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Britain

New Labour: a government with no mandate

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By the kind permission of Britain's grossly undemocratic electoral system new Labour won a 'landslide victory' in the general election. This bizarre result was achieved with the support of just 42% of those who voted and a mere 25% of those entitled to vote. Labour's vote went down by nearly 3 million from the 1997 election.

The turnout was 59%, the lowest since 1918 with a huge 41% of those on the electoral register abstaining from voting. There are many others, not on the electoral register, who do not even appear in the statistics. A disproportionate number of these are young and black and poor.

Less than one in five of the population of voting age voted for new Labour in this election.

Some 'landslide' then! By any rational view Blair does not have a mandate to do anything, not even form a government, but in terms of the British electoral system he is the most powerful Prime Minister since Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. The result was also achieved by shifting the electoral base of the Labour Party towards middle England. Blair was elected with fewer votes from the working class and more from the middle class than any previous Labour government. The biggest abstention was from the traditional Labour strongholds.

The Evening Standard of June 14 has shown graphically how this was reflected in London:

"Over the last 10 years, Labour's popularity has grown sharply among suburban middle class voters. This is the main reason why it holds seats it never did before. However, last week's vote contains a message that should terrify Tony Blair. He has lost hundreds of thousands of Labour's traditional supporters in the capital's poorest inner-city seats".

The article goes on to list ten traditional Tory seats where the Labour support has gone up massively and ten traditional Labour seats where Labour's support has fallen dramatically. The traditional Tory seats include Harrow West where Labour's percentage support across the electorate has gone up from 17.7 % in 1992 to 31.5% today. In Enfield Southgate, won dramatically by Stephen Twigg for New Labour against Portillo in 1997, Labour's level of support was 20% in 1992 and 32% in 2001, while in Tory held Brent North it has shifted from 23% to 34% over the same period.

As far as traditional Labour seats go, the article points out that in the East London seat of Bethnal Green and Bow, Labour's support has fallen from 36.5% in 1992 to 24.5 today. In Chris Smith's seat of Islington South and Finsbury Labour's support shrank from 36.5 % of the electorate in 1992 to 24.5% today. And in Lewisham Deptford it has dropped from 40% to 30%. Changes of this kind are replicated across the country.

The result is a government of the centre, based on a huge middle class vote - which had been Blair's aim since he was elected leader - and increasingly representing the mainstream of British capital.

It is a 'big tent' which has colonised the so-called 'centre ground' of British politics, driven the Tories from it, and sent them into near melt-down. Blair has stolen the Tory mantle of being the main party of big business.

The Tories could hardly be in a worse situation. William Hague has resigned as leader, and the leadership contest, which is already under way, is wracked by historic divisions over the EU. Blair had little real opposition in the last

parliament: but he will have far less in this one.

Blair, of course, claims that the election has given him a massive mandate for change. This means the second term is going to be far more reactionary than the first. New Labour represents the radical rightist edge of European Social Democracy and is the clearest exponent of the neo-liberal global project. Blair has already made it clear that he will push the neo-liberal agenda of global capitalism forward with even greater vigour this time. And the new attack on the public sector, which is planned, is already being spelled out in some detail. The private sector is to be brought directly into the management of hospitals. The other major services - health, education, transport and housing - are to be restructured as well with, as Blair puts it, 'no ideological constraints'.

All this will, of course, be totally ideologically driven - and the ideology is that of 'the market'. The result will be a massive new round of privatisation and deregulation. At the same time the shifting of the hard-liner David Blunket to the Home Office will ensure the victimisation and scapegoating of asylum seekers will continue and increase. So state racism - the backbone of racism in British society - is to continue in full force despite the shocking result in Oldham where the fascist BNP scored an average of 15% across two constituencies after whipping up hatred and conflict and provoking a fight-back by the Asian community.

The issue of how to win a majority in a referendum on the single currency may prove to be the most difficult issue the new government will have to face. During the election campaign Blair began to make the case for joining the Euro, but now we have had the rejection of the Nice treaty by the Irish electorate so things are not so clear. New Labour is split on the timing of entry while there is a big section of British capital which expects the new government to use its election victory to go in as soon as possible.

