

George Galloway wins Rochdale by-election landslide in de facto referendum on Gaza

Thomas Scripps
1 March 2024

George Galloway, running for his Workers' Party of Britain, won the Rochdale by-election held Thursday by a landslide, winning 40 percent of the vote. Second place, with 21 percent, was taken by an independent candidate, businessman David Tully.

The Labour Party plunged by 44 percentage points on its 2019 performance and the Conservative Party by 19 points. Turnout was roughly 40 percent, in line with most recent contests.

The by-election was essentially a referendum on the Gaza genocide and British imperialism's complicity in it.

Labour's candidate, Azhar Ali, was disowned by the party after his comments to a private meeting stating Israel had allowed Hamas's October 7 attack to take place were leaked. This took place too late to change his ballot status, meaning Ali ran on the Labour ticket but would have sat in parliament as an independent had he won. He quickly disgraced himself by grovelling before Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer's witch-hunt of opposition to the Israeli government.

Labour headquarters forbade any campaigning on Ali's behalf in Rochdale and reports suggest he personally went to ground.

Under these conditions, Galloway intervened explicitly on the question of Gaza, opposing the Labour Party above all for its support for Israel's war. The issue was already especially prominent in a constituency with a close to 30 percent Muslim population.

In his victory speech, Galloway declared, "Keir Starmer—this is for Gaza. And you will pay a high price, in enabling, encouraging and covering for, the catastrophe presently going on in occupied Palestine in the Gaza Strip."

He went on, "I want to tell Mr Starmer above all, that the plates have shifted tonight. This is going to spark a movement, a landslide, a shifting of the tectonic plates in scores of parliamentary constituencies... Labour is on notice that they have lost the confidence of millions of their voters who loyally and traditionally voted for them, generation after generation..."

"Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak are two cheeks of the same backside and they both got well and truly spanked tonight!"

This is all correct. A Labour spokesperson claimed in response that "George Galloway only won because Labour did not stand." But the reason Labour, in effect, did not stand is that it could not get a ferociously pro-Zionist candidate in place. It sabotaged its own campaign rather than run even a loyal Blairite who had privately acknowledged the reality of Israel's foreknowledge of October 7 to shore up support among his own core constituency outraged by Israel's actions.

Had Labour been able to run the campaign of unmitigated support for the Israeli government it wanted, the Gaza protest vote against the party would have largely remained.

In addition, the whole political establishment was rejected in this by-election, with the Tories securing just 12 percent alongside Labour's less than 8 percent. This was bound up with years of neglect and austerity—Rochdale is among the most deprived 30 boroughs in the UK, with 28 percent of children living in poverty—but the angry protest was spurred above all by both parties' support for the genocidal Israeli government.

Political commentators have already rushed to highlight the "unique" set of circumstances in the Rochdale contest—pointing to Labour's candidacy fiasco, Rochdale's large Muslim population and Galloway's experience and high public profile—to insist no lessons can be drawn for the general election due to be called this year.

It is not necessary to make predictions from Thursday's results about how the seats will fall in a national parliamentary election. What matters, and what is undeniable, is that politics in Britain is being upended by the imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza and the radicalisation of millions of people, particularly young workers and students. An anti-imperialist, anti-war opposition to the Labour and Tory parties is building and seeking a political solution.

This is how it is understood in ruling circles.

In an extraordinary televised statement outside Downing

Street Friday evening, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak delivered a diatribe against “Islamic extremists” that was an undisguised attack on the left, seeking to criminalise anti-Gaza protestors. “In recent weeks and months, we have seen a shocking increase in extremist disruption and criminality,” he declared. “What started as protests on our streets have descended into intimidation, threats and planned acts of violence.”

Denouncing the election of Galloway, he stated, “And it's beyond alarming that last night, the Rochdale by-election returned a candidate that dismisses the horror of what happened on October 7, who glorifies Hezbollah and is endorsed by Nick Griffin, the racist former leader of the [British National Party].”

Such was the nakedly anti-democratic impact of targeting a by-election vote as a manifestation of extremism, while claiming to uphold the “rule of law”, that the published transcript of his speech excised these passages with a bolded message in square brackets reading, “Please note political content redacted here”.

A process of political radicalisation is underway internationally. In the Michigan Democratic Party primary contest held earlier this week, over 100,000 protest votes, more than 13 percent, were cast against “Genocide Joe” Biden for his support for Israel.

But just as the “uncommitted” campaign in the United States offers no way forward for workers and young people opposed to the genocide in Gaza—keeping their opposition confined within the blood-soaked Democratic Party—Galloway advances no means of mounting a successful struggle against British imperialism.

The former Labour MP (1987-2003) has now unseated the party three times: in Bethnal Green and Bow in 2005 and Bradford West in 2012, both for the Respect Party, and now Rochdale. Each time, he has tapped into smouldering opposition to Labour's right-wing politics, above all its record of war. He was expelled from Labour for his opposition to the invasion of Iraq and won the 2005 election in Bethnal Green largely on the strength of that stance.

At no point, however, did Galloway use his platform to build a mass anti-war opposition to Labour. Respect was established, on the initiative of the Socialist Workers Party, as an opportunist alliance of forces opposed, for various reasons, to the war in Iraq and “neoliberal” policies. But it explicitly rejected any socialist principles, denounced as “sectarian”; made a special appeal to “the Muslim community”, treated as a homogenous identity devoid of class differences; and oriented heavily to the Labour Party. Galloway declared after his 2012 victory, “I appeal to the Labour Party to be a Labour Party again” and next year called for a vote for Ed Miliband.

These rotten foundations led to the split in Respect in 2012, and its decline and eventual dissolution in 2016.

Since then, Galloway has advanced a nationalist populist politics which has seen him denounce immigration and join forces with the likes of Nigel Farage and share a platform with Trump's fascist former advisor Steve Bannon. Appearing on a platform with Farage in support of Brexit, he made his orientation explicit, quipping “Left, right, left, right, forward march”. He later attempted to stand for Farage's Brexit Party.

Galloway's opposition to imperialist war, always based on support for sections of the ruling class in the Middle East, has increasingly come to be focussed on support for the capitalist oligarchy in Russia and China, both assigned a key role in a “multi-polar” opposition to US imperialism. Neither Moscow nor Beijing have mounted a principled defence of the Palestinians, and neither is capable of peacefully restraining the explosion of US-led NATO militarism aimed at their destruction.

The only route to defeating US and world imperialism, and the mass murder and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians by Washington's Israeli client, is through the building of a mass, anti-war movement, mobilising the international working class against the capitalist class, its state apparatus and all its parties in a fight for socialism.

On Tuesday, the Socialist Equality Party (US) launched its campaign for the US presidential elections to fight for this programme against the Democratic and Republican Parties—the spearhead of an international campaign waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International against genocide, fascism, dictatorship, war and inequality.

The Socialist Equality Party (UK) will carry this campaign into the British general election, standing candidates against the joint Tory-Labour party of genocide, austerity and war.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact