

Britain: Labour suffers heavy losses in local elections and London mayoral race

Chris Marsden
6 May 2000

The Labour Party suffered a battering in elections held May 5 for London mayor and local councils. After seeing 560 councillors lose their seats, Labour lost control of 15 metropolitan councils.

Its most high profile setback was the election of Ken Livingstone as London mayor. Livingstone stood as an independent, after Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair ensured that he was not selected as the official Labour Party candidate, and then expelled him from the party when he announced his candidacy.

Not only was the election the first for the mayor of a major British city, it was held on a system of proportional representation, with voters able to indicate their first and second preferences. Labour's official candidate Frank Dobson ended a poor third. But if all first and second preference votes had counted, he would have come fourth, behind the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

Despite near universal press hostility—the usually pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* had called for a vote for Conservative candidate Stephen Norris in order to stop Livingstone, alongside similar calls by the Tory press—Livingstone won 39 percent of first preference votes, compared with 27.1 percent for Norris, and just 13.1 percent for Dobson.

In the accompanying election of 25 members to the newly created Greater London Assembly, Labour and the Conservatives tied with nine seats each. The Liberal Democrats won 4 and the Greens 3.

Labour fared no better in the local elections. It lost the northern cities of Bradford and Oldham and suffered heavy losses throughout the industrial heartland of the West Midlands, home to the Rover car plant now threatened with closure.

Everything had been done to ensure a high turnout in the elections. Polling booths were placed in

supermarkets and postal votes were extended. A massive budget was expended on the London Assembly elections, which, together with the use of proportional representation, was hailed as the onset of a new era of participatory democracy.

Yet two-thirds of the electorate stayed at home. Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats benefited from the widespread abstention. Turnout in both the London mayoral race and local government elections hovered around 35 percent, but was much worse in traditional Labour strongholds in the inner cities. In one Liverpool ward turnout was just 15 percent, and it is estimated that on a national scale the percentage of Tory voters who went to the polls was twice that of Labour voters.

The Liberal Democrats were the main beneficiaries in the metropolitan areas. The Tories, on the other hand, scored their successes in the countryside and coastal towns by mobilising their core supporters on a law-and-order, anti-immigrant ticket. These policies, however, proved unpalatable to the broad mass of the electorate. It is significant that in Romsey, the one parliamentary by-election held on the same day, the Liberal Democrats won with a 3,000 majority in a former Conservative stronghold. Labour's vote collapsed to under 5 percent.

Livingstone's victory in London epitomises Labour's difficulties and the attitude of broad sections of working people to Blair's government. Rejected as Labour's official candidate because of his past association with the party's left wing, Livingstone's victory was a slap in the face for the party leadership.

Blair's claim to fame was that he had secured Labour a broad-based constituency and enabled it to break out of its past reliance on the working class. In the event, however, Labour has succeeded in alienating its

working class constituency while simultaneously losing the support of many of its new-found friends amongst former Tory voters.

Livingstone, whose vote was gathered from across the political and social spectrum, was able to trump Blair at his own game, combining pledges to tackle poverty with appeals to big business. He has promised “a new style of politics and a new kind of governance”, inviting all-party collaboration in his cabinet and a rotating deputy mayor post, with representatives of the Tories, Liberal Democrats and Greens holding the position at various times. But more than anything done by Livingstone, it was Blair who was the architect of Labour's defeat.

The prime minister personifies the upper-middle-class layers who enriched themselves during the boom years of the 1980s. He was catapulted to political prominence at a time of deepening Tory unpopularity and charged with overseeing Labour's final break with its old reformist programme. Since coming to power, he has relied on the media to present him as a great and popular leader, and to proclaim his anti-welfare measures and pro-business politics as the only game in town. His efforts to prevent Livingstone from standing proceeded from an arrogant belief that his personal popularity was unassailable, and that both the party and the electorate would bow to his wishes.

Thursday's elections have proved how far removed from reality the perceptions of the Blair leadership really are. No amount of media hype or jiggling with the constitutional set-up can conceal that—three years after taking office and with a possible general election next May—the government lacks any substantial social base and is deeply unpopular with wide layers of the population.

This goes to the heart of a crisis of rule for British capitalism. Throughout the last century the Labour Party, together with the trade unions, functioned as the essential political mechanisms for maintaining social order. Their advocacy of social reforms enabled class conflict to be confined within a parliamentary framework. Labour's right-wing evolution has left workers completely excluded and alienated from official politics. With the gap between the super-rich and the mass of ordinary working people growing ever wider, this has explosive social and political implications for the future.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact