

“STOP THE WAR” HUSTINGS, APRIL 14 2010

Friends Meeting House, Jesus Lane, Cambridge, 7.45pm

Theme – “General Election Hustings: Iraq, Afghanistan & Palestine – where do you stand?”

Speakers: Martin Booth, Cambridge Socialists (**MB**)
 Julian Huppert, Liberal Democrats (**JH**)
 Simon Sedgewick-Jell, Green Party (on behalf of Tony Juniper) (**SS**)
 Old Holborn (in Guy Fawkes mask) libertarian independent (**OH**)
 Daniel Zeichner, Labour (arrived 8.05pm) (**DZ**)

All 50 seats were occupied, with about 15 people standing at the back.

The chair started by asking the crowd if it was ok for the Cambridge Socialists to video the proceedings, and a man with a camera round his neck standing at the front checked if he could take pictures.

The chair invited members of the public to ask questions, and said that although the debate was about British foreign policy as regards Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine, wider concerns could be raised, as long as the debate did not stray too far from the Middle East.

Question:

How do you intend to deal with the pathetic plight in Afghanistan?

MB

The NATO troops are a hostile occupying force, and act as a poster-boy for terrorism.

SSJ

I agree with Martin, but we cannot turn away from the humanitarian plight.

JH

We’re causing more problems than we’re solving – it’s a pity the Labour and Conservative candidates aren’t here, as they might have different views and give rise to some debate.

[Chair – “one of them is coming”.

[Member of public – “that remains to be seen”.]

JH then cited a quote that I can only trace from a sci-fi novel – “Democracy imposed from without is the severest form of tyranny”.

MB

Get the troops out – today.

JH

That might not be feasible – maybe in the next couple of months.

OH

Afghanistan is the second most corrupt land on earth, and I believe we should be out now.

Question:

Given Britain can't solve the Palestinian problem on its own, how should Europe react?

OH

Palestine is a prison camp – no airfield, no port, cut off.

JH

Europe should stop selling arms. We should stop Israel entering the Eurovision song contest, it's what worked in South Africa.

SSJ

It's defeatist to say Britain can't do anything on its own – like arms embargos. Israel ignores UN resolutions with the help of the US – look at what happens to Iran when it breaks boycotts. I've been through boycotts in South Africa, and they work.

MB

What do we ordinary working-class people do? I took part in all the campaigns to isolate apartheid. Israel cannot carry on with its outrageous treatment of Palestine.

Question

Everybody has raised the analogy of South Africa and Palestine. Boycotts didn't work at all – it was working-class struggles. This needs to happen in Palestine, and in Israel as well. Hamas is anti-working-class and anti-trade-union; this needs to come from British, European and world working-class struggles.

OH

80% of Conservative MPs and 40% of Labour MPs are signed up as friends of Israel. Only Israel has more Jewish MPs than Britain.

MB

How do we mobilise in this country to support those in Palestine working for the liberation of Palestine? As a socialist I have huge objections to Hamas, but they were elected.

SSJ

I would go back to the questioner about South Africa – they knew that we were supporting them.

JH

There are people on both sides who would like the conflict to continue and the conflict to stop.

Photographer (man with camera standing at the front): “Zionism in both houses is reflected by the fact that there are neither Labour nor Conservative candidates here.”

Chair: “One of them will be here”.

Photographer: “That remains to be seen”.

(Daniel Zeichner arrived at this point, and the photographer said “I stand corrected”.)

JH

It would be nice if we did a little less invading ourselves.

SSJ

As a historian, I don't think we should look to the US to change. The organised pro-Israel US lobby influences every single senator in the US.

OH

I can only reiterate what the others have said – they'll continue holding onto the West Bank. I don't think Obama can control the Israeli lobby. They'll do what they want.

DZ

I disagree with the sum of what's being said – Obama is a capitalist in the world's most capitalist nation. But the working-class movement that elected him was the working-class wanting change, and we can mobilise that here.

Question

This meeting is ostensibly about British foreign policy, but does Britain have one, or does somebody in the Foreign Office sit by a phone waiting for instructions from Washington and Tel Aviv? I want to ask the Labour candidate if there is any independent British foreign policy.

DZ

It's now about whether we have a foreign policy, but the power in the world. The Conservatives are running with some really, really dodgy people – I don't want to say more in case I get into some more trouble than when I challenged a Conservative Shadow Secretary on this at the Cambridge Union.

MB

It was the Labour Party that defied the UN to invade Iraq [*applause*]. If this economic crisis continues we'll almost certainly see unless we end the capitalist control of wealth [*applause*].

SSJ

The tragedy is that we're turning our back on building a European foreign policy. There will be a lot of regional wars because of policy, but also because of climate change.

JH

One thing I agree with Simon about is that we have had enough of Labour and Conservative in government – we were the only ones to protest over war with Iraq.

OH

I've had enough of war, I prefer armed neutrality: the armed forces are there to protect our borders, nobody else's. There's no need for a foreign policy that involves our troops.

Question

What should British foreign policy be regarding Iraq?

At this point, the photographer standing at the front challenged Daniel Zeichner, drawing on something he'd said that I hadn't caught:

Photo:

How does Daniel Zeichner square what he says with his membership of Labour Friends of Israel?

DZ

I'm not a member.

Photo

I have information that you are.

DZ

I'm not.

Member of public to photographer: "sit down!"

Photo

I withdraw my previous comment, as my knowledge is not sufficient – what did you mean by "forces outside our control?"

DZ

My Dad was born in the 1930s in Vienna, and was driven out by the Nazis. I'm not Jewish, but my Dad lived in Vienna at a time when it was wise to get out.

The photographer turned to the seats and said "I want to reassure everybody I'm not anti-Jewish", then he and the member of the public who'd told him to sit down accused each other of wanting to direct the meeting before the Chair regained control.

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DZ

We have to remember the fact that we are an important country, but our future is with Europe.

A question was asked about Iran.

OH

As long as a country's activities aren't adversely affecting its neighbours, we need to stay out.

JH

We have to respect Iran's right to have nuclear power. We shouldn't invade. It's hard to take a moral stance that says "you can't have nuclear weapons but we'll have ours". Let's just ditch them, it would help us deal with Iran.

SSJ

I'd have sanctions banning nuclear and most conventional arms in Iran, Israel, Indonesia, Kenya, almost anywhere. Iran has a powerful internal opposition, we need to support this.

MB

Why are we – the British parties, the state – picking on Iran? Because it threatens the Middle East. We had the same thing about Iraq. My union, UNISON, campaigned for Trade Union rights in Iraq and does the same in Iran, and says that there's no reason to invade Iran. Everybody knows Israel's developing nuclear weapons, where are the sanctions against Israel?

DZ

The situation in Iran is very complex, but it's a young country, and we need to support Iran's internal opposition. But how much do we interfere in the affairs of other countries? I wouldn't rule out using sanctions in the future, but each situation needs to be taken on its own merits.

Question to DZ

As an MP, would you vote for sanctions on Israel on those merits?

DZ

Yes, I would quite like to do that.

Question

What do you mean by "a young country"?

DZ

Spoke about the average age in Iran. I want to see secular countries, not theocracies.

Question

Can you tell the Queen that?

DZ

The Queen's no friend of mine.

Question

I'd like to see a 90% reduction in military spending, and we're allowing the Americans to get away with things we don't allow ourselves. I would like to see the American military kicked out. What is the candidates' response to serious demilitarisation in this country, kicking the Americans out?

DZ

I don't really agree with that point of view. As much as I'd like to see a world without war, we need to deal with reality, and we need a foreign policy.

MB

I agree with the speaker absolutely – money can come from the vast amounts spent on our military and spent on things like hospitals and schools.

