

'British Politics at the Crossroads'? Prospects for the 'Respect' Coalition

Bob Pitt

SO, BASICALLY, George Galloway got what he wanted. Throughout the campaign against the Iraq war he had turned up at Labour left meetings telling us that it was a waste of time remaining in a party controlled by Tony Blair, that there was no possibility of ever winning the internal political struggle against New Labour and that the left had to set its sights on the formation of a new workers' party.

The logic of that position, you might have thought, would have been for Galloway to do as Arthur Scargill had done before him and resign from the Labour Party in order to set about building the new party he wanted. But he was sufficiently politically astute to realise that just walking out wouldn't win him much sympathy. Much better, he must have reasoned, to remain inside the Labour Party for the time being, in the hope that his intransigent anti-imperialist stance would provoke the control freaks in the New Labour apparatus into throwing him out. That way he could claim he was a victim of Blairite repression, driven from the party he loved for speaking his mind. Happily for George, the control freaks were only too willing to oblige. In May, the Labour Party's then general secretary David Triesman announced Galloway's suspension, and on 22 October the party's National Constitutional Committee, having gone through the formality of holding a brief kangaroo court, declared that Galloway had been expelled from the party.

It seems that Galloway initially toyed with the idea of resigning as MP for his Glasgow Kelvin constituency, forcing a by-election and standing as an independent on the basis of his political record. But he rejected this option, no doubt calculating that he stood a poor chance of winning. For all his assertions that Labour had ceased to be a party of the working class, he was evidently realistic enough to understand that large numbers of working people would support the official Labour candidate, splitting the vote and perhaps

handing victory to the Scottish National Party.

In addition, talks with his constituency party over the weekend following his expulsion revealed that its officers, while opposed to their MP's victimisation, rejected his view that nothing further could be done in the Labour Party, and balked at supporting an independent candidacy and getting themselves expelled as well. Kelvin CLP restricted itself to issuing a statement announcing that they would campaign for the overturn of Galloway's expulsion. This, however, was knocked firmly on the head by George himself when he appeared at a political rally at Friends Meeting House in London on 29 October to announce that he was intending to stand in next year's elections to the European Parliament, probably in London, as part of what he described as a new "popular unity movement which unites the different strands of the left, trade unionists, anti-war activists, British Muslims and other faith communities". Subsequent discussions, mainly between Galloway and the Socialist Workers Party, have come up with the name "Respect" (R for respect, E for equality, S for socialism, P for peace, E for environmentalism, C for community and T for trade unionism) for the new coalition.

Alongside Galloway on the platform at the 29 October rally, which was effectively the launch meeting for this new electoral alliance, were Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT rail union, film director Ken Loach, author and *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot, SWP leader John Rees, Linda Smith of the Fire Brigades Union and Birmingham Stop the War Coalition chair Salma Yaqoob. The meeting was advertised under the slogan "British Politics at the Crossroads", and the contributions by the main speakers and the general atmosphere of the meeting shared this hyped-up view of the political prospects for the new alliance. *Socialist Worker* could scarcely contain itself:

"As people filled the hall ... there was a buzz of excitement in the air, a sense that it was to be a

more than ordinary meeting. Veterans of left wing movements were there, alongside many activists brought into politics for the first time through the great stop the war movement. Students from schools and colleges enthusiastically scrambled to find good vantage points. Also there were trade union delegations – council workers, rail workers, teachers and many more – all hoping the evening would answer their hopes. Every speaker was listened to intently. At the midpoint of the evening the already electric atmosphere flared to new heights when a delegation of striking postal workers was introduced. The surge of applause brought people to their feet across the hall. By the end of the meeting the feeling was clear, with a shared sense that an important milestone had been reached, that the job of building an alternative to New Labour had taken a real step forward.”

