

# Neither New Labour nor Gorgeous George: How One Old Trot Ended Up a Reluctant Green Voter on Super Thursday

**Dave Osler**

**B** RITISH POLITICS is changing, and the multiple elections held on so-called Super Thursday last June amply make the point. For probably the first time since the formation of the Labour Party, watching it take a pummelling at the polls was arguably the optimum outcome for socialists.

By undermining Blairism, both the Labour left and the Respect-centred non-Labour left have been presented with opportunities. Whether either is sufficiently tactically astute to grasp them is another matter.

It may seem paradoxical – nay, blasphemy itself – to tell Labour leftwingers that their interests are not best served by the highest possible Labour vote. But trust me, fellas. This might hurt, but it is for your own good.

Far too many Labour left comrades cling to the essentially patronising idea that there are millions of class-conscious but somehow slightly stupid reformist workers out there who have been duped into keeping a shrine to Clement Atlee in their spare bedroom.

The masses honestly believe that Labour will slowly expropriate capitalism through piecemeal parliamentary legislative measures. The task of revolutionaries, as the orthodox Trot jargon has it, is to go through the experience of Labour government with them.

Life just ain't like that anymore. Of course the majority of the working class still vote Labour. Of course Labour remains a bourgeois workers' party. But the average trade union activist pretty much takes for granted that Blairites are a bad lot. They don't vote Labour because they believe there is a parliamentary road to socialism. They vote Labour because they are not quite as bad as the Tories.

That's if they vote Labour at all. Electoral

participation is in long-term decline, and not all of the no shows are down to apathy. A significant minority of abstainers – particularly among the young – are effectively saying “none of the above”. It's game over for such traditional Trot slogans such as “class vote for Labour”.

All of this dovetails with a second factor, which was that none of the votes on Super Thursday actually mattered very much. UKIP US import spindoctor and former Clinton staffer Dick Morris made the following entirely accurate prediction about the euro-elections six months ahead of the event: “What's going to happen is that UKIP is going to rack up an amazing vote ... almost precisely because the European Parliament doesn't mean a whole hell of a lot. It will be a symbolic vote for a symbolic body for a symbolic party.”

Super Thursday was a glorified opinion poll that, whatever the outcome, was never going to change anything essential about British politics. Or put it another way. Does any Londoner reading this frankly give tuppence whether Claude Moraes or Mary Honeyball are euro-MPs or not? Does it make any difference whatsoever to the class struggle, one way or the other, whether such braindead Blairite nonentities get into an essentially impotent body that is in any case saddled with a permanent large centre-right majority? To ask such questions is to answer them.

Come to that, how much of a tribune of the oppressed could Respect candidates such as Gorgeous George expect to prove in Strasbourg's heated debates over the latest European Commission widget manufacturing standards directive? You can just imagine the television interviews now, can't you? And now we hand you over to John Rees MEP, who explains the Leninist line on banana curvature ...

The London mayor and Assembly contests were also fights over essentially administrative positions of pretty limited power. True, many of Livingstone's supporters went into politics ardent for world revolution. Trouble is, they are now reduced to arguing that congestion charging is a pretty close second.

Labour Party comrades campaigned for Livingstone, while even Respect urged a second preference for Red Ken. Less than a fortnight later, comrade mayor was urging RMT members to cross picket lines. Bloody brilliant. Class vote for Labour, right?

The Labour London Assembly candidates were a pretty uninspiring bunch, even though individuals such as Lucy Anderson made a few token squeaks in the right direction.

When it comes to the local government contests outside London, things have clearly changed since the early eighties glory days that municipal socialism shared with Duran Duran. Councils are powerless to enact even localised progressive agendas. Their main role is to vote on which private company gets the contract to empty the bins. It is pretty far-fetched to describe Britain's town halls as sites of struggle. Come back dented shield, all is forgiven.

Does it matter whether it is New Labour, the Lib-Dems or the Tories that are creaming off inflated attendance allowances while overseeing cutbacks in local swimming pools and slashing library opening hours? Maybe there should be a political congestion charge for parties that clog up the centre-right of British politics.

Not only that, some Labour local authorities have a certain whiff of Tammany Hall about them. While I am no expert on Tyneside local politics, it's a fair bet that the whatever damage the change of administration in Newcastle has done to the machine politics employed by certain trade unions in the North East, it hasn't done municipal transparency in general any harm.

