

**Dateline: Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> May**

With London's multiple date with the ballot box looming on June 10<sup>th</sup>, Wandsworth Stop-the-War hosted an election hustings in Battersea this evening, to which they had invited the Greens, Respect, Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservatives. The first 4 all sent speakers, who duly informed the audience of about 30 that they had opposed the war (although this claim was to be sorely tested by subsequent challenges from the floor), so the failure of the Conservatives to bother sending a speaker to an anti-war event seemed to therefore carry its own message, despite Mr Howard's recent attempts to gain some advantage from Blair's difficulties in Iraq.

The Labour MEP candidate Jane Briginshaw spoke first, and confronted head-on the thorny issue of asking opponents of the war to vote Labour, by insisting that Labour and its values were bigger than Blair, and that Labour were still the only mass movement (a term she emphasised) to offer any alternative to working people.

She then predicted Ken Livingston would earn the anti-war Mayoral vote despite his recent return to Labour, and worked back from that to call on us to elect a Labour-controlled Assembly as well, to help him function more efficiently.

She closed with a warning that a vote against Labour would simply be a negative protest vote. Playing the BNP card, she added that in the context of a low turnout, they would be the beneficiary of a fractured protest vote, and reminded us of Jean-Marie Le Pen's 1st-round surge in the 2002 French elections.

Next came Roy Vickery for the Greens, who first established by a quick show of hands that there were no supporters of the war in the audience, and hence decided to move on from Iraq and talk instead about how to address the economic and institutional basis of warfare.

He condemned the arms trade, and revealed that the Greens have been campaigning unsuccessfully for Wandsworth Council to cease its investments in several armaments companies. He pointed out that the wars they profit from create refugees, whom we then denounce as bogus asylum seekers – even though their plight is our fault !

Roy criticised our reliance on oil, and our dependence on motorised transport even for short urban journeys. Developing the theme of wasteful mechanised transport, and perhaps alluding to the Greens' theory of Localisation, he also urged us not to buy supermarket goods that unnecessarily travelled huge distances from production, to processing, to their final point of sale.

He closed with a warning of the catastrophic consequences of global warming.

MEP candidate Kishwer Falkner spoke next for the Lib Dems. She declared she was not opposed to all war in principle, citing WW2 and Sierra Leone as necessary or beneficial examples, but stated that the American response to Sep11 had been wrong, if perhaps understandable, and that a campaign against terror cannot be prosecuted by means of war. She slammed the Hutton report as a whitewash, and lamented that the Iraq war had dealt a fatal blow to multilateral institutions and the UN.

Finally, she told us that the war will increase terror, and she knows people who are afraid to use the Tube. It was therefore important to vote she said, to weaken Blair.

The fourth and last speaker was Linda Smith, a firefighter and the No. 3 candidate on the London Assembly party list for Respect, the new political party co-founded by George Galloway MP, from some constituents of the anti-war movement. She condemned the war and the Labour government that had engineered it, and stressed that her party was the only one on the platform whose policies called for an immediate end to the occupation of Iraq.

She then moved on to emphasize that Respect are broader than the Iraq issue, and spoke out against privatisation and the government's other attacks on working people, particularly in relation to how it impacted on the London fire brigades, and the shameful treatment they had endured at Labour's hands over the course of their still-simmering pay dispute. She contrasted the unlimited funding available for an illegal war of aggression, with the miserly cutbacks the Labour government had inflicted on pensioners, students, the firefighters and all public services, and promised the audience that the Fire Brigades Union would soon follow the RMT out of the Labour Party.

She closed by stressing that a vote for Respect is very definitely not a wasted protest vote, as these elections use Proportional Representation. With Jane's warning about the BNP in mind, she also reminded us that while they may currently appear to be on the rise, that was the fault of a Labour government which had effectively adopted their agenda, and she attacked Home Secretary Blunkett in particular.

The Hustings was then opened up to questions from the floor, which overwhelmingly zeroed in on calls to immediately withdraw British troops from Iraq, and incredulous questions about what it actually meant for some candidates to glibly describe themselves as anti-war, while still supporting a bloody occupation. Claims from the platform that withdrawal would lead to chaos and lawlessness were met by accusations that the occupation itself was a source of chaos and lawlessness, and that Iraq could only find peace and stability once the occupiers withdrew.

The Labour and Lib Dem candidates found themselves in obvious difficulties here, and while both opposed immediate withdrawal, Jane Briginshaw opposed sending more troops, and eventually asserted that she was her own person, and was not here to defend Blair or the government.

When it was charged that the Lib Dems' anti-war credentials were utterly bogus as they were pro-invasion, pro-occupation and in favour of sending more troops, Kishwer Falkner reacted indignantly to the "pro-invasion" tag, claiming that Lib Dem speakers in Parliament had frequently challenged the government. She stressed that she had the same line as her party leader.

A recurring theme from former Labour voters in the audience, was that the Iraq war had merely been the final straw in their wholesale disillusionment with Labour's actions in power, which they saw as an abandonment of their own aspirations.

Proceedings were wrapped up after about 2 hours, bringing down the curtain on a generally courteous and smoothly run evening.

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