Of course, there were a few sceptics present at the meeting – this writer for one – who experienced the weary feeling that we had seen it all before, having sat through almost identical rallies organised first by the Socialist Labour Party and then by the Socialist Alliance. There we had heard the same emotional denunciations of Blairism, at the expense of any objective assessment of the relationship of forces within the labour movement or the level of political consciousness among working people, and the same confident but baseless predictions that the new political formation would attract widespread popular support. Both these previous attempts at launching an electoral alternative to Labour were dismal failures. But instead of facing reality and drawing the necessary political conclusions, the anti-Labour left seems intent on going through the same pointless exercise over and over again, each time in an only marginally different form. By the end of the Friends House rally I was beginning to feel as though I was trapped in far left version of *Groundhog Day*. George Santayana’s observation that those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it had never seemed more apposite.

What evidence is there that the Respect coalition will fare any better electorally than its predecessors? The decisive factor here, according to the coalition’s supporters, is the alleged transformation of British politics resulting from the mass protests against the Iraq war. This has supposedly created a crisis of representation which only George Galloway and his far left allies can fill. Their perspective is summarised in a ‘Declaration for a Left Electoral Challenge to New Labour’, reportedly drawn up by Galloway and Rees and published in the 13 December issue of *Socialist Worker*, which will be presented to the Respect coalition’s national convention on 25 January:

“The greatest mass movement of our age has brought us together. We have marched in unprecedented numbers against war, against racism and in defence of democracy and civil liberties. Our

views are shared by millions, often a majority of the people in this country. Yet no establishment politician, and very few elected representatives of any kind, will lend their voice to this movement.”

There are a number of obvious flaws in this political analysis. It exaggerates the extent and depth of anti-war sentiment, makes the unwarranted assumption that opposition to the Iraq war and its consequences is identifiable with support for a wider socialist political programme, and generally misjudges the potential for harnessing the anti-war movement to a leftist electoral challenge to the Labour Party.

A realistic assessment of the level of public opposition to the Iraq war would, I think, be that only some 25-30% were against the war in principle. It is true that in the immediate pre-war period nearly four-fifths of the population were opposed to an attack on Iraq without a second UN resolution, but most of this opposition was very soft and quickly crumbled once the war began and the lives of British soldiers were at risk. After the fall of Baghdad, support for the war rose as high as 63%, though this declined sharply once the realities of the occupation became clearer. However, a *Guardian*/ICM poll conducted on the eve of George Bush’s state visit in November found that only 41% disagreed with the invasion of Iraq while 47% felt that it had been justified.

The same poll revealed that 43% welcomed Bush’s arrival in Britain, as against 36% who said they would prefer he did not come. Given the limited extent of hard anti-war sentiment, this was more or less what you would expect, yet the SWP and its allies in the Stop the War Coalition leadership, who had been blithely declaring that they spoke for the majority in condemning Bush’s visit, expressed outrage at the poll. In media interviews StWC representatives indignantly asserted that the result was a fix and stuck to their claims that they had the majority of the British people on their side, pointing to a Populus poll the previous week which had found that most people believed that Blair was too close to the Bush government – which of course was not the same thing at all.

Whereas Lenin advocated that socialists should “*soberly follow the actual state of the class-consciousness ... of all the working people (not only of their advanced elements)*”, his self-styled followers in the SWP concentrate exclusively on the consciousness of the politically advanced minority of the population, pretend to themselves that this represents the views of the majority, and then throw a wobbler when their self-delusion is exposed for what it is.

The same false method underpins the Respect coalition leaders’ claim that opposition to the war necessarily represented support for a wider left-wing programme. One of the more fatuous examples of this was Ken Loach’s statement at the

29 October rally concerning the huge anti-war demonstration the previous February: "I got the sense that on that two million march there was a consensus against war and for a whole new left agenda." What evidence he had for this he didn't tell us. Perhaps Ken enjoyed some sort of telepathic bond with the demonstrators. Short of that, however, we can only assume that he was merely illustrating another familiar characteristic of the far left – a tendency to mistake their own subjective emotions for the consciousness of the masses.

Even accepting the point that the Blair government's policies, foreign and domestic, have alienated many of the Labour Party's core supporters, it doesn't follow that these voters will express their disillusionment by turning to a left alliance featuring the SWP. It is more likely that they will protest by voting for the Liberal Democrats or even the BNP. The Lib Dems have for purely opportunistic reasons positioned themselves to the left of New Labour on issues like the Iraq war, top-up fees for students, foundation hospitals etc. And, as we know, there are pockets of white working class Labour voters who, believing that the Blair government has turned its back on them, are prepared to transfer their political allegiance to a fascist party campaigning on a racist programme. There is no reason to suppose that any but a very small proportion of these disaffected voters will be drawn to the Respect coalition.

As evidence to the contrary, Respect supporters will point to the example of the Scottish Socialist Party, which won six seats in the 2003 elections to the Scottish parliament. They will claim that the SSP's success proves that a socialist alternative to Labour can be electorally popular and that the SSP provides a model for left politics in England and Wales. But this argument conveniently ignores the process by which the SSP arose and fails to ask whether it can be successfully reproduced elsewhere in Britain.

The SSP has its origins in a de facto split in the Glasgow Labour Party, after Tommy Sheridan and others were expelled for organising resistance to the Poll Tax. This won Sheridan considerable sympathy among traditional Labour voters, allowing him to stand successfully for the Scottish parliament in 1999, which further raised his profile, and other candidates were then able to piggy-back on his political popularity four years later. The SSP thus essentially represents the same localised phenomenon that has also been seen in Coventry around Dave Nellist and in Lewisham around Ian Page, if on a smaller scale there than in Scotland (where the SSP's position on national question has undoubtedly been an additional factor).

It is difficult to see how the SSP's success can be emulated in England and Wales by the Respect coalition. Galloway's victimisation by the Labour Party apparatus would no doubt have won him support if he had decided to contest the European

parliamentary elections in Glasgow, but he has rejected this, not least because he would have to stand on the SSP list and if elected would be required to accept the average wage of a skilled worker. As Galloway famously declared, he'd find it impossible to live on the average wages of *three* skilled workers! The sympathy vote he might have attracted in Scotland will be much reduced if he stands as part of a Respect list for the European elections in London.

Unlike his partners in the SWP leadership, Galloway does enjoy a political profile at national level, but even that cuts both ways. In contrast to Sheridan's stand against the Poll Tax, which enjoyed wide support among the electorate, Galloway's hardline anti-imperialism – which has involved publicly congratulating Saddam Hussein for his "courage", and supporting the Iraqi resistance fighters who have been killing US and British troops – represents the views of only a tiny fraction of those who took to the streets to protest against the Iraq war.

Consideration of the "SSP model" also begs the question whether the SSP's example is worthy of emulation anyway. Elections to the Scottish parliament are conducted under proportional representation, and the Scottish Socialist MSPs were all elected on the regional lists. In the first-past-the-post constituencies (with the exception of the Lib Dem stronghold of Orkney) the SSP finished well behind Labour, underlining the point that the Labour Party remains the mass party of working people in Scotland. It is also the party to which the trade unions remain affiliated, and the RMT is the only union that has changed its rules to allow official support for SSP candidates. There is no prospect of any major union in Scotland affiliating to the SSP in the foreseeable future.

This situation obviously requires a united front approach towards Labour, but that is something the SSP has emphatically rejected. Ironically, Galloway himself has been a victim of the SSP's mindless sectarianism towards the Labour Party, as for example when he and his supporters were greeted by Sheridan's comrades with cries of "Tories!" and mock fascist salutes during the 2001 general election campaign (see Galloway's account, quoted in "The General Election and After", *What Next?* No.20). All the evidence so far – for example at a recent "Convention of the Left in Camden", where SWP speakers argued that there was no longer any difference between the Labour and Tory parties – suggests that the Respect coalition will imitate the SSP's stupid Third Periodism without succeeding in repeating its limited electoral gains.

It is also questionable whether the Respect coalition will even hold together for long, given the widely different politics of its components. So far, Bob Crow is the only leading trade unionist to have shown any commitment to the coalition, but he advocates a pick'n'mix approach whereby the

RMT would back any candidate prepared to support the union's stand on transport policy and trade union rights. So, in Scotland, Crow supports the SSP, while in Wales he has soft spot for Plaid Cymru. For the London Assembly elections next June the RMT executive has agreed to back the Labour candidate in the Barnet & Camden seat. Yet Galloway has announced that the coalition plans to "run a full slate of candidates" for the Assembly (*Guardian*, 30 October), which would inevitably bring them into conflict with the RMT.

Policy issues are likely to be no less divisive than electoral tactics. Respect candidates standing for the European parliament will obviously need to have a common position on the euro. Indeed, the Galloway-Rees 'Declaration for a Left Electoral Challenge to New Labour' commits the coalition to "vote 'no' in any referendum on this issue". It is difficult to see how their position can be reconciled with that of Monbiot, who has drawn an entirely contradictory conclusion from the campaign against US imperialism: "To defend our sovereignty – and that of the rest of the world – from the US, we must yield some of our sovereignty

to Europe. That we have a moral duty to contest the developing power of the United States is surely evident. That we can contest it by no other means is equally obvious. Those of us who are concerned about American power must abandon our opposition to the euro" (*Guardian*, 22 April).

Marxism is, of course, a science of perspective rather than a source of exact predictions (I find this argument comes in handy every time my predictions fail to pan out). However, if I were to hazard a guess as to future developments, I would expect that the Respect coalition will soon fragment, shedding most of its more prominent supporters except for Galloway, and will be reduced to an SWP-dominated rump not much broader than the Socialist Alliance. It will fail to get any candidates elected next June, and will conduct its electoral campaign in such a sectarian manner as to permanently discredit it throughout the labour movement. One might hope that the Respect leaders will learn from the experience and reassess their political methods. But that would be to enter a world of political fantasy as remote from reality as the one the Respect leaders themselves inhabit. ■

Al Richardson (1941-2003)

AL RICHARDSON, editor of *Revolutionary History*, died in his sleep in London on 21 November 2003. Death had come like a thief by night and cut off a useful life. He was 62 and was a lecturer in a senior school. He joined the left movement in Britain as a young man.

Two decades ago, as stated in the preface to *The War and the International*, the book he co-authored with Sam Bornstein, he discovered the need for a history of Trotskyism in Britain, as there was a paucity of such material available. He also recalled that the Marxist pioneers themselves realised long before he did the difficulties of trying to influence socialists by writing books.

Beginning a decade ago, a history of Trotskyism in India was published by *Revolutionary History* detailing the role played by the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India, of which the most important unit was the Lanka Sama Samaja Party. Since then numerous volumes have been published, covering the Trotskyist movement across the world, from Bolivia to Poland and Belgium, and from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to Vietnam.

Blows Against the Empire. Trotskyism in Ceylon: The LSSP 1935-1964 (Volume 6, No.4) appeared in 1998. A lengthy review with the caption "The Golden Afternoon of the LSSP" appeared in the *Sunday Observer* (Sri Lanka). The reviewer called it "a labour of revolutionary love". The book contained not only favourable accounts of the LSSP but also criticisms as well. One such criticism was

that the foray to India under the BLPI flag was an adventure.

Recently a documentary history of Vietnamese Trotskyism titled *The Revolution Defamed*, edited and annotated by Al Richardson, was published by Socialist Platform. In the foreword he stated: "The real history of Vietnam's revolutionary movement has always been surrounded by a fog of ignorance in English-speaking circles, some of it the fault of the Trotskyists themselves. In spite of the appearance of an entire issue of *Revolutionary History* devoted to it in 1990 (Volume 3, No.2) and Ngo Van's *Revolutionaries They Could not Break* in 1995, it could still be claimed as late as 1998 that 'a noteworthy Trotskyist movement' did not exist in Indo China." (He cites Y. Ranjith Amarasinghe's assertion in his study of Trotskyism in Sri Lanka, *Revolutionary Idealism and Parliamentary Politics*, p.240.)

The Revolution Defamed, Richardson continues, affirms the credentials of Vietnamese working-class revolutionaries as internationalists as well as showing the link between their activities in Vietnam and in the emigration, and establishes once and for all the responsibility of Ho Chi Minh for destroying this splendid movement.

There is no doubt that the editorial board of *Revolutionary History* will continue the good work begun and carried on with devotion by Al Richardson.

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