

Local elections in England reveal mass disaffection

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Local government elections held in England on Thursday 7 May revealed widespread political disaffection, particularly in working class areas.

The elections covered a third of all council seats. Some 20 million people were entitled to vote for the 13,000 candidates standing for election in 166 town halls. The average turn-out of 26 per cent was amongst the lowest ever recorded. Just under one in three voted in the capital, where a referendum was held the same day to decide on establishing a new London Assembly and an elected Mayor. This produced a 76 per cent majority in favour.

The size of the abstention produced very uneven results, but did not work in favour of any of the main parties. The Labour Party lost 140 councillors and the Liberal Democrats over 100. The Tories recorded a slight increase, particularly in the rural south, but this was from an all-time low in the 1994 elections.

Of most significance was the dramatic decline in support for Labour in its traditional strongholds. In Liverpool Labour lost eight seats, enabling the Liberal Democrats to take control of their first metropolitan council. Just one in five of those eligible voted in the city.

Labour lost seats in all the major working class cities, including Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield. Labour council leaders lost their seats in Sheffield and Hackney, London.

Only days before, Prime Minister Tony Blair called on voters to turn out en masse to show their confidence in his government on its first anniversary. The media have conducted an exhaustive public relations campaign on Blair's behalf, praising him as a man able to communicate directly with "the people."

Blair's message proved to be unpalatable, however, leaving Labour publicity officers with the unenviable

task of putting a brave face on this setback. By Friday morning Blair was claiming the result as the "best ever for a sitting government!" New Labour even claimed that so many had stayed at home because they were content.

The widespread disaffection of millions of working people indicated in these results is not a temporary state of affairs. Labour has lost the active support of broad masses of working people and, with it, any stable social base. Now that it has junked its old programme of social reformism, there is nothing to distinguish it from any of the other capitalist parties.

Throughout the country there were a spate of "independent" Labour candidates. Some of these are in protest against the right-wing trajectory of the Blair government. Others are based on populist campaigns against corruption in Labour-controlled authorities. Labour did particularly badly in councils where there have been allegations of financial impropriety, like Hull and Doncaster. Hull City Council has been the focus of allegations of nepotism and corruption involving, amongst others, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's son.

The Labour leadership made extraordinary efforts to conceal growing rifts within its ranks and prevent any expression of dissent from the official line. Potential candidates were quizzed on their political and financial relations. Anyone interviewed by the press had their comments prepared for them by Central Office, which used radio pagers to inform them what they were to say.



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