

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3192>



Britain

Broad parties and the fight for left unity in Britain

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

Publication date: Monday 25 November 2013

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The need for new left-wing pluralist parties, which can embrace a broad spectrum of the left - both those with revolutionary politics and other left wing militants from a social democratic background - has existed now for nearly 20 years, not just in Britain but across Europe. It has been a product of the wholesale adoption of the neo-liberal agenda by European Social Democracy. In Britain it has been a product of the rise of new Labour, which was on the leading edge of that development. Today the political conditions for such parties remains in full force, yet the left in Britain “ in contrast to the wider European experience “ is weaker than it has been for many years and the prospects for such parties is in crisis, particularly in England and Wales.

Respect remains today (in 2011) the only left party in England with any electoral substance. It has a small but significant base amongst oppressed migrant working class communities in East London and South Birmingham, where it made an historic breakthrough into ethnic minority support in the wake of the invasion of Iraq. Respect leader Salma Yaqoob, herself, was brilliant gain from the anti-war movement. Respect was strongly anti-imperialist and was a significant gain for the working class. It also made some significant interventions around the environment and climate change at least at some stages in its development.

Respect, however, is now extremely fragile and is locked into an inward-looking orientation which is leading it nowhere. The decision taken at its conference in November 2010 to begin organising in Scotland against the Scottish left and when it has yet to establish itself as a national organisation in England (and which caused SR to leave the organisation) may well be the final chapter.

Other formations such as No2EU and TUSC continue on, to some extent, as top down initiatives with little electoral weight and even less democracy and show no signs of changing.

Yet for the last 10 years the basis has existed for a substantial left party in England reflecting the rise of the SSP in Scotland. Not a mass party. But an organisation of fifteen or twenty thousand embracing sections of the trade union left was entirely possible. The failure to establish such a party has been the responsibility both the endemic sectarianism in the British left (with its inbuilt Stalinist legacy) as well as the enduring pull of Labourism “ even as it moved to the right. The grotesque first-past-the-post electoral system for Westminster also compounded the problem.

A potted history of left weakness

Ever since the turn of the 20th century left wing politics in Britain have been relatively marginalised, operating under the shadow of the British trade union leadership, and then the parliamentary political party created in the image of the union leaders. While other European countries witnessed a much more explosive division within working class politics, the relatively new Labour Party in Britain did not face a significant split in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian revolution.

The Communist Party in Britain was always weak both in numbers and in its political theory and approach, and in the 1920s became politically dependent on the line spelled out by the Kremlin: its attempt to organize a large-scale left wing base in the unions, the Minority Movement formed in 1924, was steered almost immediately off course by Stalin’s insistence upon an alliance with the “left” trade union leaders who sold out the 1926 General Strike. The

British CP and its co-thinkers proceeded to follow every twist and turn of Stalinist policy from the late 1920s (when an ultra-left turn limited its opportunity to exploit the 1931 betrayal as Ramsay MacDonald formed a coalition with the Tories, before the so-called "Popular Front" period from 1934 led the CP to advocate bizarre cross-class alliances to bolster "liberal" capitalists). This lasted through to the 1950s, where Stalin's notion of a "Parliamentary Road to Socialism" cemented the CP into a reformist political framework, and confirmed the strategy as seeking influence through long-term and opportunist alliances with the trade union leaders.

A disunited far left

In these intervening decades, left wing alternatives to the Communist Party and Labourism have veered between the opportunist and the sectarian, sometimes combining both approaches. In the post-war period this meant that the revolutionary left, which had been vilified and oppressed during the 1940s by the Stalinists, social democrats and fascists alike for holding a class struggle line, was itself subject to repeated splits reflecting its ideological weakness, and the growing problem of individual dominant personalities seeking to gain and maintain political control through bureaucratic and sectarian methods.

Even though some of these organizations professed adherence to the principles of revolutionary Marxism, and the political legacy of the first four Congresses of the Community International, few were able consistently to base their work on any of the concepts of the United Front. Uniting the left was not seen as a priority for people such as Gerry Healy (SLL/WRP), Tony Cliff (IS/SWP), Ted Grant and Peter Taaffe (Militant) and later those who copied their methods, such as Sean Matgamna (Workers Fight/AWL): instead preserving the separation of each organisation from its rivals on the far left took centre stage, including the use of manoeuvres, opportunist alliances and bureaucratic techniques to control their relatively small memberships.

While Labour retained its political hegemony over the majority of the working class, the left remained fairly much self-contained, a variety of smaller organizations aspiring to become "mass parties", but working separately and having little strategy other than building through one-by-one recruitment, and hoping for a split in the Labour Party that has still never come.

The extent of rank and file trade union militancy and student activism in the 1960s and 1970s meant that there appeared to be a space for the left to organize and the lack of a serious interventionist orientation to the labour movement could appear to be less of a fundamental weakness.

Up until the mid 1980s the Grant-Taaffe Militant group remained within the Labour Party, growing in membership to the point of becoming Britain's fifth biggest party, according to journalist Michael Crick. "Entryism" appeared to have been elevated from a tactic to a long-term strategy, until the nearest thing to a "split" in the Labour Party saw their entire current expelled in a witch-hunt led by Neil Kinnock. The expulsions began on a relatively small scale. In 1982 the Labour conference adopted a list of proscribed

organizations: the following year five members of Militant's "Editorial Board" were expelled.

In 1985-6 Kinnock increased the attack on the group of Liverpool Labour councillors, led by Militant, who had taken a stand against Tory spending cuts, and in 1986 Derek Hatton, who had led the revolt in Liverpool was expelled from the party.

The Bennite movement

Tony Benn called the first of the three Socialist Conferences in October 1987 in response to the defeat of the miners and the rise of the defeatist "new realism" approach in the unions and the continued rightward trajectory of the Kinnock leadership of the Labour Party. He still had a big movement around him after his leadership challenge in 1981.

The conference was massively over-subscribed, and was refreshingly open and democratic. The Socialist Conferences united a swathe of the left both inside and outside of the Labour Party on what was called a "twin track" approach " though it was far more inside the Labour Party than out. The Conferences became the Socialist Movement in 1989 and took on much more of the shape of an organisation with a publication " called The Socialist. In 1991 it held an impressive trade union conference in Sheffield, which debated the way forward for the trade unions around the theme "unshackle the unions". The ISG, then the British section of the Fourth International, was heavily involved in the Socialist Movement, in particular in the trade union conference.

The limitation of the Socialist Movement from the outset, however, was that it was never going to break with Labour, whatever happened within the Labour Party. It was certainly never going to stand candidates against Labour. In any case most of those participating in it, including the ISG, still regarded an electoral challenge to Labour as premature " though this was clearly starting to change.

Militant exits from Labour, and splits

Even though only 250 or so Militant supporters were actually expelled from Labour it was by now increasingly operating outside of the party. From 1988 onwards Militant ran its successful anti-poll tax campaign largely outside the Labour Party, which clearly questioned entryism in the eyes of many of its members and it would not be long before they would start standing candidates against Labour.

In 1991 Dave Nellist, who had been elected as a Labour MP in 1998, declared that he would stand against Labour as a "Labour Independent" in his seat of Coventry South East in the general election expected in 1992. Meanwhile Militant supporter and Liverpool Councillor Lesley Mahmood lost the selection battle for the deceased Eric Heffer's seat to right winger and witch hunter Peter Kilfoyle. Mahmood went on to stand against Labour as "Real Labour" in Liverpool Walton.. She received 2,613 votes and beat the Tory candidate. Dave Nellist was expelled from the Labour Party in December 1991 along with fellow Labour MP Terry Fields.

In January 1992 Militant split into two when a majority backed Peter Taaffe's proposal to withdraw from the Labour Party. A minority, following Ted Grant and Allan Woods, stayed in the Labour Party and became Socialist Appeal. Taaffe's proposal was underpinned by the view that the Labour Party was now a straight capitalist party the same as the Tories.

A month later Scottish Militant Labour was proclaimed as an independent organisation in Scotland with jailed poll tax activist Tommy Sheridan as its most prominent member.

In the 1992 General Election on April 9, Dave Nellist and Terry Fields, stood as Independent Labour candidates along with Tommy Sheridan for Scottish Militant Labour north of the border. They did not win but they scored well. Nellist, who had been the sitting Labour MP, stood in Coventry South East and came remarkably close to winning: he polled 10,551 votes against Labour's 11,902. Terry Fields polled 5,952 in Liverpool Broadgreen and Sheridan

6,278.

Labour under Neil Kinnock dramatically lost the election having been convinced it was going to win.

In the local elections the following month Militant took two council seats from Labour in Glasgow, one of them by Sheridan himself – and he took and from prison where he was serving a sentence arising from the poll tax campaign.

After these successes the ‘Scottish turn’ became a model for Militant in England and Wales and by the end of the year Militant in England and Wales had become an independent party called Militant Labour.

The SLP and the Socialist Alliances

After successfully forcing through the abolition of Clause 4 at a special Labour Party Conference at Easter 1994, Blair went on to consolidate

his position by trouncing the left and winning every vote at the 1995 Annual Labour Party conference.

After the abolition of clause 4 NUM leader Arthur Scargill took the initiative to form the Socialist Labour Party (SLP). The RMT’s Bob Crow became a leading member in the early days of the new party. In launching the SLP, however, Scargill did not follow the Socialist Movement’s example of democracy and openness, but went sharply in the other direction. From the outset Scargill managed to demonstrate (with the help former ISG members now organised as the Fourth International Supporters Caucus (FISC)) who acted as Scargill’s enforcers for several years) exactly how such parties should not be built. .

The slamming of the door by Scargill triggered the formation of a number of Socialist Alliances (SAs) and SA type initiatives some of which involved the Militant, for example in Coventry which was its main base. The Greater Manchester SA which was set up by John Nicholson and others was another example. They came together in what became the Network of SAs which also included the Walsall Democratic Labour Party, which was an expelled local branch of the LP. There were also SA type organisations in Lancashire and Kent.

In Scotland many on the left, including Scottish Militant Labour, had discussions with Scargill which broke down when he refused to contemplate any degree of Scottish autonomy.

Some members of organised groups did manage to get into the SLP. Three groups of sectarian leftists – the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Revolutionary Democratic Group and the Bolshevik Tendency (a split from the Spartacists) – all got people in, but were all eventually expelled. In 1997 a battle for democracy opened up inside the SLP after an article was published in its name supporting the Chinese government over the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre!

There was then mayhem at the second conference of the SLP in December 1997 when having always refused to allow organisations to join, Scargill produced a block vote of 3,000 from the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners Welfare Association from his back pocket and used it to dominate the rest of the conference. Even the FISC were outraged when he used this to abolish Black Sections, which they supported.

This spat with Scargill soon led to the expulsion of FISC itself. After the conference people began leaving the SLP in groups as well as individuals. The only group Scargill built an ongoing alliance with was the pro-Stalin group (serious Stalinists with Stalin t-shirts etc) the around the Indian Worker's Association's Harpal Brar.

Scotland shows the way

In Scotland the SSP was formed in 1998 after it became clear that New Labour, elected the previous year, was moving towards devolution including a Scottish Parliament elected by a form of proportional representation.

The forerunner of the SSP was the Scottish Socialist Alliance, a coalition of left-wing organisations (including SML) which had existed since 1996 and which had drawn on the work the left had been doing in the Scottish Constitutional Convention around the issue of devolution and home rule as well as the poll tax and water privatisation. Even some sections of the Scottish Communist Party were drawn in.

As a result the SSP was able, at the time of its foundation, to represent the bulk of the left in Scotland and become an important model of a broad democratic party of the left at the European level as well in Britain.

The SSP model was based on the idea that an alternative to Labour had to be built as a party, with a comprehensive political programme, and that if a serious party was to be built which could challenge the rightward march of Social Democracy it could not be built by one-by-one recruitment and even less via a single political tradition – even parties which have in the past been as successful in Britain as the SWP and the Militant/SP have not been able to do that. The SSP recognized that what was needed was first the unity of the left, and then to reach out to broader forces through the development of a common political experience and culture over a period of struggle.

The first election the SSP fought was the by-election for Glasgow City Council in 1996 where it won a respectable 18% of the vote. It then contested 16 seats in Scotland in the 1997 general election which brought Tony Blair to Westminster. Tommy Sheridan saved his deposit in Glasgow Pollock and Jim McVicar and Alan McCombes also did well in two other Glasgow constituencies.

The SSP's main breakthrough, however, came in the first elections to the Scottish Parliament in May 1999. Although the SLP polled better in Scotland than the SSP overall, Sheridan was elected to represent Glasgow. The SSP was highly organised, democratic and inclusive and it grew to around 3,000 members.

Socialist Alliances in England

In England the experience of New Labour in office, from 1997, accelerated initiatives towards the establishment of Socialist Alliances. In 1998 a conference was held in Birmingham, after a series of preparatory meetings, which adopted a set of policies, a constitution and a steering committee for a wide and more stable national network of alliances. A number of far left organisations were involved (including the ISG) as well as individual activists. Militant (which had changed its name to the Socialist Party of England and Wales (SPEW) in 1997) were central to it. The SWP was not involved.

The following year the SWP - now overwhelmingly the biggest far-left organisation in Britain following the decline of the Militant/SP after its split - took the decision to join the London Socialist Alliance, which had been established by

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Militant, the ISG and others in order to stand in London in the European elections in June 1999. It was a big break for the SWP to start to work with the rest of the left, and was potentially extremely important for the left as a whole.

The LSA now embraced the bulk of the left in London to the left of Labour outside of the CP tradition – including the SP and the SWP. It appealed to the SLP to come on board to complete a unity slate. Not only did it reject this, however, but announced that the SLP would be standing a full slate in London, with Scargill at the head of it! The LSA offered to put Scargill at the head of a united slate, but this was also rejected by the SLP. It was an isolationism which continues with its full destructive force today.

Faced with a split of this kind in the left vote, the SWP withdrew from the LSA arguing that the LSA candidacy was no longer viable. As a result the LSA withdrew from the election and left the field open to the SLP. The SLP, which stood in the additional members section only, polled 1.7%.

A year later the LSA decided to stand in the election for the new Greater London Assembly - which had been set up by New Labour along with the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. ISG member Greg Tucker was now the LSA's secretary. The SWP was also back on board having apparently accepted that the SLP was not going away and was a problem the rest of the left would have to live with.

The LSA launched its campaign with a rally in Camden Town Hall with film maker Ken Loach and journalist and SWP member Paul Foot on the platform. The results of the election were very good, with an average of 3.1% in the constituencies and 74,000 people

voting for it overall. The SLP stood for the additional member seats and polled 14,000 votes – 0.8%.

At a conference of the LSA soon after the election, the first structured debate took place on the future and character of the LSA where there seemed to be agreement that the LSA should be an ongoing political organization building up a record between elections and not just an electoral mechanism to be brought out when an election was imminent.

In September 2000 a conference of the SA Network was held in Coventry to discuss launching an all-England SA for the general election expected in 2001. It was chaired by Dave Nellist and brought together over 400 activists embracing the bulk of the far left organisations in England - including the SWP and the SP. Independent activists and local campaigning organisations were also involved. The conference adopted a protocol to provide the organisational structure and political framework for the election campaign. A decision was taken to register the name Socialist Alliance as a political party. The conference was a big step forward for the English left.

It meant that the SA now embraced the bulk of the far left including SWP, the SP, the ISG, the AWL, the Democratic Labour Party, Workers Power, the CPGB, Workers International, RDG, Lewisham Independent Socialists, and some important groups and individuals from the Labour Left including former Islington Labour councillor and Labour Party NEC member Liz Davies and journalist and novelist Mike Marqusee

The SA fielded almost 100 candidates for the general election in June 2001 in England and Wales. It polled a total of 55,635 votes in the 93 constituencies in which it stood in England, with an average of 1.75%. It saved two deposits with scores of 7% and 6.8%. The ISG had six candidates in the election, including John Lister in Oxford East.

Party or coalition?

Six months later, in December 2001, the SA held another conference (with a thousand in attendance) to discuss the next stage of its development and to adopt a constitution based on one member one vote. The SP opposed the constitution, however, and when it was adopted they walked out and resigned from the SA.

They had argued for a federal structure, which would have given the component organisations a veto over the decisions of the

leadership bodies. This would have rendered individual members who were not members of a component organisation powerless. It would have meant no democratic procedures, just negotiations between the component groups. It meant that, in reality, all political life and debate would take place in the internal meetings of the component groups rather than the broad organisation.

This is not to say that it would have been easy to establish democracy in an organisation where one component organisation (the SWP) had a predominance of members. However the answer was not to demand an undemocratic structure which would exclude independents and hobble political debate. The answer was to fight for democracy in a united organisation and to develop a new culture which would make democracy work. That was what we intended to do.

Despite the SP walk out most of the rest of the far left stayed in the SA at that stage. The SP went on to set up the Campaign for a New Workers Party, which has been for the last 8 years or so a narrow propaganda exercise more designed to build the SP than to create a new broad party. It was and is characterised by the SP's own brand of top-down economism.

A weakness in the unions

The biggest failure of the SA, however, was its inability to win the affiliation or support of any of the left unions, or left union leaders, on a consistent basis. And this was even more important given the continued weakening of shop-floor and workplace organization, the virtual disappearance of the militant shop stewards' movement that had offered openings to the left in the 1960s and 70s.

The run-down of manufacturing industry in the 1980s, the brutal anti-union laws wheeled in by Thatcher, the defeat of the miners and the political capitulation of many trade union and Labour leaders to 'new realism' had helped to reduce the material base, the freedom to act, the morale and the political aspirations of union members.

The key problem, as ever, was at the top, where union leaders were more reluctant than ever to take a political stand themselves, or to separate themselves in any way from the Labour leadership that had won the election and ousted the Tories but refused to reverse the anti-union laws, or carry through policies to benefit the working class.

Even in the days of the so-called "Awkward Squad", few of them were prepared to be awkward enough to break with Labour, and even those who did were not prepared to back left of Labour candidates. Even Matt Wrack, who wrote a pamphlet for the SA on the trade union link and the crisis of working class representation, has kept at arm's length from the issue of left parties since he won the leadership of the Fire Brigades Union: indeed the FBU itself, which has for years been disaffiliated from the Labour Party, has still not given any real support to alternative left candidates.

The exception to this was Bob Crow, who after he became general secretary of the RMT in 2002, affiliated the RMT as a national union to the SSP. The RMT was expelled from the Labour Party as a result. Affiliation, however,

continued until the SSP was split by the catastrophic decision of Tommy Sheridan to sue the News of the World for damages over allegations of infidelity. Soon after the split the RMT withdrew its affiliation.

In an attempt to develop its support in the unions, the SA held an impressive conference of trade unionists, in March 2002, with 1,000 participating, which took up the issue of political representation and the democratization of the trade union political funds. It published the pamphlet written by Matt Wrack entitled *Whose money it is anyway?*.

The anti-war movement

The opening of Bush's war on terror with the invasion of Afghanistan not only saw the development of a mass anti-war movement but the radicalisation it produced also laid the basis for a new stage in the development of a broad party of the lefty in England – providing the left could rise to the occasion.

February 2003 saw the biggest political demonstration in British history, with two million people on the streets. Thousands were open to socialist and anti-imperialist ideas, to joining a broad pluralist party, and work with revolutionary socialists in that framework - providing they thought it was a genuinely broad and inclusive initiative. This included large numbers of young Muslims who were radicalised to the left by the war and angered by the Islamophobia it generated.

The War Coalition (StWC) could not itself become a political organisation. It was a single issue campaign, and far too diverse to unite on any more developed political platform than opposition to the war. It embraced the whole of the far-left along with the Green Party, important sections of the trade unions, the Campaign for Nuclear

Disarmament, the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and a number of left Labour MPs.

A conference of the Socialist Alliance, just after the invasion of Iraq, responded to this opportunity by adopting a resolution calling for a regroupment of the left in the wake of the invasion of Iraq. It discussed with many on the left, including the CPB, and key figures of the trade union left as to their possible involvement.

The SA, however, was unable to do this. The CPB decided not to participate - despite its positive experience of working with other left organisations in the StWC. This was partly due to moves by some of the left union leaders, at that time, to launch a campaign to 'Reclaim the Labour Party'. This was sharply out of kilter with political reality, of course, but it reflected the CPB's long-held strategy along these lines.

The event which opened the way for something new, was the expulsion of MP George Galloway – the anti-war movement's most prominent and uncompromising leader – from the Labour Party, in October 2003, for calling on British troops in Iraq to refuse to fight. Galloway called for a new political organisation to be formed in time to stand in the European (and London Assembly) elections, which were to take place in June 2003.

Galloway was the first Labour left MP in modern times to make a break with Labour in this way. This opened up the possibility of a much broader organization, based on the radical and radicalising wing of the anti-war movement – of which Salma Yaqoob was the most impressive representative. It was a perspective we supported, and the SA merged into Respect when it was launched in January 2004.

In Scotland the SSP had dramatically extended its breakthrough by winning 6 seats in the Scottish Parliament in the

second set of elections to that institution on May 1 2003. Frances Curran, Rosie, Kane, Rosemary Byrne and Colin Fox joined Tommy Sheridan at Holyrood. The party took a number of important initiatives inside and outside the parliament – probably the most significant was Frances Curran's bill to introduce free school meals for all, but also launched a campaign for free public transport as well as participating in more general campaigns particularly against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the siting of nuclear weapons at Faslane.

The SSP was also making an impact on the left at the European level, and itself becoming influenced by developments elsewhere. It became a founding organisation of the European Anti-

capitalist Left along with other such left parties which had emerged or were emerging across Europe.

The launching of Respect

Respect came into being via an ad-hoc group mostly from the anti-war movement including John Rees and Lindsey German from the SWP as well as George Galloway. Ken Loach played an important role. They agreed an initial draft of a founding declaration which was strong enough in its socialist content to represent a real alternative to new Labour and broad enough to create a wider coalition. Respect was launched from a conference in January 2004. An interim Executive Committee was elected which reflected the anti-war movement in its composition. John Rees was its National Secretary.

The launch of Respect was contentious amongst the far left in the SA since it represented a shift to the right in order to form something which was bigger, broader and more diverse than the SA had been. Some of the smaller groups which had been in the SA rejected Respect and went on to form a plethora of small groupings including a re-launch of the SA with a smaller network of socialist alliances.

Respect replaced what was essentially an Anti-capitalist party with one which was more left social democratic (at least its key components Galloway and Yaqoob were left social democrats) but with a strong far left, mostly SWP, membership – although the SWP never managed to get anything like the whole of their membership into Respect. From the fringes, the AWL, Workers Power, the CPGB and presented Respect as a betrayal of the politics of the SA. Others denounced it as a 'popular front'. Respect, however, had the potential, from the outset, to reach out to the anti-war activists (including the young activists and the Muslim activists) and to parts of the wider movement the SA had singularly failed to attract.

In June 2004 Respect stood in both the Euro elections and the elections for the London Assembly – which were held on the same day.

In the Euro elections Respect stood in every constituency in England and Wales and polled 1.7% of the overall vote (250,000 votes). Within this were some very big votes in some places, particularly in East London, and was to shape the development of Respect. In Tower Hamlets in East London Respect polled 21%.

In the London Assembly elections Respect polled 4.5% - just short of winning a seat, which required 5%.

Respect's most important election results were in the General Election in June 2005, when it stood in the limited number of 26 seats, and George Galloway's victory in Bethnal Green and Bow. Respect received votes ranged from less than 1% to the 38.9% won by George Galloway. Nine of the Respect candidates saved their deposits. Salma Yaqoob came a close second in South Birmingham. Galloway was the first MP to be elected to the left of

Labour, and in a separate party to Labour, since the Communist Party won two seats (one of them also in East London) in 1945. He overturned a 10,000 majority held by the sitting Blairite and pro-war MP Oona King. Young Muslims, in particular, from the large Bangladeshi community in the constituency, flocked to his campaign.

The debates and battles inside Respect

Although Respect was broader and had a much stronger electoral appeal than the SA, some of the same problems emerged. One of these was the issue of the democracy and transparency of its decision-making and another was the issue of building Respect as a party rather than as a coalition or a network.

These issues were debated at the first Respect conference (the first after the founding conference) in November 2005, which was held in a packed hall with 1500 present. We intervened with both an SR broadsheet and with various resolutions on building Respect.

We were roundly denounced for this by both George Galloway and John Rees for our sins. Afterwards we produced an SR statement which pointed out that although we remained fully committed to building Respect and that it was the best thing to happen on the left in England for a long time the conference had been a deeply worrying event which had 'put a question mark over Respect's long-term development as a broad based alternative to new Labour and its neo-liberal agenda.' It also questioned its ability to develop as a genuinely pluralist organisation capable of embracing the bulk of the left.

We had pushed for the conference to discuss how to locate Respect firmly in the emerging campaigns against the new neo-liberal offensive of the Blair government, and to confront the assault on civil liberties. But while the conference had adopted some good resolutions problems arose in the session on building Respect – the key session of the conference as far as Respect's future development was concerned.

Faced with resolutions aimed at developing Respect as an organisation which called for better administration, better democratic functioning, better contact with members and branches, more

collective policy discussions ... and Respect's own publication – John Rees and George Galloway responded negatively with demagogic speeches and crude appeals to loyalty. The tone of their response was that the proposals were either unnecessary or that they placed unreasonable demands on Respect's resources.

The problem was that the loose coalition model defended by George Galloway and the SWP leadership imposed a narrow organisational framework that could not be a viable model for an organisation which wanted to challenge for political power on the full spectrum of political issues. Nor was it working. Despite important successes Respect remained organisationally weak with a great diversity between its branches as far as their numerical strength and political viability was concerned.

George Galloway's close-of-conference speech continued this theme – despite the fact that the debate had been closed and the votes taken. He said that what John Rees had said had been 'brilliant?'. He said he had always been against Respect having a newspaper and he was now even more against it. Respect was not a party, he said, but a coalition – and that was the way it should stay.

There were policy clashes as well. A supporter of SR who proposed a resolution on LGBT rights was denounced by Lindsey German to the effect that this was not the right time to raise it. The matter of abortion, to which GG is

opposed, was resolved with the agreement to support a woman's right to choose.

A series of practical measures were adopted by the conference, which, if implemented, would have gone a long way to improving the administration and collective development of Respect. These included:

- Urging local branches develop strong and regular campaigning activities.
- Making Respect as open and inclusive as possible in order to encourage recruitment and keep and consolidate the new members.
- Making a fresh approach to those sections of the left, including the trade union left, which are not currently in Respect.
- Strengthen our political profile at national level by producing further editions of the successful Respect tabloid paper.
- Seeking to strengthen the national office and press and publicity profile between elections.
- Building strong local branches which develop their own political life and culture through regular discussion and debate.
- The National Council should convene consultative groups on specific areas of policy, such as housing, health, transport, drugs, civil liberties etc. drawing on the expertise and specialist knowledge of interested members and supporters of Respect in order to develop policy papers for discussion by the National Council and the party at large and to produce fact sheets and campaign materials for use by party members.
- That the National Secretary should circulate reports on the business conducted at meetings of the National Council as soon as is practically possible after those meetings.
- The publication of a general Respect manifesto which can be available for sale and on the website.

It was a very big win of course, and many in the conference took from the tone of the speeches by George Galloway and John Rees that these proposals would be kicked into the long grass.

The Respect Party Platform

Nor were SR members the only ones to who were shocked by the speeches of Galloway and Rees. This led to the formation of the Respect Party Platform (RPP) – mainly from London – particularly Camden and Lewisham. After a few arguments the RPP was recognised as a platform within Respect. Its aims which were published inside Respect was as follows:

Our priority proposals are:

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- Respect has to be built as a mass membership party. This means a new emphasis on recruitment, and a fresh approach to sections of the left currently not in it.

? Respect needs a stronger national political profile, with its own publications, leaflets, pamphlets, and a manifesto for regular use between elections.

? The national office needs to be strengthened.

? The Officers' Committee and National Council need to be more effective, develop greater authority, and improve their connections to the local branches. Minutes of their meetings should be available to branches and members.

? Structures are needed to ensure the accountability of elected representatives.

? Policy groups and special interest groups need to be established to create more membership involvement in Respect.

? We need an internal bulletin and/or website facilities for discussion and debate so that differences can be discussed and ideas developed.?

Any progress in this direction, however, was shattered in January 2006 by the decision of George Galloway to go onto the Big Brother show without any consultation within Respect. Respect was rocked to its foundations. It was not only a deeply discrediting event but it raised the issue of democracy and accountability to a new level. The internal crisis it created was compounded by the reluctance of SWP leaders to take Galloway to task over the issue. The crisis eventually passed, but not without damage to Respect and a significant loss of membership.

Respect's electoral appeal was dented but not destroyed, however, and it stood in the local elections in May 2006, winning 16 new council seats, taking its total to 18. Previously Respect only had three councillors - two in Preston and one in Tower Hamlets in London. Respect also stood in a small number (14) other seats in London and a small number of seats (25) in the rest of the country. This made 153 candidates in all. The results in Newham and Tower Hamlets were remarkable by any standards for a left party, with Respect winning 3 seats in Newham and 12 in Tower Hamlets. To get these seats it polled a massive 86,000 votes across the two Boroughs – 23% of the vote.

The only seat Respect won outside of London was in Birmingham Sparkbrook – a deprived inner city working class area with big Pakistani and Kashmiri communities where Salma Yaqoob won with a massive 49% of the vote. The results for her ward were: Respect 4,339, Labour 2,700, Liberal Democrats 990, Conservatives 343, Greens 309, BNP (fascist) 109.

Despite electoral success, however, Respect continued to decline in terms of members. At the next Respect conference in October 2006 the Respect Party Platform drew focused on this decline in a broadsheet on building Respect, which it distributed. We pointed out that Respect had lost more than half its members – down from 5,000 to about 2,000.

This rather mild intervention received a remarkably over-the-top and hostile reaction. We were given three minutes to articulate an alternative way forward for Respect. After that we were denounced not just by George Galloway but also by Nick Wrack, who spoke on

behalf of the SWP leadership. Nick Wrack had been one of the founding group which launched Respect and who we had been working with throughout. He had later joined the SWP.

We were then (once again) completely marginalised by a succession of wildly upbeat speeches by members of the SWP with the blatant distortion of the membership figures, and what proved to be bogus claims of the mass recruitment of students. We were told that Respect had just recruited hundreds of new students in the fresher's fairs which had just taken place. It was complete rubbish of course. The conference was told that Respect was the fastest growing organisation on the left.

In Scotland meanwhile the SSP had been going through a difficult time. In November 2004, 18 months after winning the magnificent total of six seats in the Parliament, Tommy Sheridan resigned as Convenor of the SSP. This was the outward sign of what would eventually lead to a split in the party - Sheridan's demand that the SSP support his decision to sue the News of the World, demanding Â£200,000 in damages, for allegations that paper had made about his sexual behaviour some of which he had admitted to fellow party members were true. Sheridan and his supporters walked out to form Solidarity in Autumn 2006. The split and what had preceded it led to disastrous results in the 2007 elections for the Scottish Parliament. The SSP vote collapsed and they lost all six seats, including Sheridan's. It is true that the rise of the SNP and the squeeze it exerted was also a factor not the main one.

Galloway's letter and the split in Respect

In September 2007 the issue of democracy came to a head in Respect in an extremely unlikely way. George Galloway wrote a letter to the Respect NC which implicitly challenged the SWP's control of the apparatus of respect and called for a broader-based leadership with a position of 'national organiser' created which would be in parallel to John Rees as National Secretary.

We, as SR, supported the letter (as did a large majority of the non-SWP Respect members including Ken Loach and Salma Yaqoob) not because we had confidence in George Galloway, which had been severely shaken by the Big Brother affair and his attitude towards us in Respect conferences, but because we agreed with what the letter said. In fact much of it could have been written by us.

The reaction of the SWP leadership was to brand the letter as a 'declaration of war on the SWP'. After that a split between the SWP

and most of the rest Respect was probably inevitable. We (Alan Thornett in particular, working most closely with Nick Wrack) became a part of the organising group for the non-SWP side of the argument from then until the conference which launched Respect Renewal in November 2007.

There was a huge political debate around the split and the politics it reflected. Those members of the SWP who supported the letter (Nick Wrack, Rob Hoveman and Kevin Ovenden) were expelled from the SWP early in this process. However a majority of the members of the NC supported the Galloway letter and were strongly opposed to the response of the SWP leadership. SR NC members signed a statement along with 21 other members of the NC which included the following passage:

'On the ground many SWP members have worked alongside other members of Respect to great effect. However, it has become clear ... that the actions of the SWP leadership imperil the very existence of Respect as a broad, pluralistic and democratic left alternative to New Labour. Since the letter from George Galloway, which echoed some

of the criticisms others had been making earlier, was sent to the members of the National Council on August 23, the SWP leadership have demonstrated that they are incapable of engaging in open and frank discussion with those who have disagreements with them.

?The chain of events in this crisis is contrary to the ethos which Respect has been seeking to develop and which is reflected in its constitution: ?Respect is a broad, open and inclusive organization. It is politically pluralistic and will encourage all its members to participate in its campaigns and activitiesâ€™.?

SR subsequently produced a book with the documents of the split – so that the lessons would not be lost. We (John Lister and Alan Thornett) produced a discussion paper, which included the following passage:

?Even their very worst enemies could not have hatched up a scheme half as destructive as the one the SWP Central Committee has imposed upon itself. It must be the first time such a large-scale left current effectively launched a witch-hunt on itself, driving towards a split which – if they were to go to a stitched-up Respect conference and win the vote – would be a Pyrrhic victory, leaving only a downsized SWP and a wafer thin layer of hangers-on in Respect. Such a formation would never attract any broader forces – many of whom will instinctively

recoil from the SWP for years to come as the reality becomes more widely known.

?The SWP leadership have also broken from most of the well-known figures who could draw a crowd for Respect – notably Galloway and Salma Yaqoob, but also Victoria Britain and Ken Loach.

?In other words the SWP leadershipâ€™s tactics have driven off virtually all of the independent forces that made Respect a genuinely broad-based coalition. After three years of work they now stand to walk away from the project weaker and more discredited than they were before it launched: their track record is one of politically hobbling Respect, under-selling it and failing to tap its potential in a period uniquely favourable to building a left alternative. And having failed to build it to its potential, rather than face up to any of the errors that have been made, or correct them, they have embarked on a suicidal policy of polarising Respect for and against the SWP.?

Respect Renewal was launched at an impressive and upbeat conference in November 2007. Nick Wrack was elected national secretary and prominent FBU member, Linda Smith as chair. It was to have monthly paper, facilitated by Socialist Resistance which closed down its own paper and handed the resources to Respect in order to have a paper of its own.

The launch was a great achievement in the circumstances, given that it involved challenging the strength of the SWP. There was a bitter battle with the SWP over the ownership of the name, which was eventually resolved in Respect Renewalâ€™s favour.

The leadership bodies functioned well the early stages. The NC was initially well attended, and the officer group (which Alan Thornett was on) met every week and ran the organisation.

There was, however, a very strong challenge right from the start, led by Mark Perryman who comes from a Eurocommunist tradition. He argued, against Respect Renewal becoming anything resembling a party, or having what he called ?traditional, out of dateâ€™ structures. He was opposed not only a newspaper but a policy making conference. Although his line was not openly supported by many in Respect at that time it would in the end be supported by the main players around George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob.

It was a similar story when the economic and banking crisis broke in 2008. Attempts by ourselves (Alan Thornett and John Lister) to even discuss the crisis and Respect's response to it were ridiculed on Respect's National Council Mark Perryman, Andy

Newman and others, as the usual far left mantra. Even after the crisis hit them in the face the issue of Respect relating seriously to the crisis was never resolved. We were told at one meeting of the NC by George Galloway that "people are not interested in what we have to say about the crisis."

An equally important (and related) difference as far as building Respect was concerned, was to emerge over the issue of electoral work as against wider campaigning activities. No one was against electoral work: it was and is clearly essential for any party presenting itself as an alternative to the establishment parties – "you can't surrender the electoral territory to the enemy. There were those, however, around George Galloway's office in particular who would accept little less than a dominance of electoral work virtually over all else."

This came to a head over the October 2008 Respect Renewal conference, when Galloway's office called for the conference to be postponed in favour of a Saturday afternoon of election work for an election (in Tower Hamlets) which was still 7 weeks away. The move against the conference satisfied both those who saw electoral work as above all else as well as those who were opposed to "traditional" policy making conference. In the end there was a "compromise" with an early finish, but the issue caused ongoing resentment, even though the conference itself was well attended and very successful.

Another walk-out weakens Respect

After that tensions increased on the leadership bodies, although they continued to function quite well. We had worked closely with Nick Wrack and Will McMahon throughout all this, although there was some tension developing around the fact that Nick himself was refusing to call meetings of the EC because he did not want to debate with his political opponents. Our view was that this approach undermined the democracy of Respect – and thus could not be supported however frustrating it was to have seemingly pointless debates some of the time.

An important turning point came with resignation of Nick Wrack and Will McMahon, as National Secretary and Treasurer, and others, over the issue of supporting "No to EU" in the European elections.

This new mini-split took place just before the 2009 conference, and it altered the relationship of forces on the leadership bodies. One of the consequences was the collapse of the Respect newspaper. It

also had a demobilising effect on many of our supporters inside Respect, with some of them partially or completely dropping out

The 2009 conference itself, held in Birmingham, was well attended and had some good debates. However the intervention of Galloway – who implied that whatever the conference decided would make little difference to him – was a throwback to 2005 and the speeches he and John Rees had made in the past. It did not bode well for the post-conference internal situation.

A half-hearted 2010 election campaign

Respect's objective in the 2010 general election was to extend its one seat in Parliament to three. George Galloway would stand in Poplar and Limehouse (in Tower Hamlets) Abjol Miah would stand in Bethnal Green and Bow and Salma Yaqoob would stand in Birmingham Hall Green. All three were regarded as winnable.

However in the run-up to the election Respect more or less ceased to function at all as an organisation. Suggestions of a monthly publication of a newspaper were dropped without discussion, leaving the organisation with only a rudimentary means of communicating with members or publicising its views. An election manifesto commissioned by the National Executive and written by Alan Thornett on the basis of agreed policies was vetoed by an obscure process with no meeting of the officers or National Council to discuss it, and a bowdlerised version with little content was published in its stead.

Astonishingly for an election campaign, no appeal was even circulated to members for an election fund or resources to help build the party's campaigns.

The eventual results – further skewed by a last minute anti-Tory swing to Labour in London and other urban areas – were almost universally disappointing, with Galloway and Abjol Miah losing heavily in East London, although Salma Yaqoob increased her vote in Birmingham Hall Green. She secured an 11.7% swing from Labour. Simultaneous council elections in London saw most of the Respect councillors lose their seats

The period since the election has seen no evidence that Respect can pick itself up from these setbacks. This was illustrated by the fiasco in the power-base of East London, where Respect, having campaigned (controversially) for an elected mayor, and succeeded in securing an election, then decided it was not strong enough to stand its own candidate, and instead wound up supporting Lutfur Rahman,

a Labour nominee. Blushes were spared somewhat when the Labour bureaucracy intervened and deselected him and installed another candidate, giving respect at least a fig-leaf of supporting a left challenge to Labour, who went on to win the election.

No2EU and TUSC

In 2009 and 2010 there were two closely related attempts to launch electoral initiatives. The first was the No2EU campaign which was launched in 2009 as an intervention into the European elections. Its driving force was the Socialist Party with Dave Nellist as the central figure. It also included the Communist Party of Britain and the rail union the RMT. Bob Crow, General Secretary of the RMT, was centrally and actively involved. Also involved were the Alliance for Green Socialism, the Indian Workers Association and the Liberal Party (not the Lib-Dems). The second was the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) set up in 2010 in order to stand candidates in the general election. This no longer involved the Communist Party or the RMT as a union, which had also withdrawn, although Bob Crow continued to be central to it in an individual capacity.

Neither organisation had any significant electoral impact, but the test would be whether anything might come out of them as far as uniting the left was concerned. Both organisations emerged as electoral fronts from a secretive and exclusive processes, and each set itself up as a self-appointed top-down structure (or core group) with the powers to keep out anyone they did not like. The lesson of the long struggle for broad parties to the left of Labour, outlined above, is that organisations set up in this way have nothing to offer, and in the end will only be an obstacle to the process itself.

Other organisations, including SR, which applied to join were rejected – both by No2EU and TUSC. These also included the CPGB, the AWL, and Workers Power. SR wrote to Dave Nellist, and received no acknowledgment or even a letter saying that we had been rejected. By contrast Nick Wrack, as an individual, was given a place on the core group of both bodies!

With No2EU we were told that the lack of democracy and transparency was the result of “practical difficulties”, not a preferred method of operation. Its late emergence of, just before the European elections, we were told, simply did not allow for democratic structures to be put in place. At numerous public meetings of No2EU, assurances were given that after the election there would be a conference in which everyone could participate, and at which the next

stage of the project could be democratically discussed – including whether No2EU would develop into a party.

These “commitments” were coming mostly from SP members, however. The direct representatives of the RMT such as Bob Crow and Alex Gordon were much more circumspect about it, and stressed repeatedly that No2EU was “not a party” or a future party, but an electoral arrangement for the European elections.

Despite the high hopes among some, after the European elections, and the disappointing results for No2EU, nothing happened. The RMT organised a conference in November – at which the SP floated the initiative which eventually became TUSC. This, however, was not a No2EU post-election conference. It was organised as a result of a series of decision of RMT conferences to organise conferences on Labour Representation and was the third such conference in four years.

TUSC then emerged fully formed in the same way as No2EU – after it had been decided behind closed doors what it was, how it would run, and what it stood for. All others could do was decide whether or not to support it: there was not even a facility to join. This was now clearly a consciously chosen method of operation, and not an unfortunate necessity. In fact what TUSC has ended up as was very close to what the SP advocated at the 2001 SA conference.

We have to reject this kind of method. It contributes nothing to the formation of the kind of party which is required. We do not defend democracy as an abstract concept. We defend it because it is the only effective way on which to build a political alternative to right wing Social Democracy and tackle the crisis of political representation.

During the TUSC campaign we were again told that after the General Election there would be a conference and the whole thing would be opened up. Again it did not happen, and looks unlikely to happen. Nothing changes.

Recent events and initiatives

Not only have all the initiatives towards a broad pluralist party of the left failed over the past 10 years but new initiatives are still taking place, and not just the SP project via the CNWP.

At the end of July 2010 a meeting was called by Pete McLaren who leads one of the fragments left over from the SA, and who was involved in N2EU and TUSC, to discuss the setting up another new

organisation of the left. The meeting was a predictable combination of his particular brand of a top-down approach and a dangerous tendency to localism which has arisen in recent years. There was a nasty antipathy to the socialist organisations present, which went alongside a heavy bias towards various politically disparate and ill-defined local

groups, which were seen as the key to the future of the left.

The main discussion was around Pete McClaren's proposal to set up a new network of organisations with a name and officers with the aim that it would "become a political party on a federal basis within a year". Nothing was said as to what its political basis would be. When it looked like the vote would be lost Pete McClaren proposed that a new network be established on an "interim" basis and with "interim" officers and this was agreed with a few votes against. He was of course the "interim secretary".

There was a lot of talk in the meeting about building from the bottom up, which seemed to be code for getting round the SWP and SP and building something without them. We have to start, however, from the need for left unity, and fight to establish the right political basis for it. None of the organisations which we look to as useful models at the European level were built from the "bottom up" in that way. They were built out of the unity in practice of the left organisations and their leaderships, as well as a multiplicity of individual activists.

It is the same with localism. We have to relate seriously to local electoral initiatives where they spring up "not least because they reflect the failure to build anything at the level of national politics. It would be a mistake, however, to see this as a strategic way forward towards a party of the left at the national level. The extreme diversity of the local groups represented in Rugby – some were explicitly non-socialist "only reinforced that view. Unfortunately there are no political shortcuts.

Moreover the decision taken at Respect's conference in November 2010 has seriously compounded the problem. We were faced with the situation of a late amendment from George Galloway's office to the effect that Respect would abandon a long held policy and begin organising in Scotland. Not only that but Respect would stand George Galloway for the Scottish Parliament in 2011!

This was completely unacceptable to us in SR for a number of reasons. First because we have always supported and continue to support the SSP. Secondly because in general we are opposed to English organisations organising and standing for election in

Scotland. And thirdly because of the way it was pushed through "with no discussion prior to the conference on this proposal and under conditions where Respect has never discussed Scottish politics.

It was also under conditions that not only has Respect failed to build itself as an organisation in England at the national level we have always been opposed when we have proposed that it do so. Now with no discussion on Scottish politics, and even less resources, it has decided to organise in Scotland as well.

Having been outvoted on this at the conference SR has withdrawn from Respect and is no longer involved. It is a defeat for us (and for Respect in our view) since Respect started with real potential and had achieved things both at the electoral level as well as its impact in minority migrant communities which no other organisation of the left has been able to achieve.

Unfortunately Respect has succumbed to the problems traced in this article since the mid-1990s "the top down domination by powerful organisations or individuals who are only prepared to be part of such an organisation providing it turns around their own individual needs. Until we are able to break from such conceptions the left will remain marginalised.

Conclusion

There has been a common thread running through the failures and missed opportunities since the early 1980s when can be summed up as follows:

- The failure to organize the various formations to the left of Labour as political parties, with their own political life, communication systems and culture of debate, to offer a convincing alternative for those who had been part of, or been attracted to the Labour Party.
- The failure to establish genuine democracy. Time and again this is supplanted by some form of top-down domination by domineering, self-seeking individuals or groups, which offers no real political alternative to the bureaucracy of Social Democracy, and no opportunity for activists to play a leadership role and feel they have a genuine voice.
- The continuing failure to establish the right relationship between the far left organisations which join such parties and the leadership structures of that organisation. An example of this was the decisions being taken in the structures of the SWP rather than the structures of Respect, and the lash-up which allowed the SP with its various partners to rebuff attempts of other left currents and groupings to join No2EU and TUSC.

As the ConDem government drives through the biggest public spending cuts in recent history, to be met with a pitifully ineffective, timid Blairite opposition from Ed Miliband's New Labour front bench, and by the empty words of a stridently vocal but largely passive trade union bureaucracy, the need for a political alternative to the left of Social Democracy is as great as it has ever been.

But unless these basic lessons are learned and the left breaks from its sorry history of sectarianism, demagoguery and opportunism, the working class movement in Britain seems doomed to repeat the cycle of false start and failure that has marked the last 30 years.

13th November 2010