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Britain

# General Election - New Labour punished over the war

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**The British General Election on May 5 saw New Labour, under the leadership of warmonger Tony Blair; win its 'historic' third term. This victory, which was never in doubt, came however at a heavy price.**

They received the smallest share of the vote ever for a governing party - just 36%. Their majority was slashed by almost 100 seats, from 160 to 66.

## Blair damaged

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/blairkeys.gif>]

Reg Keys denounces Blair

Blair himself was damaged beyond repair. He was seen holding himself rigid with embarrassment at his own constituency count in Sedgefield, while anti-war candidate and father of British soldier killed in Iraq Reg Keys, who won 10% of the vote, denounced Blair's own wretched refusal to apologise or admit to having waged an illegal war on the basis of lies.

It was particularly heavy blow for Blair and his cronies to see the new left-wing party Respect win an apparently safe Labour seat in the heart of London's east end.

The war in Iraq was the issue that refused to go away. Prior to the election campaign, the government had always refused to release the legal advice given to it by the Attorney General on the lawfulness of war against Iraq. During the campaign there was a partial leak of that advice which finally forced the government to make the whole thing public. Despite strong briefings to the contrary, this incident further confirmed the view that the Attorney had been put under pressure to change his opinion to suit Blair. The Prime Minister's reputation was damaged still more.

The response of new Labour was to promote Finance Minister Gordon Brown into the heart of the election campaign - he and Blair appeared together so much that commentators referred to them as being joined at the hip.

Until recently Brown had played it clever and stayed relatively silent on Iraq - though he ensured that there was ample funding for the war, whatever the implications for public services. As a result his reputation has not suffered in the same way as Blair's. But the more Brown was brought in as human shield for Blair the clearer it became that the leadership transition was under way. Brown's statements during the campaign made it obvious that there is not a cigarette paper's difference between the two in terms of policies.

Both Blair and Brown claimed on election night that the electorate had got the result they wanted - Labour returned with a smaller majority and that they would respond by listening to their concerns. However they subsequently went on to contradict that by making it clear that they will press ahead with all the anti-working class measures that were in the pipeline before the election.

Much of the electorate rejected both the Tories and New Labour. Millions of Labour voters either stayed at home or voted for those they saw as anti-war parties - predominantly the Liberal Democrats who stole most of the anti-war votes. Important anti-war activists such as Tariq Ali contributed to this by calling for a vote for them in his own London

constituency as the best way of punishing Bomber Blair, as well as supporting Respect where they were standing.

This second-string party of British imperialism also talked left on a number of other questions such as withdrawing the tuition fees that students have to pay to attend university and raising the top rate of income tax. This rhetoric stands in contradiction with what they do in practice in the local councils they control and in the Scottish Parliament where they are in coalition with New Labour. They have been as strong advocates as the other mainstream parties of cuts and privatisations, for example in Scotland they voted against the introduction of free school meals.

But in this media-dominated election, perception was all and the majority of those who voted Liberal Democrat for the first time in this election did so from the left. As a result, they won 11 extra seats though they failed to capitalise on this unique opportunity for a major breakthrough.

The Tories, who had brought in Lynton Crossby who ran Australian PM John Howard's last two successful election campaigns, focused to a large extent on the issue of immigration. This deeply racist campaign did not seem to do them very much good at the polls and persuaded some traditional Labour supporters to vote for Blair despite the war in order to keep the Conservatives out. This not only let New Labour off the hook on the war but also covers up the fact that the government's own record on immigration and asylum is profoundly reactionary.

The result was that they won 33 extra seats, but failed to increase their share of the vote from the 2001 election. They also failed to resolve the crisis created by New Labour's occupation of their traditional territory and thus leader Michael Howard has tendered his resignation. There is no obvious successor waiting in the wings and further disarray is likely to follow.

Britain's grotesquely undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system [1] was displayed in all its glory. It took an average of 26,000 votes to elect a Labour MP, 46,000 to elect a Tory MP, and a massive 100,000 votes to elect a Liberal Democrat. Smaller parties suffer even more because votes for them are often seen as wasted. The need to fight for a system of proportional representation is brought to the forefront yet again.

The smaller parties were placed at an even greater disadvantage than usual. This was compounded by the undemocratic approach of the media that blanked them out whilst giving wall-to-wall coverage to the main party leaders in a presidential-style campaign.

These violations of basic democracy make the breakthrough results won by Respect even more remarkable.

## RESPECT breaks the mould

Respect was able to break the mould of the election campaign and build dynamic campaigns in key inner city constituencies, which won a mass resonance on the streets, in a way which no other left party has been able to achieve. Respect contested 26 seats, won 68,071 votes, averaged 6.9%, and won one seat.

