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On the general election in the UK

A British anarchist on the May 5th elections

Anarcho

April 30, 2005

A general election takes place in Britain on May 5th with immigration and the Iraq war dominating the agenda. The British electoral system guarantees a two party competition but a number of minor parties are also running.

This election campaign is hard to get enthusiastic about, particularly for die-hard anti-parliamentarians. The two mainstream parties with any chance of winning are basically running on the same platform and quibbling on the details. As for the Liberal Democrats, they could promise a lot more because they are in no position to “deliver” (i.e. betray those promises).

The Tories campaign seems to amount to the usual xenophobic playing of the race card and can be summed up as “if you don’t want people like Michael Howard’s grandfather getting into the country then vote for Michael Howard.” Blair’s campaign amounts to “don’t mention the war” — perhaps they should reconsider changing their campaign slogan to “For war not back”? As it is, both are running on a neo-liberal platform and like the Democrats

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and Republicans in the US, emphasising different aspects of it to get people to consider them the least likely to mess-up their lives.

The parties' manifestos were unleashed and the newspapers took them seriously in spite of them being simply ignored once in office. If we had a real media they would have prefaced their coverage with "Last election, New Labour's manifesto promised not to impose tuition fees..." When push comes to shove, election promises wither under the heat produced in the greenhouse of big business and the state bureaucracy.

As for the fringe parties (like the Greens and Respect), it is doubtful that they will gain significant results as any anti-war feelings will be directed towards the Lib-Dems (who are in a position to actually win seats). Respect, in particular, will suffer most as the usual SWP hyper-hype will make even the unlikely event of moderate success seem like an anti-climax and, consequently, a defeat (although no matter what, the post-election rhetoric will proclaim any result, no matter how bad, as a victory of earth-shattering proportions). Hopefully the descent of party leadership into the most crass opportunism and reformism may give any genuine socialists remaining in the party cause for concern — and thought.

As for those seeking to express their opposition to Blairism and its wars, may be suggest a spoilt ballot paper as the logical course of action. A large increase in spoilt ballots gives a message that we are not apathetic, but angry; not apolitical, but anti-politics.

One noticeable aspect of the campaign so far is the undercurrent of concern over turnout. The Sun has even decided to make a campaign about it. There does seem to be an awareness that more and more people are seeing through the game of politics and recognising that no matter who you vote for, they will put the interests of state and capital first and foremost. That is healthy, in as much as it shows that you cannot fool all of the people all of the time. However, as long as this expresses itself in cynicism rather than the creating of genuine alternatives which use direct action to achieve change then the elite can happily tolerate it.

As such, the concern raised about "apathy" should not be considered as sincere. Actual turnout is utterly irrelevant to how a party governs or whether it claims a mandate for its actions. The US state has happily survived decades of around 50% of eligible people voting. As long as the non-voters leave it at that, then they will be as ignored as those who bothered to go to the polling station. To state the obvious, the level of abstentions has no relation to "the level of anarchy" a given country has unless there is a large and active anarchist movement present. We have no interest in apathy and while the current alienation with the political system is good, unless it turns into a positive agenda for social change we will not expect much to change.

That means looking seriously at building anti-parliamentarian alternatives which will inspire those who, while turned off from politicians, are actively interesting in changing the world for the better. Only such a movement, using direct action and solidarity as its weapons, can make real change possible. Relying on politicians, as the Iraq war showed, is doomed to failure.

And that is the task any serious libertarian movement should be looking into. It means tapping into the current disillusionment with politicians in order to present a positive alternative based on what many people are doing already or logical extensions of it. It means encouraging militant rank and file unionism against bosses, producer and consumer co-operatives against capitalist firms, credit unions against rip-off banks, community groups against local state bureaucracies, in general direct action against bosses and politicians.

We have a positive message and a means to make the world a better place. We are saying to people that they, and they alone, can make their lives better. That direct action not only can be used to fight the current system, it can also create a new, better, one to replace it. An anarchist anti-election campaign is a way of presenting that message to the general public during a time of heightened interest in politics.