Note from Chairman of the Foreign Policy Commission of the Central Committee of the VKP (b), V. Grigorian, to V.M. Molotov regarding British parliamentary elections, 6 December 1951

To Comrade V.M. Molotov,

The Foreign Policy Commission (FPC) presents a note about the results of the British parliamentary elections.

Chairman of the Foreign Policy Commission, Central Committee of the VKP (b)

[Signature] (V. Grigorian)

ABOUT THE RESULTS OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN BRITAIN

As a result of the extraordinary parliamentary elections which took place on 25 October 1951, the main political parties of Britain received the following number of votes and seats in Parliament:[[1]](#footnote-1)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Party | Votes | Percentage | Seats |
| Conservative and parties siding with them | 13,708,773 | 48% | 321 |
| Labour | 13.911.580 | 48.7% | 295 |
| Liberal | 723,550 | 2.5% | 6 |
| Communist | 21,640 | 0.08% | 0 |
| Other parties | 177,329 | 0.62% | 3 |

From 35 million registered voters (650,000 more than in 1950), 28.5 million participated in the elections, yielding 82.6% voter turnout which testifies to some decrease in activity of voters in comparison with 1950, when 84 % of voters took part in elections.

The elections took place in 625 counties with 1,376 candidates put forward (492 candidates less than at elections in February, 1950). The Labour Party and the Conservative Party had the same number of candidates (617).

In comparison with elections of 1950, Labour lost 20 seats, the Liberals lost three seats and the Conservatives gained 24 seats.

The cited data testifies to the defeat of the Labour Party, which has lost 100 mandates in total since the elections of 1945. In the last elections Labour received 0.1 % votes less than in 1945 while Conservatives received 8.3% votes more. At present, the Conservatives are the parliamentary majority, holding 26 more seats than the Labour, and 17 seats more than all the other parties.

The fact that the Attlee government, having decided to hold an election long before the expiration of Parliament’s term, has suffered a defeat, points to the political bankruptcy of the British Labour movement.

By October 1951, after the Labour government’s six-year rule, about three-quarters of trade union members (5-6 million) in the British Trade Union Congress opposed the government’s policy of so-called salary “freezing” and subsequently promoting the growth of capitalists’ incomes. A number of big British trade unions comprised of over two million people (including trade unions of machine engineers, electricians, automotive industry workers, construction workers, Scottish miners, firemen, etc.) called for modifications in the Labour government’s foreign policy, insisting they sign the Pact of Peace among the five great states.

Discontent was especially strongly demonstrated at the BTC[[2]](#footnote-2) last September and at the Labour party conference in Scarborough last October. It is indicative that during the Labour Party Executive committee elections in Scarborough, Bevan and his supporters (Barbara Castle[[3]](#footnote-3), Thomas Driberg[[4]](#footnote-4) and Ian Mikardo[[5]](#footnote-5)) demagogically opposed the governmental rearmament programmes and received the most votes while the Labour Minister of Defence, Shinwell, a member of the Executive committee for 11 years, was blackballed.

The British people’s frustration with the policy of the Labour Right found its expression in a number of election counties where the so-called “Labour Left” from Bevan’s group stood out in elections. The Labour Party has not only kept all of its 1951 seats, but it has also gotten a few more votes. Bevan was elected by a majority of 20,000; Wilson, elected in 1950 by majority of 857 votes, was elected in 1951 by majority of 1,193 votes; the “Bevanites” Freeman[[6]](#footnote-6), Mikardo, Castle and Foot[[7]](#footnote-7) were all elected to Parliament.

Ironically, the Labour Party leaders were not actually striving to win the elections because they believed that a transition of the parliamentary Labour faction to the opposition would prevent the further growth of public mistrust of Party leadership.

Meanwhile, the Conservative Party leaders prepared for elections by developing great propaganda and working to attract voters who formerly had supported the Liberals or Labour. After the elections of 1950, the Conservative Party Central Bureau continued to publish a lot of propaganda material which they disseminated at low prices.

Although they supported Attlee’s government on issues of foreign and domestic policy, the Conservatives opposed salary freezing, and criticised the “weakness and indecisiveness” of the Labour Party’s foreign policy in Western Europe and the Near East to gain support for their campaign during the elections.