So if the "vote Labour with no illusions" guidelines of the past no longer apply, how should socialists work out which way to vote? These days, party label is no longer sufficient basis for an automatic decision. It is important to factor in a candidate's personal political track record and the political programme she is standing on before coming to a decision.

On the mayoral ballot, I voted Independent Working Class Association, safe in the knowledge that Lorna Reid would be one of the first candidates to have her votes redistributed and that my vote would then pass on to Livingstone. In the euros and the assembly votes, I backed the Greens as a vote for a semi-coherent left reformist platform. Note to my sectarian critics: I didn't "call on" anybody else to do likewise. Those were personal

choices.

True, there is nothing inherently socialist about Green ideology. But the Greens – in the UK, at any rate – are unmistakably an anti-establishment party. They opposed the invasion of Iraq. They are anti-racist and anti-homophobic. They reject the current laws on immigration, trade unions and cannabis.

Read the section on employment rights on their website. They have detailed policies on the issue politically far in advance of anything of the "repeal the Tory anti-union laws" approach of the far left, instead setting out a series of positive demands. It comes to something when a party derided as petty bourgeois is well ahead of the self-appointed proletarian vanguard on something as basic as trade union issues.

As for Respect, I have to confess that when I first heard about the idea of an SWP/Scottish Tankie/Taliban Lite bloc, I was almost tempted to back it. My reaction was hey, this is so opportunist it might even work. It almost did. In London as a whole, and in some other cities, the vote was better than I expected.

But the key question is not so much the vote achieved, but the means used to achieve it. Respect literature identified the party as "the party for Muslims", and its Muslim support was won on that basis.

There's no indication that in voting Respect, this layer consciously identified with socialist or class struggle politics. Indeed, like all good politicians, Respect seemed indifferent about their reasons they secured the backing they did. After all, a vote is a vote is a vote.

Incidentally, surely Marxists have a problem passing themselves off as "the party for Muslims". What Muslims? All Muslims? The 5,400 Muslim millionaires in this country, many of whom made their pile by exploiting other Muslims? The party for Mohammed al Fayed? The party for Sir Anwar Pervez?

Outside what might be dubbed its heartland vote, Respect's performance was abysmal. Its vote in Lambeth was down on the Socialist Alliance's 2000 tally. In Hackney, an impressive-sounding percentage disguises the fact that there are 4,000 hardcore hard left votes, as previously seen in the 2001 general election and Paul Foot's subsequent run for mayor. In Camden, the far left was once again slugging it out with such candidates as the felicitously-named Humberto Heliotrope of the Christian People's Alliance for fifth place out of six.

Nationwide levels of support – averaging 1.7% – were on a par with the bedrock far left vote, given that between 1-2% of adults regularly tell opinion pollsters that they are revolutionary socialists. What was gained on the Muslim roundabouts was

largely lost on the socialist swings.

Remember all those speeches about Respect getting a million votes? Remember the inflection in the voices of comrades Galloway and Rees, implying that this target erred on the side of caution? Remember the categorical statements that Respect would secure not just one MEP, but several?

In the event, just 250,000 backed Respect. Such a total would not be beyond what an organised and united far left party, campaigning consistently in the working class, could have achieved. Yet the following week's *Socialist Worker* was ridiculously complacent. Those quarter of a million votes were hailed as a triumph for Respect, while the more than 800,000 votes for the BNP were derided as a setback for the fascists.

There are plenty of other problems with Respect, too. It's difficult even to conceive of anything that could fairly be described as a step backwards from the Socialist Alliance. But this surely is it.

The whole manoeuvre was arrogantly hatched in secrecy between Galloway and the SWP leadership, without consultations on the wider left. Hardly surprising that – with only a handful of

arguable exceptions – Respect has little support in the labour movement, even from the awkward squad.

Candidates for the most favourable electoral terrain are routinely announced well in advance of the selection meetings. Even New Labour goes through the formalities of organising some sort of process before coming up with a spurious reason to keep Mark Seddon off a by-election shortlist.

Respect supporters will argue that there has simply been no time to put democratic structures in place. OK, it's early days and there is such a thing as the benefit of the doubt. But so far the talk has been of ditching boring old branch meetings in favour of picnics. You might call it the egg and watercress sarnie road to socialism.

Given the way the slightest difference from SWP/Galloway orthodoxy within Respect has so far been marginalised, I don't see much likelihood of evolution in a pluralist direction, along the lines of the Scottish Socialist Party. But if only for the sake of certain former comrades of mine, I hope Respect goes easier on dissenting voices than Galloway's financial supporters in the Saudi monarchy. ■

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