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Broad Parties

A reply to Alex Callinicos

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

Publication date: Thursday 9 December 2004

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Alex Callinicos's article "The European radical left tested electorally" reopens a number of important debates on the construction of broad parties in Europe - including Respect in England and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) in Scotland. Murray Smith in "The European elections and the Radical Left" deals well with Callinicos's controversial remarks about the SSP. My agreement with Murray's response allows me to concentrate on making some additional points in response to Alex Callinicos's views about the development of Respect and the role of the Socialist Alliance which preceded it.

I agree with both of them about the general significance of the June 10 election results in Britain and the emergence of Respect. The results were both a disaster for new Labour, the worst since 1918, and a breakthrough for the left. Respect's votes in a number of working class inner city areas were a qualitative advance on anything the British left has achieved in the past - with the exception of the SSP. George Galloway got 92,000 votes for the European Parliament in London. Lindsey German polled just short of 5% for London Mayor, and Respect got 20% of the vote in East London in the Greater London Assembly (GLA) elections. In Birmingham Respect averaged 7.4% and in Leicester 10%. The support Respect has won from what we can loosely call the "Muslim community", in its ethnically and culturally diverse forms, is a major step forward in itself.

Since the Callinicos and Smith articles were written Respect has notched up some additional impressive electoral scores. In the Leicester South and Birmingham Hodge Hill parliamentary bye-elections Respect polled 12.4% and 6.4% respectively. Soon after it had an outright win in a local council bye-election in Tower Hamlets. All these results add up to a dramatically better start for Respect than we could have predicted at its founding conference last January. It has found its place on the political map in a remarkably short period of time. So how can Respect's initial success be turned into a long-term gain for the left?

A balance sheet of the Socialist Alliance

Alex Callinicos is right to look at the lessons of the experience of the Socialist Alliance (SA). However, the conclusions he draws are seriously problematic. It is not just that he regards the SA as having been a failure, but he locates the problems it faced in the objective political conditions rather than in the questions of its own development or problems of the wider English left. He argues that the decay of the Labour Party had not reached the point where the construction of a left alternative to new Labour was on the agenda. He puts it this way:

"From a strategic point of view, a mass socialist party can only develop in Britain if it succeeds in breaking away substantial sections of Labour's base, which, despite its decay, still reaches deep into the working class organisations and communities. The point of the SA was to brigade together the sane elements of the far-left into a united front (of a new kind) that could directly appeal to, and win over significant forces from a Labourist background..."

Given that Labour held together, the SA found itself in some internal difficulty. Had substantial ex-Labour Party supporters joined, the SA would have had two poles, reformist and revolutionary."

I thought it was common ground with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) that the objective conditions for a new party to the left of Labour had matured by the mid-1990s, or at least by the time SWP joined the SA in late 1999. True the

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Labour Party did not split, but the bulk of its socialist and activist membership left in disgust; its voting base in its traditional areas collapsed; its local meetings became moribund and its annual conference was stripped of its powers and replaced by policy forums. Blairism was a new kind of Labour leadership more consciously determined to fundamentally change the class nature of the party.

Was the Socialist Alliance a failure? In fact the SA was by far the best initiative towards left unity in England prior to Respect. It failed to reach its potential, that is true. But this was due to political problems within the SA, and the wider left in England. It is hard, otherwise, to explain the success of the SSP in Scotland. It faced the same objective conditions as the SA faced in England - the rise of Blairism and a growing pool of people, including disaffected Labour supporters, open to a new political organisation - but it went well beyond what the SA was able to attain. The introduction of the Scottish Parliament was an important factor, but this does not explain the whole picture.

The SA got some good results in the May 2000 GLA elections and then in the June 2001 General Election. It did good work in the unions around the growing crisis of labour representation and the political fund, organising a major rank-and-file conference in March 2001. It had a good constitution, based on one-member-one-vote, that incorporated the far left organisations and gave maximum leverage to the individual non-aligned member. It also had a good manifesto that was, rightly, as Callinicos says, not a revolutionary programme but a radical left platform suitable for a pluralist socialist organisation. It provided valuable experience and also a springboard from which to launch Respect.

The SA faced, however, a much more difficult configuration of the left in England, than existed in Scotland. The Communist Party of Britain (CPB) stayed outside. There was the continued existence of the Socialist Party (SP), as a sizable organisation, which lurched increasingly towards a sectarian and unilateralist trajectory - despite its ritualistic propaganda about a new workers' party. The SP split from the SA at the constitutional conference in December 2001.

There was also a stronger presence of smaller, sectarian far-left groups in England than in Scotland, particularly the Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL), but also the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Workers Power (WP), which was capable of a much more constructive role, went off on a leftist binge, rejecting the idea of building broad parties at just the time when new possibilities were opening up.