SSJ

I agree. The best thing we could do is to leave NATO. But I have to say that there is a union support for the defence sector, because of jobs – but the defence sector does not employ a lot of people. If we used the money spent on, for example, tanks, and built wind turbines, we'd have a much more diverse economy.

JH

We could scrap the Eurofighter B and save £500 million a year; but the worst thing was extraordinary rendition, people being brought through Britain to be tortured, for example Binyam Mohammed. But soldiers get a really awful deal, they need to come back to decent homes and health-care, as they are traumatised by our government telling them to do things they shouldn't have to do.

OH

Aircraft carriers, Eurofighters, Trident, it's all irrelevant – our armed forces should be to defend our shores, not fight wars on the orders of the US.

DZ

Across most of the Trade Unions there are a lot of policies against wars, so I wouldn't like to see the trades-union movement being turned into a lobby group for war.

Question

I'm uncomfortable with any MP voting for sanctions on Iran. I don't mind Daniel Zeichner saying that, because he's not going to win, but sanctions against Iraq cost two million lives.

JH

The fight is between me and Daniel Zeichner. [**OH** – “I haven't started yet!”] Mis-targeted sanctions are a complete disaster. They affect the people at the bottom, while the people at the top do very well.

DZ

That was the argument the Tories used against sanctions on South Africa.

JH

The critical thing is that people affected by sanctions support them, as in South Africa.

Question

I never understood “Royal Prerogative” – I think that's the basis on which we went to war on Iraq. I don't see any political party talking about using all our military money for making friends all over the world. Instead of Royal Prerogative, why can't we make friendships and make life better for every worker in every strata of society everywhere?

JH

Royal Prerogative comes from the fact that the Queen runs the country, which I don't agree with. The Liberal Democrats say that Parliament must vote on going to war. We would like to increase the amount of money given to other countries, with extra money for climate-change litigation, as these are problems we have caused. But there is a role for the military, Costa Rica is the only country to get rid of it...I have no problems with the Norwegian Army having mobile hospitals built by Marshall's.

SSJ

I'm a republican, and I want a written constitution. [*applause*]

OH

I was also on the march with one million other people [*member of public: "two million!"*] and you have to ask yourself: were we asked? We weren't asked whether we want to go to war with Iraq. A minority government – 36% of people who voted elected Labour [**JH** – "*22% of all people who could vote*"] – took us to war.

MB

It wasn't the Queen who took us to war with Iraq, it was the Labour Party with Tory votes. I'm absolutely in favour of getting rid of the monarchy. We need to come out and vote clearly against xenophobia and Little England.

DZ

Let's look at referenda in Switzerland – you can ask people questions and get some nasty answers; as happened in Switzerland, racist replies. Don't imagine it's always going to turn out the way we want it to turn out. Now Parliament will be the final judge of whether we go to war, but I hope we don't have to ask that question again. Providing you vote Labour in a few weeks [*laughing*] we'll get rid of the House of Lords–

Question

Can you get rid of the Queen?

DZ

I can't promise that.

[*Member of public: "remember the axe!"*]

JH to DZ:

There was a bill with the alternative vote in it, you dropped that in a deal with the Tories.

Question

Do you think Tony Blair should be arrested as a war criminal?

[The chair asked for a very quick reply from each speaker:

DZ – No.

MB – Yes, in the Hague.

SSJ – Yes.

JH – Yes.

OH – I'll arrest him myself!]

Question

We all know the oil is running out, what do we do?

MB

Wars are about spoiling for the resources of the world. I don't believe we'll go short, we need to restructure society and stop wars through dismantling the structures of capitalism.

OH

We need desperately to find an alternative, which I don't think is wind-power – marine power?

DZ

The issues around resources are very important. We need to negotiate, the failure in Copenhagen was very disappointing. Britain is the leading producer of wind-power in the world–

OH

We aren't – that's Denmark.

SSJ

I draw a distinction between what I'd like to see happen with resources and what probably will happen. I want to see lots of different resources, and a massive reduction in energy use through greater global equality. But Obama is opening up huge parts of America for oil exploration.