Playing to the known chauvinistic sentiment in a certain part of the native population, the Conservatives promised to “promote the prestige of Britain as a Great Power” and to improve the influence of Britain in the countries of the British Empire.

With false intent, the Conservatives promised British workers that they would lower prices on essential products by reducing the “purchase tax”, support the reduction of governmental expenses, improve social services and build 300,000 new houses per year if they came to power.

It should be noted that even though the Conservative Party leaders aspired to shift voters’ attention to domestic issues, due to the growth of an anti-war mood among the British masses in most of the counties, the issue of peace was nonetheless put forward. W. Churchill, leader of Conservatives, at the last stage of election campaign, acted as an “advocate” for the peaceful resolution of international problems. The Conservatives falsely assured voters that they had no aggressive plans concerning the Soviet Union and the national democratic countries.

The Conservative Party leaders, who were aware that the Liberal Party was paramount for the election results, aimed to gain greater support from it. In the last elections, the Liberals had supported Conservative Party candidates in 28 counties. On the other hand, the Conservative Party supported 5 liberal candidates, including Clement Davies[[8]](#footnote-8), the leader of the Liberal Party parliamentary faction.

Analysis of 1951 elections results in the counties:

In 1950 the Conservatives gained more votes than Labour (52-60%) in the rural and nonindustrial counties of Southern and Middle England inhabited mainly by middle and lower-middle class. The Conservatives received some of the middle class votes (petty bourgeoisie, farmers and intellectuals) that had supported Labour in 1950. Most of the parliamentary seats lost by the Labour Party were from the counties where the Labour and Conservative positions were almost equal at the elections in February 1950, including Lancashire (Oldham and Manchester), Doncaster, South Battersea and others. During preparation for the elections, the Conservatives concentrated their attention on these counties.

In a number of counties (Darlington, West Middlesbrough, Plymouth, North Riding, Rochdale, etc.) the Conservatives won only because the Liberals had sharply reduced their number of candidates (from 475 at elections of 1950 to 108 in 1951). Therefore, a considerable part of the new votes for the Conservatives was from the voters (mainly middle class) who had voted for the Liberals in 1950 and were hesitant in 1951. Upon analysing the election results in the counties where the Liberals did not present their candidates in 1951, on average, two-thirds of voters who formerly supported the Liberals voted for the Conservatives, and one-third voted for Labour.

US pressure certainly influenced the election outcome. Representatives of 100 large US banks and trade corporations openly declared that victory for the Conservatives would enable Churchill's new government to gain extensive American financial support. It is known that the Conservative government has already addressed an official request to allocate a certain share of American funds intended for economic “assistance” to Europe for Britain.

The Conservative victory does not reflect any serious shift of public opinion in favour of the Conservatives. Owing to features of the British electoral system (“majority” principle), the Conservative Party received the majority of parliamentary seats, despite having actually gained 190,000 votes less than the Labour Party did. The Conservatives only have a narrow majority in Parliament (51.2 % of all mandates). The American reactionary circles have openly expressed their disappointment, noting that the Conservative Party has not managed to create a “steady” and “strong” government in Britain.

The Conservative government tried to expand their majority in Parliament by reaching an agreement with the Liberals. However, these attempts had no success due to Liberal leader Davies’s refusal to enter government.

The results of the 1951 parliamentary elections have underlined the weakness of the British Communist Party. Despite presenting 10 candidates, the Communist Party has not gained a single seat in Parliament, and has even lost all its election deposits because the Communist Party candidates gained less than one-eighth of the votes in their election counties. In the counties where Communist Party candidates were presented, they gained 21,640 votes in total.

Their failure to put communists in Parliament proves that the British Communist Party leaders have still not made all of the necessary adjustments from the results of the elections in February 1950, and have struggled to improve and expand their influence on the masses.

Despite the launch of a new British Communist Party program (“Britain’s way to socialism”), the Communist Party has still not paid enough attention to organisational work among the masses in its daily political work and has not implemented real change in the primary party structures necessary to improve the party’s relations with the masses. The number of party members continues to decline, and is now at 36,000 compared to 65,000 in 1943.