Added to this was the dominant size of the SWP inside the SA - exacerbated by the departure of the SP - which Alex Callinicos refers to as a 'structural imbalance'. He is right: there was a structural imbalance. The SWP was the biggest asset the SA had and at the same time posed one of its trickiest problems. It was, however, to the credit of the SWP that it had taken the strategic decision to join the SA and back the building of a broad socialist alternative. We had serious left unity for the first time after decades of functioning as rival organisations.

The issue, therefore, is not whether there was a structural imbalance but whether it was a containable problem, to be resolved as soon as possible by the expansion of the SA, or whether it rendered the SA non-viable, despite its achievements. Alex Callinicos seems to suggest it did, arguing that the imbalance was due to the weakness of the SA's reformist pole. This would raise some serious problems about the future of Respect as I discuss below. He puts it this way:

"When we asserted ourselves, however democratically, we caused resentment. The SP and a few well known 'independents' cited 'SWP dominance' when they walked out of the Alliance. Usually they had their own reasons for leaving, but in truth the SWP did dominate the SA - not by intention, but by default, in the absence of a sufficiently strong pole from a reformist background."

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In fact there was such a pole or 'left Labour component' inside the SA. The SA had understood that success rested on its ability to attract ex-Labour Party members, and it had had some success, with members in the local branches and standing as candidates. Both Mike Marqusee and John Nicholson were leading members, as was Dave Church and a sizeable group of socialists from Walsall where some were ex-Labour councillors. Liz Davies resigned from the Labour Party (and its NEC) to become the national chair of the SA.

To have had more from the Labour tradition would have tempered the internal debates and improved the situation. But winning large numbers of ex-Labour Party members was not easy. They had broken with Labour by individual decision rather than by collective split. The decision to join something new, therefore, was also an individual process. Some were wary about joining an organisation with such a large far left component and/or dominated by the SWP. The integration of this left-Labour component was more or less a precondition to a further breakthrough on this front. In this the actions and attitude of the SWP was as crucial as the campaigning successes of the SA itself.

The point here is not to put all the problems of the SA at the door of the SWP - far from it. The SWP made important compromises in the cause of the unity of the SA, and engaged in debates it did not want to have. But the blunt fact is that there are things that only the dominant organisation can do. The SWP failed to convince a lot of individual activists that the decision-making processes of the SA were sufficiently separate from those of the SWP itself. The result was a growing resentment, not always based on fact, which became an increasing problem.

Alex Callinicos is right to say there was often resentment against the SWP even when it acted in a perfectly democratic way. There was also sectarianism towards the far left in general. He is wrong, however, to suggest that it was an unmanageable situation. It was always going to be difficult in an organisation embracing diverse traditions of the left and far left. It meant that the SWP had to be squeaky clean when it came to the democratic functioning of the SA, to ensure no credence could be given to false accusations. Unfortunately there were too many examples, particularly at a local level, of pre-emptive decision-making by the SWP, a tendency to regard democratic procedures as cumbersome or time-wasting.

In my view a perceived lack of democracy was responsible for more individual members flaking away from the SA than any other reason - particularly those who had a history of fighting for democracy in the unions or the Labour Party.

An example of this pre-emptive approach at national level was the SWP's response to 9/11 and the looming invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. The SA was by-passed and the rally which set up the Stop the War Coalition was called in the name of the SWP. Many of us on the SA Executive Committee thought the initiative should have come from the SA itself. The outcome would have been the same - a highly successful anti-war movement - but the distinction was important. It was symptomatic of a problem that when something important, other than an election, came up, the SA was set aside and the SWP took over. SWP leaders argued that only a revolutionary party could take such an initiative. But why? Why should the elected leadership of a broad alliance, acting as a party on a wide range of issues and developing collective experience, not be able to take such an initiative?

Behind this was the SWP's strategic view of the Alliance as a 'united front of a special kind'. This effectively saw the SA as a mainly electoral vehicle amongst several such united fronts the SWP were involved in such as Globalise Resistance and the Anti Nazi League. But the SA was not a united front: it was a political organisation with a rounded programme offering itself as a political alternative. This approach limited the SWP's commitment to the SA and caused it to counterpose the building of the SWP to the building of the SA, as, for example, on the anti-war demonstrations.

War on Iraq

The invasion of Iraq by the US and Britain in March 2003 created a renewed crisis for new Labour, accelerating the disenchantment amongst Labour's traditional supporters. We saw the biggest Parliamentary revolt of Labour MPs ever.

The scale of these new opportunities was clear in the elections in May 2003 - just after the fall of Baghdad - for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and some English local authorities. Labour lost control of traditional Labour councils such as Birmingham and Brighton. The Alliance won its first local councillor in Preston through drawing support from the Muslim community for its anti-war stance. The most spectacular gains were made by the SSP, which increased its representation in the Scottish Parliament from one to six.

