by-election and the need for a revolutionary socialist party

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The victory of Respect Party candidate George Galloway in the Bradford West by-election last week has been met with shock and anxiety throughout the British political establishment and media.

Standing on an anti-war and anti-austerity ticket, Galloway wiped out the Labour Party in the West Yorkshire seat it has held continuously for almost four decades. Its majority of 5,000 was overturned as Galloway won the seat by more than 10,000 votes—a swing from Labour of 36.5 percent. Labour’s share of the vote collapsed by 20 percent from its 2010 General Election result.

It was not only Labour that was trounced at the polls, but also the candidates of the governing Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition. Galloway won a 56 percent share of the vote, more than Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats put together. The Conservatives, who had hoped to win Bradford West, polled just 2,746 votes, losing more than 10,000 votes. The Liberal Democrat candidate won just 1,505 votes and lost her deposit.

It had been the received wisdom of the political establishment that Labour would be able to build on growing opposition to the coalition. Galloway was considered a hopeless candidate, with the odds on him winning at the start of the campaign at 200 to 1.

With elections due in Scotland, England and Wales on May 3, the official parties have been at pains to justify why they performed so miserably in Bradford.

Asserting that Bradford West is a “one-off”, they have sought to explain the result on racial lines. Galloway won by appealing solely to the constituency’s large Muslim population, it is argued, and that population’s opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In fact, Galloway won across each of Bradford’s six

electoral wards, regardless of their racial or ethnic composition. According to Respect leader Salma Yaqoob, in the Clayton ward, which Labour won with a 55.5 percent share of the vote last year, “approximately 900 votes were cast for Respect compared to 40 for Labour”.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is on record as an opponent of Galloway’s opportunist politics. He has long combined an admiration of Stalin’s Soviet Union and Castro’s Cuba with the glorification of bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East.

For many, however, Galloway is known for his defiant appearance before the US Senate on the Iraq war in 2005, and is regarded as an anti-establishment figure. His vote was particularly large among youth and first-time voters, who have grown up having never known a period in which Britain was not involved in one predatory war or another in the Middle East.

His stated opposition to the coalition’s austerity measures also struck a chord in a city that, along with many others in the country, is blighted by endemic unemployment and poverty.

Youth unemployment in Bradford is double the UK average and has trebled in three years. During Labour’s 13 years in government from 1997 to 2010, some 15,000 manufacturing jobs were lost in the city.

This has been compounded by the austerity measures imposed over the past four years, following Labour’s 2008 bailout of the banks and the Conservative/Liberal government’s coming to power. These attacks have been slavishly imposed by Bradford’s Labour council which has slashed £67 million from vitally needed services and axed 1,000 local authority jobs. The trade unions have not lifted a finger in defence of jobs, wages and services but instead have collaborated with these measures.

Galloway described the election result as “the Bradford spring”, in reference to the mass uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia last year. It had come from the “same wellspring of discontent and alienation that fuelled disturbances in British cities last summer”.

There is no question about the seething resentment that exists among millions to the three parties of the super-rich. A YouGov poll found that, for the first time in the history of polling, the leaders of the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour parties are equally reviled. The survey registered a negative rating, the difference between the number of voters who think he is doing a good job and those who do not—of David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband—at the lowest ever level, minus 121 percent.

The survey also found that 68 percent of voters think British politics is corrupt.

Polling expert Mike Smithson commented that he could not “find a period in modern UK political history when all three leaders have registered such poor numbers at the same time”.

Galloway, however, has no intention of making a fundamental challenge to this rotten political set-up. His agenda, and that of his Respect party, is to try and ensure that this disenfranchisement does not take on the form of a conscious political break with Labour.

He used his victory speech to appeal to Labour to learn the errors of its ways. “I care nothing for the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats”, he said. “But I do care about the Labour Party in which I served for 37 years, for 18 of which as a Labour Member of Parliament”.

Despite the fact that a massive repudiation of two decades of Labour’s pro-capitalist, pro-war politics had just taken place, he declared, “I appeal to the Labour Party to be a Labour Party again. To unite the coalition they once had and of which I was once part. That’s the way to really defeat the Tories and the Liberal Democrats”.

During the campaign, Galloway repeatedly told audiences that he was “real Labour” and would still be in the Labour Party had he not been expelled by the Blair leadership in 2003 for his anti-war opinions.

His appeal is contemptible. The Labour Party is a right-wing, bourgeois party, hostile to the working class. While Galloway hopes to exploit his result as leverage for his re-entry to the party, or some faction of

it, Labour has made plain its commitment to the policies of austerity and war. Ed Miliband launched Labour’s campaign for the local elections by trying to outdo the Conservatives as the party of law and order.

Capitalism internationally has broken down. The political task facing workers and youth is not some bankrupt perspective of trying to patch it up, or equally fruitless efforts to “reform” the moribund Labour Party. That way lie only further devastating wars of imperialist aggression and austerity.

Working people face a fight for political power—to overthrow this rotten political set-up and reorganise the economy along socialist lines.

This is the programme of the Socialist Equality Party and its candidates, Stephen Woodbridge and Danny Dickinson in Peterborough and St Helens.

The SEP fights for the formation of rank-and-file committees of action, independent of the trade unions and Labour, to bring down the coalition government and replace it with a workers’ government.

We call on all workers and youth who support this programme, to support our election campaign, vote for its candidates, and join and build the revolutionary party.

See also:

Britain: the SWP and Galloway’s Respect Renewal on the economic crisis

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