During the elections the Communist Party’s tactical line propagated a fairly straightforward platform to British workers. Its central focus was on the issue of peace and the improvement of workers’ living conditions. The Communist Party rallied the voters to unite in order to defeat the Conservatives, and to vote for Labour in the counties where the Communists did not present any candidates. However, in spite of the fact that the Communist Party has improved its propaganda among the masses through its campaign (organisation of meetings, demonstrations, appeals to mass organisations to unite efforts against the Conservatives), it has not yet found efficient forms and methods of cooperating with mass trade unions and labour and cooperative organisations in the campaign. For example, the Communist Party did not actively participate in committees on parliamentary elections, but rather, spontaneously appeared at the enterprises operating under the slogan, “Crush the Conservatives”. The Communist Party has also not made timely attempts to let its candidates deliver speeches at the local trade unions and other workers’ meetings.

Sometimes, in attempts to achieve an electoral agreement with the mass workers’ organisations, local party organisations weakened their ideological and political efforts in the struggle against the right-wing Labour leaders.

During the election campaign, the Communist Party devoted too little attention towards popularising their ‘British way to socialism’ programme. While conducting propaganda in election districts, candidates from the Communist Party and party members did not coordinate discussion of current issues with deep and comprehensive explanations of the programme’s objectives.

The Communist Party did not utilise the rise of public activity during the elections to gain signatures for the Petition for the Pact of Peace, and they did not involve enough ordinary members of the Labour Party and trade unions in the peace movement.

It’s also notable that H. Pollitt, the Communist Party Secretary; General; P. Dutt[[9]](#footnote-9), the Communist Party Vice-Chairman; W. Gallacher[[10]](#footnote-10), the Communist Party Chairman and other outstanding figures of British Communist Party did not participate in the parliamentary elections.

It is necessary to note that, despite a number of serious drawbacks for the Communist Party in the parliamentary elections, the party leaders have ignored these drawbacks and the conclusions in their speeches to the party regarding the last parliamentary elections.

[RSASPH, f. 82, inv. 2, file 1146, pp. 109-115]

Keywords: British elections

1. “Economist” 3.XI.1951 (reference to the source in the original document). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BTC (TUC) - Trades Union Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Castle, Barbara, Baroness Blackburn (1910-2002) – British politician, one of the most prominent members of the Labour party in 1950s­­­­-60s; MP for Blackburn (1945-1979), Parliamentary Private Secretary to Sir Stafford Cripps, Secretary of Trade (1945-1951), leading member of the ‘Bevanites’, head of the Parliamentary Labour faction of (1958-1959), Minister in Harold Wilson's Labour office (1964-1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Driberg, Thomas, Baron Bradwell (1905 - 1976) – British politician, a journalist, member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (1920-1941), member of the Labour Party National Executive Committee (1949-1974), Chairman of the Labour party (1957 – 1958). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mikardo, Ian (known as ‘Mik’, 1908-1993) - Member of the Labour Party National Committee (1950-1959 and 1960-1978), Labour party Chairman (1973-1978), Vice-President of the Socialist International (1978-83). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Freeman, John (1915-2014) - British Labour politician, diplomat and journalist, Secretary of the Ministry of Supply (1947-1951), left the cabinet with A. Bevan and H. Wilson in disagreement with the increase of expenses for the military operations in Korea in 1951, leader of the popular BBC program, “Face to Face” (1961-1965), British High Commissioner in India (1965-1968), Ambassador in the USA (1969-1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Foot, Michael (1913-2010) – “Founding father” of campaign for nuclear disarmament, Labour Left, Editor of the “Evening Standard” (1942-1944), Editor of “Daily Tribune” (1948-1952 and 1955-1960), State Secretary of Unemployment (1974-1976), Head of Labour faction in Parliament (1976-1980), leader of Labour Party (1980-1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Davies, Clement Edward (1884-1962) - Head of the Liberal party of Great Britain (1945-1956), offered the post of Minister of Education by Churchill, but refused for the sake of preserving the unity of the Liberal Party. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dutt, Rajani Palme (also known as Palme Dutt, 1896-1974) – an outstanding journalist and theorist of the Great Britain Communist party. ditor-in-chief of the “Daily Worker” (1936-1939), - Secretary General of the Communist Party of Great Britain in (1939-1941). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gallacher, William (1881-1965) - member of trade-union movement of Scotland, one of founders of the Communist Party of Great Britain, twice elected to Parliament, Chairman of the Communist Party of Great Britain (1956-1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)