JH

This is one of the most important questions we have to address in the next 40 years. Oil is running out, and is increasingly only in places we don't want to collect it from. Water too – there's more conflict as population centres increase. I'm a scientist, I work in a physics lab – there's nothing like enough power in tides here. We need also to look at insulation in old homes, which could reduce Cambridge's carbon footprint by 40%. If there's any capitalists still in this room, it also saves money. We need to get solar power from

deserts, and think how we can make arrangements with countries with deserts, and not plunder their deserts.

OH

This is happening now, with a grid providing electricity across North Africa and southern Europe.

Question

The instabilities we've created in Iraq, Iran and Palestine have created asylum seekers, and then failed asylum seekers, some of whom are my friends. How do we address this?

DZ

We have to do better by people seeking sanctuary in our countries, from Iran, Iraq, Palestine, also from Somalia, etc. We have to treat people the best we can. But we must take consideration of the public debate on migration – in my union I tried to raise awareness of myths about asylum seekers put about by the far right and the press. There are just as many people moving from Britain to Spain and France as there are moving from other parts of Europe to here.

OH to DZ

How many other European countries allow free access from the new EU states?

DZ

I'm very proud that during the first stage we allowed free access, but ashamed that because of public pressure we are allowing less now.

OH

If there are wars anywhere on the planet, we have a duty to people who are genuinely persecuted. We have more than a million illegal immigrants [*member of public: "racist!"*] and this is at the expense of people genuinely seeking asylum.

MB

Immigration centres should be shut down [*applause*] – I'm disturbed by Old Holborn's comments. There are people from all over the world with employers here. Some are illegal – it's the employers exploiting them, they have a right to be here.

JH

I'd be proud to represent Cambridge because of the tolerance here, and I'd disagree with anybody who wanted to reduce that. There's a drive to use the word "sanctuary" as the word "asylum" has negative connotations. [**OH** – "double-plus-good!"] People should be allowed to work when they stay here, and the wait should not be so long. The stories I've heard about children in Oakington–

[*member of public: "there are no children in Oakington."*]

JH

David Howarth tried to go into Oakington and he was barred. I don't know if it was a bad day...if I'm elected and if I'm barred, I'll keep trying.

SJJ

The biggest asylum problems are the Iraqis who've had to move to Jordan, and the Burmese who had to move to Thailand. We need to help these people. But there's a hierarchy of immigrants – you don't hear people complaining about those nasty Australians who've overstayed their visas, but you'll see the big parties running with dog-whistle politics.

Chair: one last question?

Question

All of you have expressed some sympathy for the position of Palestinians – how would you push Israel to stop abusing its international obligations?

JH

We need to remember that for Gaza, the blockade is from both Israel and Egypt.

SSJ

We need to break the connection with the US and stop pretending we're Britain's Greece to America's Rome.

OH

This is the problem when we try to found a country on a religion. It's only happened twice – Israel and Pakistan. I don't know what we can do as a nation – Israel will ignore us, it will have to because of its religion.

DZ

Anybody who has an answer will get an instant Nobel Peace Prize.

MB

An arms embargo, mass campaigning, embargo of Israeli products.

The Chair invited candidates to deliver a short summing-up.

DZ

I expect a bit of a kick-about, but remember, don't forget about the real enemy out there – in 30 days we could have a Conservative government. Please think about this.

MB

The real enemy is capitalism, we stand for mobilisation.

SSJ

We'll be lucky to have a handful of MPs, but don't forget how a few people can shine a bright light into murky corners, for example Royal Prerogative or expenses.

JH

I'm very proud of my party and our record of voting on Iraq. Our policy is empowerment. The choice is between me and Daniel Zeichner. If I'm elected, I'll do all I can to scrap nuclear weapons in Britain and to try to walk into Oakington.

A member of the public shouted "will you prop up the Tories?" At this point the Chair moved onto Old Holdborn, whose closing comments unfortunately I missed, and the meeting ended.