The most sensational Respect result was George Galloway's victory in Bethnal Green and Bow in East London. He is the first MP to be elected for a party standing to the left of Labour since the Communist Party's finest hour in 1945. [2]

Galloway overturned a 10,000 majority held by the Blairite pro-war MP Oona King. Labour fought hard and dirty to keep the seat. Respect activists were accused of anti-Semitism, beating up a pensioner, slashing King's tyres and throwing eggs at a memorial service attended by King. It goes without saying that no one connected with Respect

had anything to do with these incidents.

In a campaign that went to the heart of the large Bengali community in the constituency and beyond, young Bengalis, in particular, flocked to Respect in droves. But it also attracted other anti-war votes in the area as was apparent from the people who we spoke to when out campaigning.

Three other results in East London were also of breakthrough proportions. In West Ham Lindsey German won 20.7%, coming second to Labour. In East Ham Abdul Khaliq Mian won 19.5%, also coming second. Oliur Rahman won 17.2% in Poplar and Canning Town, coming third.

Salma Yaqoob's result in the Birmingham constituency of Sparkbrook and Small Heath was no less spectacular. She won a huge 27.5% of the vote, coming second to Labour and only 3000 votes short of winning. Five other Respect candidates broke the 5% barrier to save their deposits, not easy for left of Labour candidates.

Respect also came under attack from the fundamentalists. Galloway was targeted by a small group from a relatively unknown organisation called al-Ghuraaba. The group invaded a local public meeting and locked the doors behind them, proceeding to issue serious threats against Galloway. Another less serious disruption from the same organisation took place at a subsequent Respect public meeting in the town of Luton. Salma Yaqoob also faced harassment and death threats from similar sources. Others concentrated on arguing that it is un-Islamic to vote at all.

These attacks demonstrate that Respect does not only pose a challenge to the warmongers of New Labour. Fundamentalist groups are increasingly recognising that if young people from the Muslim communities become involved in radical politics through Respect they will radicalise on a whole series of questions. This will undercut the ability of these reactionary organisations to recruit and to appear as the unchallenged voice of these communities.

The anti-war sentiment in the electorate, however, did not spell automatic gains for the left. Respect also received some poor results and in Scotland the SSP lost ground against its 2001 performance. The plethora of candidacies to the left of Respect made no impact. The Socialist Party (a current from the former Militant Tendency), the most serious of them, got fewer votes than in 2001 including for their best-known candidates Dave Nellist and Ian Page.

The Greens also had a disappointing election. They improved on their 2001 result but not in line with the opportunities open to them. In their target seat of Brighton Pavilion they managed only third place. They suffered from the scandalous lack of profile the environment received in this election as well as the media's attitude to small parties.

Of the small right-wing parties the only one to make an advance was the BNP. They capitalised dangerously on the race card played by the Tories and on years of state racism against asylum seekers and migrants by New Labour and the Tories. Their best vote was 17% in Barking in East London where they came third. But they also got votes between 9% and 13% in at least five other seats. They came fourth in eighty-three seats. These developments have to be confronted by the left.

The vote for the right-wing anti-European UK Independence Party (UKIP) collapsed from their successes at the European elections, however, and the splinter from it, Veritas led by former TV personality, and MEP, Robert Kilroy-Silk failed to get off the ground. This was in part due to the fact that Howard ran a right-wing, demagogic campaign and the EU was kept off the agenda by the main parties.

The Respect results, in particular the election of George Galloway, represent an important challenge and a major

opportunity for rebuilding the left. Respect is here to stay and the conditions for building it are good.

In his acceptance speech George Galloway promised to lead militant local protests such as the defence of the local fire service. He also said that the campaign for the local elections starts the day after the general election.

This is the right approach. Respect has to broaden its support from its current strongholds to wider sections of the working class. It has to become the natural home for those who want to resist the forthcoming attacks by New Labour - which will come despite the smaller majority.

Respect has to become a campaigning organisation between elections, at both the national and local level. It has to strengthen its democratic structures and build local branches that have an attractive political life in their own right. It has to use its new authority to build stronger links with the trade union left, in particular those union leaders who continue to challenge the employers. The day after the election, left-winger Matt Wrack decisively won the General Secretary position of the fire-fighters union. This is a sign of the preparedness of some sections of the organised working class to fight the neo-liberal offensive.

Respect also needs to make new approaches to those sections of the left who are not yet part of it. If such an open approach is adopted Respect has the opportunity to become a major force on the left.

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[1] Single-round elections in 646 single-member constituencies in which the candidate with the highest number of votes wins the seat.

[2] In 1945, in the wake of the Soviet Union's massive war effort, the Communist Party's had its best result, when it contested 21 seats, won 102,780 votes, averaged 12.7%, and won two seats. One of Communist MPs, Phil Piratin, was elected for the same constituency as Galloway has won today - at that time a militant base of the Jewish migrant working class.