

Respect Coalition: No Joke

Martin Sullivan

ONE OF the consistent features of the far left is its inability to subject its own activities to any kind of honest political assessment. Whenever the Socialist Workers Party announces the size of a demonstration it has had a hand in organising, you can pretty well guarantee that the figure given will be approximately double the number of actual participants. Election results, of course, present a greater challenge – the figures are there in black and white and can't be fiddled. Even here, though, the SWP does its best to avoid any serious engagement with reality. Electoral defeats are invariably presented as major political advances and limited gains as stunning victories, all with a cynical disregard for objective truth that would excite the envy and admiration of the most hardened New Labour spin doctor.

In the Super Thursday elections on 10 June “Respect – The Unity Coalition (George Galloway)”, to give it its full title, stood for the European Parliament and the Greater London Authority, plus a handful of council seats. Its hopes were high. In a rousing speech to an eve-of-poll rally at Friends Meeting House in London, which was received with enthusiastic applause, Galloway predicted major gains for his new organisation. “We are going to get a result tomorrow that will see Lindsey German elected to the London Assembly”, the former Labour MP told the audience. “We will see other Respect candidates from around the country elected to the European Parliament.”

All that applause must have gone to George's head. As it turned out, in the European parliamentary elections the least worst result for Respect was in London where Galloway himself headed their list, but the 91,000 votes they received were a good 64,000 short of the figure needed to send George off to the fleshpots of Brussels. As for the GLA elections, Respect failed even to clear the 5% hurdle necessary to get leading SWPer Lindsey German onto the Assembly, while her mayoral candidacy attracted support from a mere 3% of Londoners. Not a single Respect candidate was elected anywhere.

Did Respect's leaders make any attempt to analyse their failure to estimate accurately the level

of electoral support they could expect? Is the Pope a Protestant? Predictably, they declared that Respect had achieved a “tremendous result” in the European and GLA elections, as a consequence of which it had “established itself on the political map”. Galloway himself hailed the Euro results in particular as “a very considerable triumph”. Given that Respect's share of the poll across England and Wales amounted to a derisory 1.7%, you wonder how low their vote would have had to be for Galloway to categorise it as a disaster.

Respect followed up its “tremendous result” on 10 June by contesting two parliamentary by-elections in July – in Birmingham Hodge Hill, where the SWP's John Rees received 1,282 votes (6.3%), and in Leicester South, where journalist, former Taliban captive and Muslim convert Yvonne Ridley got 3,724 (12.7%). The latter result, it must be said, was not too bad, although the anti-war, anti-Blair vote that Respect hoped to attract went mainly to the Liberal Democrats, who won with 10,274 votes (34.9%) in what had previously been a safe Labour seat.

Their by-election results were acclaimed by Respect as “spectacular and unprecedented votes”, which supposedly demonstrated “the sea change which is happening in British politics” and marked a “break through” for the Coalition. A week later when Respect candidate Oliur Rahman actually won a council by-election in Tower Hamlets, the Coalition leadership must have been left frantically leafing through their thesaurus in order to come up with new superlatives. They settled on “a quite incredible result”.

In point of fact, Rees's vote in Birmingham was not much better than the results achieved by the earlier SWP-dominated electoral front, the Socialist Alliance, when it first contested parliamentary by-elections four years ago. In April 2000 Weyman Bennett stood in Bernie Grant's former seat in Tottenham and got 885 votes (5.4%), while in the Preston by-election in November that followed the death of Audrey Wise the Alliance polled 1,210 (5.6%). As for Yvonne Ridley's result, it was almost identical to that achieved by Paul Foot when he contested the mayoral election in Hackney in 2002 as a Socialist Alliance candidate, receiving 4,187

votes (12.7%). Even Oliur Rahman's victory was no more than a repeat of that by Paul Lavalette, elected to Preston council on a Socialist Alliance ticket in 2003.

It would be easy to mock – and I haven't hesitated to do so. But the overblown, self-congratulatory rhetoric of Respect's leadership does contain a kernel of truth. A serious examination of the June election results reveals that there are in fact a few pockets of substantial support for Respect. These are to be found in East London, in a few wards in Birmingham and also in Preston, where the five Respect candidates who stood for the council failed to get elected but received between 24% and 34% of the poll. The common element is that these areas have a high proportion of Muslim voters.

To that extent, Respect is not – as I argued rather one-sidedly in the last *What Next?* – a simple re-run of the Socialist Labour Party and the Socialist Alliance. Whereas those organisations based themselves on a moralistic denunciation of the iniquities of New Labour rather than on any actually existing social forces, there is a material foundation – if a very limited one – to Respect's electoral challenge, namely the significant number of British Muslims who are understandably disaffected with Labour as a result of the Iraq war.

But there are many other wards and constituencies with a similar demographic profile to East London, Birmingham and Preston where Respect has polled less well and the beneficiaries of Muslims' rejection of Labour candidates have been the Liberal Democrats. A recent *Guardian* poll revealed, interestingly, that only 4% of British Muslims intended to vote Respect, compared with 41% for the Lib Dems and 32% for Labour, demonstrating that there is no spontaneous mass gravitation of Muslims towards Galloway and his friends. A large Muslim electorate is therefore a necessary but not a sufficient condition for Respect to succeed. What is required, in addition, is an organisation with influence in the community – specifically, a local mosque – which can ensure that the vote is mobilised behind Respect rather than behind some other party.

There are, evidently, few areas in the country where this situation obtains. And that is the basic flaw in Respect's approach. By these methods the SWP and its allies may gain a handful of council seats, and could even conceivably get Galloway elected in Bethnal Green & Bow when he challenges Oona King in the general election – but it's hardly a strategy for replacing Labour on anything but a very limited and localised basis. Contrary to the claims of the Respect leaders, it provides no perspective for building a broad-based political alternative to the Labour Party at national level.

The Hartlepool by-election in September was very much a test of Respect's wider appeal, because Muslims comprise only 0.4% of the electorate there.

Galloway was quoted as saying that "Respect gained 13% of the vote in Leicester South, and we are confident of doing much better in Hartlepool". At the campaign's launch meeting on 18 August, Respect candidate John Bloom went even further, declaring that "we are in with a fighting chance of winning.... I can hear David Dimbleby's words on election night in my head: 'New Labour – born in Islington, died in Iraq, buried tonight in Hartlepool'." Which only goes to show that it's never a good idea to listen to voices in your head. To suggest that Respect had a chance of winning, or even getting 13% of the vote, was to lose all contact with reality. In the European elections the Coalition had gained precisely 266 votes in Hartlepool – 1.04% of the poll. Predictably, they did little better in the by-election. Bloom finished fifth with 572 votes, representing a mere 1.8% of the poll. Though Labour held the seat, its vote slumped by 18.5%, with the Lib Dems gaining 19.2%.

Respect's own sober assessment of the result was that "Respect and its candidate John Bloom did exceptionally well. We gained a clear fifth place and established Respect as the largest and best organised left challenge to the establishment, gaining well over twice the vote for the Green candidate.... the Hartlepool by-election shows we are well-placed to grow in the forthcoming weeks and months." Contributors to the UK Left Network discussion list initially mistook this report for a clever parody.

In his less bombastic moments (not that there are many of them), Galloway is apparently prepared to recognise that Respect's prospects are somewhat limited. With regard to the next general election, the Coalition's official line is that there is "an enormous potential for Respect to emerge as a very serious challenger to New Labour from the left". Galloway, though, seems to have set his sights rather lower. He has stated that Respect intends to stand between 25 and 100 candidates in the general election, but not with the central aim of actually winning seats. As he explained to BBC News Online: "We will stand against New Labour MPs who supported the war. We will split their vote and we'll cost them their seat and we are determined to do that."

So that's what it all amounts to in the end. Behind all the talk of breakthroughs and sea changes in British politics and building a mass party to challenge New Labour, in reality Respect's general election strategy boils down to defeating Labour candidates by handing victories to Tories and Lib Dems. It would be difficult to imagine a more conclusive admission of political bankruptcy. In that sense at least, the Respect Coalition is no joke.

Published in an earlier and edited version in *Chartist*, September-October 2004