The SA's AGM a few weeks later addressed this new situation and launched a new political initiative calling for something broader and more effective than the existing SA. Unfortunately the Communist Party of Britain, an important component of the Stop the War Coalition, and a potential supporter of a realignment, decided not to join but to stick to their line of 'reclaiming' Labour for the left. This strategy looked towards the trade union left, the so-called 'awkward squad' and the Campaign Group of Labour MPs.

However, George Galloway's expulsion from the Labour Party, in October 2003, opened the situation up. He promptly appealed for a new political coalition based on the unity forged in the anti-war movement. After a series of discussions and rallies around the country, Respect was launched in January 2004.

Launching and building Respect

It is clear that Respect is a major step forward from the SA. Its origins lie in the political situation created by the war and in the biggest anti-war movement ever seen in Britain. Although the conditions for a left alternative had existed for eight years or so, dramatic new opportunities have opened up. This gives Respect a resonance that the SA never had. The debate is now on its political character and how to build it.

Respect already has a bigger ex-Labour component than the SA achieved, for as well as the traditional Labour left, Respect has attracted many from the ethnic minority communities - the first time the left has managed to do this. Activists were strongly represented in the Respect candidates' lists and are evident in Respect meetings, with new people also coming forward. But its vote is much wider than this layer. George Galloway's expulsion for opposition to the war is the nearest thing we have had to a split in the Labour Party. With the stature and credibility of an ex-Labour MP he brings with him an important chunk of the left Labour tradition.

Does this mean that Respect has resolved the 'structural imbalance' suffered by the SA, as Alex Callinicos implies? Emphatically no! In fact the domination of the SWP inside Respect is no less than it was in the SA and no less of a potential problem. As a new and more viable organisation Respect is better placed to tackle this, but the problems posed in developing Respect are similar to those faced by the SA: strengthening its non-far left component; making it habitable for non-aligned members; making it an effective vehicle for left unity; bringing in parts of the left who are not yet convinced by it; making a breakthrough into the unions and gaining union affiliations.

It also means tackling this 'problem' of the dominant organisation - seeking to draw on the strengths of the SWP whilst avoiding the pitfalls. This has to be done by building confidence and trust in the course of day-to-day work and Respect's decision-making processes. There are already signs of pre-emptive decision-making at local level that set

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the alarm bells ringing. This is not just about the fears of individuals. We need to create the best conditions to bring new organisations into Respect. At the moment the only other organised groups within Respect are Socialist Resistance and the CPGB.

In the unions hostility to new Labour continues to grow, yet important left leaders hold back from embracing Respect, even those who are sceptical about the 'reclaim Labour' position. We need to think carefully about this. The gains made by the SA in the RMT and the CWU need to be consolidated. The FBU, which has just broken from Labour, needs to be won to Respect. We need to create the best possible conditions for the unions to transfer their allegiances to Respect as a political alternative to new Labour.

The SWP has a much bigger commitment to Respect than it had to the SA. This is reflected in the human, material and political resources it is prepared to put into it. More of the SWP's leadership is committed to Respect than was the case with the SA. SWP branches were clearly the driving force in the recent election campaigns. Respect has a profile in Socialist Worker that the SA never had. All this is a basis for building Respect more consistently than was the case with the SA. At the same time Respect has to develop politically. Out of necessity, it went into the June elections on a limited political platform and with embryonic organisational structures. But if it does not develop more comprehensive and collective politics, and its own distinct political activity, it will run into serious trouble.

Alex Callinicos' defence of the 'Respect model' suggests that the SWP leadership still regard Respect in the way it regarded the SA - as a 'united front of a special kind'. This is a big problem. If Respect is to develop and consolidate it needs to move towards becoming a party rather than a broad coalition. Only in this way can it develop the necessary collective political experience and internal life that will take it beyond being a collection of groupings and individuals. This will not happen immediately, but it needs to be the medium-term objective.

Already there seems to be a consensus that Respect should be a multi-tendency organisation with the political groups having the right of platform within it. This is very important and a rejection of the authoritarian model of Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (SLP). Respect has a clear socialist reference point (the 'S' is for Socialism) but puts forward its socialist and anti-capitalist ideas in a way which is consistent with its pluralist approach, the diversity of its membership, and its stage of development. It is crucial that it continues this way.

Respect has towards two thousand new members who were not in the SA. These new members will need, and will want, the democratic structures of a party in which they can participate and have their say. They will want local branch meetings with political discussions and debate. They were after all attracted to Respect on the basis of its politics and its stand against new Labour and the war. This is particularly the case with Respect members who are not members of an affiliated organisation and therefore have no other forum for such discussions. The October conference that will discuss the constitution, as well as political issues, will be a test of Respect's future viability.

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