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Britain

Britain 2010: Watershed Election

- IV Online magazine - 2010 - IV423 - April 2010 -

Publication date: Saturday 3 April 2010

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This is a watershed election. Like those in 1979 and 1997 its outcome will both reflect and impact on the political consciousness, confidence and combativity of the working class. What happens and what flows from it will determine the course of the next few years.

There is a possibility that Brown will return to Number Ten but apart from a brief bounce following his unelected accession to the Labour leadership – Labour has dragged behind in the polls for the past three years. It would take a dramatic turn of events or a massive Tory own goal to reverse that trend, though the polling evidence is becoming contradictory.

Although New Labour took power on the back of revulsion against 18 grim Tory years, a host of indices indicate that life has barely improved and in many cases is worse. Inequality, child poverty, social mobility, the housing crisis, prison numbers, teenage pregnancy rates, race discrimination and drug addiction statistics each tell a damning story of their own inequalities underpin class society.

Increased spending on health and education has been a plus. But savage inequalities underpin class society and Labour's enthusiasm for deregulation, privatisation and a credit boom based on the bubble of property prices have tended to undermine any gains.

Disillusion set in by 2001 and deepened with a succession of corruption scandals over the party's habit of selling favours to reactionary millionaire businessmen and more recently with MPs on the take. Then there was a hugely unpopular Iraq war built on lies. Now the biggest recession since the Second World War has combined with looming climate catastrophe.

Gordon Brown and the whole Labour leadership bear responsibility for all of this and the electorate knows it. The party has little to offer but more of the same. In the past two elections Labour only scraped in due to a combination of declining voter turnout (with only one in five electors voting for the government) and Tory unattractiveness.

Cameron not so shiny

Cameron has turned that around since 2005, but only to a degree. The shine is coming off and, at the time of writing, a hung parliament seems possible. The Liberal Democrats are manoeuvring to maximise this opportunity to their advantage. And there's a welcome revival of interest in proportional representation, although it's worth remembering that Labour first promised legislation on PR back in 1931 - and that what is being talked about now is by no means a fully proportional system.

All this might be depressingly familiar were it not for the global context. The world economic crisis is far from over and the continuing inability of the ruling capitalist class to agree on a solution is evidence of the deeper systemic failure. Confidence in the world's largest economy is at such a low point that in mid-February China sold \$34 billion worth of US government bonds. The failure of the Copenhagen climate change talks signalled the entrenched hostility of individual capitalist states to rein back the slightest competitive advantage to meet the burning necessity of action on global warming.

This fragility and division has been sharply exposed in the Euro zone where one of its smaller economies is on the verge of going into free-fall. The French government urged financial support to stave off Greece's deficit crisis - fearing the fall of one domino would bring others crashing down, as the markets lost confidence in the Euro. The German government backed fierce cuts.

The massive Greek austerity package has been met with general strikes, mass demonstrations and farmers blocking roads. The similarly weak position of Ireland, Spain and Portugal has underlined the high stakes involved.

The relaunch of the expanded, centralised and streamlined EU after years of slog, through the final ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in December, now seems an eon away.

Muddied waters

Gordon Brown initially claimed Britain would bounce back more quickly than most because of its supposed economic health. The opposite has proved to be the case. Britain's budget deficit – at 13% of GDP – ranks even higher than Greece. In the last quarter of 2009 the economy managed just 0.3% growth, making it the last major economy out of recession. Few now doubt the possibility of a “double dip” recession.

Hopes of a recovery have been dashed with a jump in unemployment in January to the highest level since Labour took office. A miniscule drop in the final quarter of 2009 to 2.46 million proved to be a false dawn and government plans to keep the public deficit below Â£170 billion for the current financial year were dealt a blow with a further Â£4.3 billion borrowing in January.

These events have ironically reined back the Tories lead. The waters are now muddied between the two major parties as Cameron has back-tracked on a promise of immediate and savage post-election cuts, against New Labour's plan to wait until a recovery is underway. The frailty of the economy has fuelled fears that undermining demand would deepen recession.

As the Tory leadership dithered, a phalanx of 30 leading economists weighed in to back the party's original position. A few days later 60 others responded in the Financial Times arguing for a one year pause, as did the normally hard-headed IMF – reflecting lack of confidence in an early recovery.

These battalions of bourgeois economists battling it out in the public arena have exposed the fundamentally political character of the debate. The capitalist class internationally is divided over whether or not to go down the Greek route, with its potential consequences of an economic crash and mass militancy.

Our political rulers are barely in control of what is a systemic crisis of international dimensions. On the one hand, the impact of any national action is marginal. For instance Spain, still in recession with nearly 20% unemployed amid fears it could end up worse off than Greece, is Britain's seventh largest trading partner and a sales slump of 31% in 2009 will have inevitable knock-on effects for the economy. On the other hand, as Copenhagen and the Greek crisis showed, capitalism is incapable of reaching the international agreement required to overcome national self-interest.

However there is no dispute within the global elite that labour should pay for the crisis through a massive transfer of wealth towards capital. In Britain all three parties are united in offering huge post-election cuts. The only question is when over the coming year they are brought in. These will have a devastating impact across the public sector – including so-called “frontline” services like health and education – where tens of thousands of redundancies are

already in train.

Resurgence of Labour left unlikely

Unlike European countries where there has been mass resistance in recent years, in some cases reflected through the growth of new parties of the left – the working class in Britain has been slow to regain its confidence after the defeats of the past three decades. The danger is that the major defeat implied by a post-election austerity offensive could leave the class struggle left marginalised to a degree it has not been for a long time. Whether this occurs depends on the character of the response, the willingness of BA cabin crew and civil servants to fight providing some cause for hope.

Assuming that Brown leaves Downing Street, some may consider a turn back to Labour as the party of opposition. This happened after 1979 when, despite the bitter legacy of the Wilson/Callaghan years, the Labour left grew - becoming the organisational focus for political resistance to the Tory onslaught of the 1980s. But that scenario is unlikely to be repeated on a significant scale.

Thirty years ago the Labour left started from a much stronger position – closely linked to the unions and with a continuity going back to post-war Bevanism. There was also a thriving internal party culture of activism and debate, despite all the democratic limitations. If the Blair/Brown leadership achieved nothing else it smashed this left, dismantled democracy, drove away hundreds of thousands of members and wedded the party to neo-liberalism in a way that is hardly likely to unravel.

The widespread desire to register a protest could instead lead to a rightward turn, with growth in support for UKIP and the BNP. There is also a danger of defeatism and depoliticisation.

How many resist this will depend on the visibility of a credible socialist alternative – yet to be created in the opening caused by Labour's shift to the right. In its absence we may see a resurgence in support for the Green Party and, in Scotland and Wales (where there are anti-Tory majorities), the nationalists.

This makes the late arrival of the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition on the electoral scene alongside the more established challenge from Respect, certainly welcome. But whether and how this is built upon at the election will significantly determine the prospects afterwards. A coherent left alternative will need to be unified, inclusive, democratic and pluralist. And it will have to reach out - alongside socialists in the Green Party, Plaid Cymru and Labour - to the trade unionists, communities and young people on the frontline of the attacks.