

Meetings on UK general elections: “We were alone in telling workers and young people the truth”

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30 May 2015

The following is an edited version of the speech given by Socialist Equality Party candidates David O’Sullivan and Katie Rhodes at public meetings in London and Glasgow on May 24.

The most important political development of the 2015 general election is the defeat suffered by the Labour Party and the exposure of those claiming it offered a lesser evil to the Conservatives.

The election was said by us to be the death of British Labourism. It will become clear in the next weeks and months how correct we were.

This appraisal goes far beyond the numerical losses suffered by Labour. The party was all but wiped out in Scotland, with the Scottish National Party winning 56 out of 59 Scottish seats, and Labour losing over a third of its vote.

Nationally, holding just 232 seats—down from 258 in 2010—the election was the worst for Labour since 1983.

It has now lost seats at every election since 1997, when under Tony Blair it won 418 seats. This means that the party has lost seats for four elections in a row.

But when you must consider what party and what government it was standing against in this year’s vote, then the scale of its defeat is magnified and made far more significant.

It has been decades since the governing party has increased their share of the seats in parliament. The Tories did so, with their share of the vote actually up from 2010.

Now that is truly devastating. This is the most hated of governments. It has the support of 25 percent of the population—those who have materially benefited from its low-tax, pro-business policies. But it is despised by most of us.

Yet very few in the working class were persuaded that Labour offered any alternative to the Tories. Above all Labour is not seen as an oppositional current, but as another party of big business—the Tory Party Lite.

Labour will not recover from this defeat because it will respond with a further shift to the right.

The saying goes that when you are in a hole, it is wise to stop digging. Instead Labour is digging like mad. Not only are they worshipping at the altar of Blair, while denouncing Ed Miliband as virtually a communist. They are intent on starting where Blair left off—and not under conditions of the 1997 debt-fuelled consumer boom, but against a background of terrible austerity.

Look at the Labour leadership contest. The right is making all the running. Indeed there is no left candidate because they cannot even secure a nomination. The “left” has less than the 35 MPs ready to support its candidate, equivalent to less than a tenth of the parliamentary party.

In this contest, the winner will be chosen from among those who declare most loudly that socialism is poison and “aspiration” is everything.

It is all about winning the support of business. As Will Hutton declared in the *Guardian*, “[H]e or she has to be unambiguously on the side of wealth generation... Any Labour leader who wants to win in pro-capitalist Britain needs to have a critical mass of business inside.”

This is all they want to talk about and be defined by. It is like a meeting of the Adam Smith Institute.

The favourite was initially Dan Jarvis, whose credentials were that he was a major in the Parachute Regiment and saw action in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. For this, he is affectionately known in the party as “the Steely Eyed Merchant of Death.”

But he dropped out and was replaced in pole position by Chuka Ummuna. He too dropped out, claiming too much media attention. Soon after it was revealed that the man who said that London nightclubs were full of “trash” was a member of the exclusive M Den Club and even had a bar named after him. A steak there costs £150 and a bottle of cognac is up to £4,000.

The rest are much the same.

Ummuna complained that, “In spite of the fact that our policy offer was pro-business, the rhetoric often suggested otherwise.”

Yvette Cooper has declared, “Too often in the past our rhetoric undermined that positive relationship with business, and with the creation of jobs and wealth for the future.” In addition, Miliband’s efforts to distinguish between “producer” and “predator” companies “sounded anti-business, anti-growth and ultimately anti-worker.”

Another self-proclaimed “moderniser”, Tristram Hunt, has also quit and is backing Liz Kendall. Her unique and refreshing stance is epitomised by her insistence that Labour should “wrap our arms around business.”

She complains that, thanks to “Red Ed”, “There are many good businesses that share our agenda, but they did not feel they could be part of what we were saying, because too much of the time they heard us attacking business, and giving the impression that profit is wrong.”

Kendall outlined a militarist agenda this week, stating that Britain had to commit 2 percent of GDP to military spending. This is something even the Tories haven’t done yet. She said there had been “a quiet diminishing of Britain’s role in the world” under the coalition government.

Andy Burnham, who is now the frontrunner, is supposed to be an alternative.

But his call “to rediscover the beating heart of Labour” is an appeal to speak to people, and I quote, “like we did in 1997” under Blair. He was the minister for health when Labour began its initial privatisation of the NHS.

Significantly, even his call for a united party prompted Blair’s chief advisor Peter Mandelson to complain that, “this sounds like continuity and an unwillingness to make hard policy choices.”

This is the significance of Kendall’s statement that “There is no God-

given right for the Labour Party to exist.”

Even though for us the difference between the Brownites and Blairites is hard to measure, the party could split if Burnham wins and something very right wing and very rotten will crawl out of it.

What then of the left? We wrote on the *World Socialist Web Site* that their response was a cry of despair at Labour’s loss. And we were being literal.

Laurie Penny, for example, wrote in the *New Statesman*, “What remains of the British left is flat on its back, staring at the ceiling in a mess of unwashed sheets, and shouting at it to get up is not going to help right now.”

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett wrote in the *Guardian*, “This weekend has, for me, been like the most savage of hangovers. Waves of despair, punctuated by panic, anxiety, paranoia, and fear.”

The pseudo-left groups are no different. In the main, they too came out in support of a Labour vote. Left Unity, the Socialist Workers Party and the Workers Revolutionary Party all stood candidates, but only on the basis of pushing Labour to the left.

The WRP declared, for example, “Today the working class and the majority of the middle class must put the Cameron government out of office and return the Labour Party to government with a clear majority.”

They then claimed, “A majority Labour government will be the best outcome since it will be the signal for the working class to make the big push forward, to go beyond the attempt to reform capitalism in 1948, to overthrowing it in 2015.”

