

RESPECT OR RESPECTABILITY?

Are you thinking what we're thinking? Thank God, it's all over. But did all that sound and fury about the "Muslim vote" signify nothing? Are British Muslims moving towards a politics of accountability or are the old ways of patronage still decisive? **YAHYA BIRT** reflects after all the ballot papers have been counted.

When a poll in March 2004 showed that the traditionally-solid Muslim Labour vote had halved after 9/11, mostly swinging to the Liberal Democrats, it was certain that British Muslims would be wooed by the main parties rather than be taken for granted. Once so controversial, the funding of faith schools no longer seemed to be such an issue. New Labour even promised to use the Parliament Act to get incitement to religious hatred through at a third attempt. Record numbers of Muslim parliamentary candidates were selected, some 74 in all (44 from the main parties). Muslim caucuses were formed in the three main parties over the last two years. The new Respect party chased the anti-war vote in constituencies with big Muslim populations. The radicals opposing the election looked more isolated than ever, and could do little except rough up Iqbal Sacranie or release their own parodic manifestos, as the community decided how to cast its vote.

This was the first General Election for about one in eight Muslim voters, and it was clear that a second generation - growing up with the war on terror, stop and search and Iraq - were out to seek respect, even if our community leaders were still seeking respectability. Both the Muslim Council of Britain and the new British Muslim Forum (the latter in more surreptitious fashion) attempted to be seen as non-party political, but both tilted to Labour towards the end of campaign, knowing like the rest of the country that we were in for a third term. But for the first time, we had an open discussion about the manipulation of clan politics by community leaders and local party politicians. The implications of Birmingham postal vote scandal, which has eviscerated Muslim political representation in the local Labour Party, have yet to be fully played out. The old tricks, the old manipulations, look increasingly tired, and let us hope that something more relevant, democratic and transparent can now take its place.

George Galloway's spectacular win for Respect in Bethnal Green and Bow was the surprise of the election, and sent a clear message that Iraq was still a live issue. But a careful look at Respect's overall performance indicates that this might be a one-off as Iraq begins inevitably to slip down the agenda. Respect's share of the national vote dropped from 1.5% in the Euro elections of June 2004 to 0.3% in the General Election. Seventy per cent of its 70,000-odd votes came in four East End constituencies and Sparkbrook and Small Heath in Birmingham, where Salma Yaqoob was only a few thousand votes from unseating Labour's Roger Godsiff. The Muslim Association of Britain, a key ally only a year ago, offered lukewarm support for Respect's 26 candidates, endorsing only four of them and opposing Ali J. Zaidi in Tooting in favour of Labour's Sadiq Khan.

Looking at the forty constituencies with the highest

Muslim populations, the Liberal Democrat share of the vote in 2005 increased by an average of 8.8% over the 2001 Election, more than double the increase achieved nationally. This was no doubt due to their stand on Iraq and civil liberties but also because they were on the left of New Labour on some social and economic issues, reflected in the fact that they lost some rural seats to the Conservatives while doing better against Labour in the inner cities. It is likely that Muslim votes helped the Liberal Democrats to win Rochdale and aid Sarah Teather's retention of Brent East after her stunning by-election victory last year, despite MAB's short-termism in deciding to back Labour's Yasmin Qureshi this time around, no doubt for favours owed to the Mayor of London over the Qaradawi fiasco. Elsewhere, however, Muslim voters in Leicester South, unimpressed by another Liberal Democrat by-election victor, Parmjit Gill Singh, plumped instead for an experienced local Labour politician, Sir Peter Soulsby. It is hardly surprising that the Conservatives failed to take their one target seat (number 112) in the Muslim top forty, Batley and Spen, given their strong stand on immigration.

However the brutal fact is that these forty constituencies were almost all safe Labour seats, even if the party hierarchy believed that its intense operation to retain its Muslim vote mitigated an even greater disaster, which was fronted by Gordon Brown rather than by a tarnished Tony Blair. So despite an increase in the anti-Labour vote, Labour got a 47% share of the total vote and retained thirty-seven of these forty seats. So all in all, under the rigours of the first-past-the-post system, the impact of the Muslim protest vote, such as it was, was hardly titanic.

It is certainly true that many Muslims decided to stick with Labour for its popular domestic policies of reducing poverty and improving core services for reasons that had more to do with class than creed, even if they felt aggrieved over Iraq. No matter what community leaders might have wanted us to believe, the results show that we are not a single issue community: in the privacy of the polling booth, Muslims appeared

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to vote with some mix of self-interest, principle, party loyalty and tactical consideration as did the rest of the country. Nor did they vote unthinkingly for the Muslim candidate: Sadiq Khan and Shahid Malik, both capable new MPs, came in on reduced Labour majorities. But the myth of the Muslim bloc vote may be hard to dislodge in the foreseeable future for reasons of mutual self-interest between Muslim community leaders and the political parties. It will only be shattered when Muslims renounce the politics of symbolism for one of true engagement. ■

VOTE EARLY, VOTE OFTEN

Imagine a Muslim voter waking up on Friday 6th May for his fajr prayers. In the half-light of early dawn, he is in a reflective mood. He turns on the television catching the hilariously yet disturbing Paxman-Galloway “interview”, which while entertaining, was scarcely enlightening. Our thoughtful Muslim returns to bed, but is unable to sleep. What to make of this night of electoral drama? Was Galloway’s result an aberration? Did he make the right choice? Did his vote count? Did it count three or four times? So many questions. **DAL NUN STRONG** has some answers.

First things first, the scantest reading will tell you how the Muslims voted. They voted negatively against Blair, for whatever party was the most vocally anti-war in their constituency. In most cases this was the Liberal Democrats, but in particularly “ethnic” areas, the motley Respect coalition polled particularly well. The scale of the anti-Blair swing and the heterogeneity of the recipients of Muslim votes, leave no doubt that Muslim voting was entirely negative.

Muslim representation

This desire to give Blair a slap in the face at any cost has some curious consequences. Firstly, Muslims did not vote for anything. Now that the elections are over, how are politicians supposed to interpret what the Muslim community wants or requires for 2005, and beyond, if they only wanted to punish the mistakes of 2003? Muslims clearly didn’t think that anti-discrimination laws, faith schools or tackling incitement to religious hatred were actually as important topics as campaigners such as the MCB thought - indeed the entire issue of faith schools didn’t appear in the Respect party manifesto at all.

Secondly, poor people nationwide use MPs as helpers on bread-and-butter issues disproportionately more than rich people - and Muslims are no exception, asking for help with housing claims, benefits, visa applications and all that. Yet there is little evidence that Muslims rewarded people with a strong track record in constituency work. By all accounts, Oona King in Bethnal Green was an exemplary constituency MP, even devoting her entire Parliamentary allowance to a running a permanent local advice-centre. Bethnal Green residents have now decided that George Galloway would be a better constituency representative - but we must wait and see whether he will devote as much of his time to the problems of

Support group for survivors of near-Muslim experience



the people he is paid to represent as he does to people in trouble spots overseas. Many people in his old Glasgow constituency thought they were the second choice on his personal agenda.

Thirdly, the Muslim vote has if anything set back efforts to boost Muslim representation in public life. True, there are two more Muslim MPs, in the shape of Shahid Malik (Dewsbury) and Sadiq Khan (Tooting), which brings the total up to four. Four MPs out of 646 makes 0.6% at the House of Commons, as against 2.6% in the population as a whole. Muslims should not dare to complain about this under-representation, since Muslim votes were responsible for the losses of several of other Muslim candidates. For example, the 12% Muslim population of Brent East wanted the Labour party out more than they wanted a Muslim in, and so Lib Dem Sarah Teather narrowly defeated Yasmin Qureshi to retain the seat she had won in a post-Iraq by-election.

Democratic choice?

Finally, the scale of the anti-Blair swing in Muslim areas should sound some alarm bells. Are we seriously saying that thousands of Muslim voters all independently came to the decision to vote for certain parties and leave the others untouched? Do we really believe that hundreds of thousands of Muslims voted Lib Dem across the country, but the moment a Respect candidate was offered, they all switched to Respect?

Or have we just witnessed business as usual, as Muslims voted communally for whoever their leaders decided? There have been some particularly egregious examples over the last few months, such as the overt MPAC/MAB campaigns in key constituencies. Or the Muslim man who told the Lib Dem candidate on an election walkabout in Leicester South that “you’ll get six votes from me.”

And I’m wondering how many Muslim voters ever saw the ballot paper that they cast? For example the 13 voters registered at a six-bedroom house belonging to a Conservative councillor, plus a further 12 registered at a derelict house he owned until December? I’m wondering how Labour could win 47% of postal votes cast, despite winning only 37% of in-person votes. I don’t want to comment on ongoing electoral fraud investigations in Birmingham, Blackburn, Bradford and East London, but it does seem fishy that almost all of these investi-