So what did the left achieve in the election, and what are the prospects now for building an alternative to Blairism in Britain? One thing is clear, the decision of the Socialist Alliance to make a major intervention into this election was absolutely vindicated both by the campaign and by the result.

The urgency of such an intervention was dictated not just by the march to the right of the Blairites, but by the space that this was opening to their left. This space - represented by disaffected LP members and voters - needed to be filled and it needed to be filled by a socialist alternative.

The idea - promoted by the media - that all abstention is 'apathy' is nonsense. Many people abstained because they could see little difference between what the two main parties were saying and did not want to vote on a 'lesser evil' basis. Many of these are people who have understandably lost faith in political parties and the political system. Some of them are particularly alienated and are unable to see how the current major parties and the system of government relates to them. Even many of those who protest against global capitalism see no point in participating in elections on this sort. We have to show them that there is no contradiction between campaigning for your politics in an election and demonstrating on the streets in Seattle or Genoa. Both are important to building a national and international alternative.

The protest vote which was divided, inevitably, between abstention (the biggest number) and voting for the Liberal Democrats (who are historically the junior party of British capital and who were well to the left of Labour), the Greens, who also ran a left campaign, and the two socialist alternatives: the Socialist Alliance (SA) and the Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (SLP).

The Liberal Democrats took the biggest part of the protest vote and increased their representation in Parliament. They also benefited from tactical voting - people voting to keep the Tories out whether that means voting Labour or Liberal Democrat in a particular constituency. This growth in Lib Dem support also shows a weakening of the idea of

working class independence from the traditional bourgeois parties.

The Greens had their best ever result in a general election scoring an average of 2.25% in the 145 constituencies in which they stood. Their best constituency vote was 9.3%. This was the first time the Greens had saved a deposit in a Westminster election: they did not save any in 1997. They achieved this result despite a poor profile in the campaign and weak campaigns in most areas. Their best results were in London where they benefited from Ken Livingstone's endorsement during the Greater London Assembly election last year.

As far as the left is concerned the biggest achievement was the result won by the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) - which had merged with the SWP in Scotland in May and went into the election as the first united socialist organisation in Scotland for many years. The SSP won an average of 3.1% across all 72 constituencies in Scotland, with its highest scores in Glasgow including 9.98% in the best Glasgow constituency. It achieved a total vote of 72,500 and saved ten deposits. The SLP stood in a few Scottish seats but were marginalised by the SSP vote. This result puts the SSP in a strong position to win more seats in the next elections for the Scottish Parliament - which are held under proportional representation. This achievement represents a big step forward for socialist renewal, not just in Scotland but in the whole of Britain. The SSP remains the model to be followed.

The socialist vote in England and Wales was split between the Socialist Alliance, which was standing for the first time, and the SLP, which stood in the last election in 1997. The Alliance polled better than the SLP, but only just. The Alliance polled a total of 55,635 votes in the 93 constituencies in which it stood in England, with an average of 1.75%. It saved two deposits with scores of 7% and 6.8%. The SLP scored 54,880 votes in England in the 104 constituencies they stood in and saved one deposit. This means that the Alliance averaged 598 votes per constituency and the SLP 504. The SLP also stood in 10 seats in Scotland, where in most cases it scored badly against the SSP vote. Its average vote in Scotland was just 261.

In Wales the SA scored lower than in England with an average in the six seats contested of 376. Plaid Cymru did a lot worse than expected.

The Socialist Alliance's best constituency votes were 7% in Coventry followed by 6.4% in St Helens in Lancashire where Tory Shaun Woodward was parachuted into the safe seat just before the election was called. The strength of the Coventry vote reflected long term campaigning and electoral intervention by ex- Labour MP and current councillor Dave Nellist. On average London polled best for the Alliance, reflecting last year's intervention into the London Assembly election. It scored: 4.6% in Hackney, 4.3% in Deptford, 3.7% in Tottenham, and 3.1% in Holborn and St Pancras. Apart from the two seats where deposits were saved, the best results outside London were 3.8% in Nottingham and 3.5% in Manchester Withington.

The result means that there were 180,000 votes for far left candidates (including the SSP), which is unique in a post-war British election. It is triple the left vote in the 1997 election.

But the fact that the left was seen as divided in England and Wales despite the remarkable degree of unity achieved by the SA in the run up to the election remains a problem - and the SLP continues to reject all proposals for any kind of unity. The SLP did not campaign in the election very much outside of Hartlepool where Arthur Scargill was standing against the arch-Blairite Peter Mandelson. In most places the SLP was no more than a name on the ballot paper - in some constituencies the candidate did not appear at all during the campaign! The SLP has disintegrated over the past few years as it consolidated its Stalinist politics and the dominance of the Stalin Society within it. In 1997, its heyday, it had several thousand members. By the time of this election various rounds of disputes and expulsions had reduced it to a few hundred. It largely relied on its name recognition from previous elections and Scargill's reputation and resources. It had an election broadcast, as did the SA.

The Alliance in contrast ran a remarkable, high profile campaign in almost every constituency in which it stood. Most constituencies had public meetings and rallies and millions of leaflets were delivered by hand. Most constituencies delivered at least one leaflet by hand (an average constituency is about 40,000 households) and many of them up to three. Stalls were held in the high streets and all kinds of campaigns and activities undertaken.

The average score the Alliance achieved was lower than some of the SA activists expected. But it has to be looked at objectively. It was the first time it had stood outside of London and its results are equal to those the SSP achieved in its first electoral challenge. But it is also clear that the situation had not matured enough for workers in large number to vote for a radical class struggle party. It is clear that when the time came to vote many of those considering voting for the SA failed to do so. Also, in the first-past-the-post system, the vote is only about who will form the next government. Under that system there seems little point voting for small parties because they cannot possibly win representation. Others decided to give new Labour a second chance - which was the pitch of new Labour propaganda in the final days of the campaign. Nonetheless, it was also the best far-left result in the post-war period, better than the Communist Party scored in 1950 when it stood 100 candidates.

But the fact is we were not able to fill the space to the left of Labour in the course of one election campaign. The conditions had not yet matured enough for those breaking from Labour to vote for a radical left alternative, despite our very effective campaigning. At this stage most disaffected and politically disenfranchised people primarily expressed themselves in the election by abstention. Protest voting and tactical voting did occur, especially with the Liberal Democrats, but also with the Greens.

This may well be different next time, when the full extent of New Labour's second term has been seen and there is a deepening polarisation against the government. The SA has now established itself as an ongoing campaigning organisation which is not just there during elections.

Meanwhile the SA brought the argument for socialism in front of millions of people at a time when the left inside the LP has declined dramatically, and had no profile in the election whatsoever.

The importance of projecting a socialist alternative can be seen in the rise of the far right BNP in some places, partly generated by the situation they have whipped up in Oldham.

Our campaign put the SA on the map and built an organisation out of an election campaign - a factor which is decisive in the longer term. It established active organisations in every constituency in which it stood. The result shows that although we were unable attract the main protest vote there is a growing minority of people who are looking for a socialist alternative and were prepared to register this in the election. This can only increase in the next period.

The SA has also had a major impact in the unions in the short time it has existed. The left in a number of unions are discussing unity as a direct response to the SA, and the fire fighters union FBU has been the first to decide to change its rules to allow it to give money to parties standing against Labour. To discuss these issues the SA has decided to hold a trade union conference in the autumn.

During the course of the SA's high profile and energetic campaign, it more than doubled the number of activists involved in the Socialist Alliance. In particular, it drew in a steady stream of former Labour party activists, exceeding 60 former Labour councillors and many hundreds of former party members by polling day. It also received strong backing at the trade union conferences which have taken place over recent months, both through debates on conference floor and through organising fringe meetings.

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Obviously the SA will need to learn from the campaign and assess its strengths and weaknesses. For example, while the Socialist Alliance had policies on environmental issues these were not highlighted in much of the work done on the streets. In order to challenge the strength of the vote for the Greens, this needs to change.

Meanwhile the Alliance has already launched the fight against new Labour's second term. On the weekend after the election when the major parties went back to business as usual, Socialist Alliance activists returned to the streets. SA stalls and leafleters were out in force. The message was clear. New Labour's plans to introduce private profit into the heart of the NHS and other public services must and can be stopped. The re-emergence of the far right and the rise of racist violence must and can be resisted. The Socialist Alliance intends to be a key part of those campaigns.