Quite why this is so is, of course, never explained—because the only thing they want to do is justify a Labour vote.

The Socialist Party claim to be building an actual alternative to Labour, even though their Trades Unionist and Socialist Coalition calls for a vote for Labour “lefts”.

They boasted of a “combined vote of 120,000 votes in the general and local elections”. But this for 748 candidates—all paid for by a £150,000 bequest from a deceased member that gave it a TV spot, as well as the backing of the Rail Maritime and Transport union. This is about £1.25 a vote and around 160 votes per candidate.

More importantly, their campaign was mounted solely to convince the trade union bureaucracy that the Socialist Party can be useful, given that Labour is so discredited, in efforts to maintain control of the working class and subordinate it to a pro-capitalist programme.

Their post-election statement declares, “TUSC has now ‘arrived’ as a recognised factor on the labour movement’s national and local electoral map. What conclusions will trade unionists and particularly the leadership of the unions draw from this?”

It continues by asking, “how much more powerful and attractive to voters would an alternative have been if the trade union leaders, particularly those on the left with their huge potential strength [by which they mean money], had come behind an electoral alternative, modelled on TUSC?”

This naked subordination to the trade union bureaucracy, the betrayers of every single struggle waged by the working class for close to four decades, is not the worst of it.

In Scotland the pseudo-left groups have all effectively liquidated into the Scottish National Party—the main party of the bourgeoisie north of border.

Solidarity Scotland, led by Tommy Sheridan, abandoned all pretences and called for an SNP vote even when members of TUSC, which they helped set up, were standing. Now they write:

“We would like to offer our congratulations to the SNP on their historic win at the General Election. The results were astounding and the new members that will be heading to Westminster on behalf of the Scottish people should be giving themselves a pat on the back.”

As for their competitors, the Scottish Socialist Party, they congratulate

“the SNP on their stunning victory on May 7th. Nigh-on eradicating Labour in Scotland in this way was no mean feat. The result of decades of work by the nationalists it has nonetheless shaken the political foundations of Scotland to its core. It is a remarkable and welcome achievement in any socialist’s book.”

They add, “We will work as a party and with others to ensure the SNP keep the promises they made to their working class constituency. The SNP carry the expectations of millions on their shoulders.”

One of its leaders, Carolyn Leckie, even left the SSP and campaigned for the SNP. She writes, “I was struck by how similar the people campaigning last week for the SNP were to the Scottish Socialist Party members I’ve worked with and respected over the years.”

She then asks, “Where is the best place to ferment ideas and sustain the radical momentum the referendum unleashed? Should the Left assume that the SNP will let them down, like Labour in the past? Or should it work—whether from the inside or the outside—to push the SNP to the Left?”

To which she, like Sheridan, says, push the SNP to the left, or more truthfully, “Please let me in.”

This is an extraordinary political shift. Labour has been the mechanism through which the bourgeoisie has historically regulated class antagonisms and policed the class struggle, along with the trade unions. Now it is breaking up, just as surely if not yet as spectacularly as PASOK in Greece.

There, the response of the bourgeoisie and its petty bourgeois political defenders was the formation of Syriza as a supposedly left alternative. But that is not an easy thing to repeat, given what has happened since Syriza was elected in January.

After forming a coalition with the right-wing Independent Greeks, they have, in a matter of weeks, made clear their readiness to impose austerity and deliver the working class to the tender mercies of the IMF and the European Union.

The pseudo-left groups envy Syriza and want to emulate it here only because it has won office and access to money and prestige—which is also why they tail after the SNP.

These groups are going to crash and burn. Tommy Sheridan urged workers to “lend” their vote to the SNP, as if they could politely ask for it to be returned afterwards. But as for the pseudo-left, they lent nothing to the SNP. They were bought and paid for by Nicola Sturgeon and company.

They are politically owned by the SNP and in turn what it does in government is “owned” by the pseudo-left. They said the SNP was an anti-austerity party and they knew they were lying. And when the SNP attacks the working class, as it must, they too will be held to account.

The demoralised and demoralising message of the pseudo-left cannot dominate the working class. It must be rejected.

Thanks to Labour, to the SNP, the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists, the working class has been delivered over to a Tory government intent on waging social war at home and military war abroad.

The Queen’s speech next week is the most reactionary package ever put before a British parliament. Over £35 billion in additional cuts, including £12 billion to welfare, anti-immigrant measures that fascist groups like the National Front or the British National Party would once have monopolised.

They are proposing legislation that will make it virtually impossible for workers to strike. Proposals to junk human rights legislation, criminalise free speech, censor the Internet and television programmes—banning groups and control orders for individuals who are opposed to “democracy” and “British values”.

When Home Secretary Theresa May said the government’s counter-extremism strategy is designed to combat people who are “seeking to divide us” into “them and us”, the anti-socialist message is clear for all to

see. In the name of preserving “one nation” values, anyone who defends the interests of working people against their oppressors can now be branded as a criminal.

All of this takes place under conditions of a threatened breakup of the UK and of an exit from European Union and with the global economy teetering on the edge of a yet deeper abyss.

We have stressed that the objective conditions that drive capitalism towards dictatorship and war also create the conditions for the shift of masses of working people towards a revolutionary internationalist and socialist perspective.

Our perspective is now revealed as the only serious and viable answer to the fundamental problems facing the working class in Britain and internationally. We offer the only road forward.

During the general election campaign we were alone in telling workers and young people the truth. We always have and always will.

But here is the difference. It is becoming ever clearer—firstly to the more politically aware and far-sighted and especially to young people—that what we offer is what working people desperately need: A way to fight back and defeat the class enemy and to build a world fit for this and future generations to live in.



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