

London by-election records Labour's second largest fall in votes

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Last week's by-election in Tottenham, north London, confirmed the growing antipathy of many workers to the Blair government. Although Labour managed to hold its seat in this deprived and ethnically mixed working class inner-city neighbourhood in Thursday's poll, it was on a severely reduced vote of 8,785. Turnout was just 25 percent, down by nearly a third from the 1997 general election.

Besides the low turnout, mounting disaffection with Labour was reflected in a swing of 12 percent to the Liberal Democrats, who gained 3,139 votes, pushing them into second place in front of the Conservatives.

The by-election was caused by the death of Labour MP Bernie Grant from a heart attack in April. Guyanese-born Grant established his reputation as one of Labour leading lefts in 1985 when he blamed heavy-handed policing and the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher for provoking the outbreak of violent disturbances by youth on the Broadwater Farm housing estate. Two years later, he was elected MP for Tottenham, increasing Labour's majority of 4,000 in 1987 to 20,000 in 1997 and making it one of the party's 50 safest seats nationally.

In line with Labour's swing to the right and abandonment of its previous social reformist policies, Grant ditched such rhetoric—speaking out in defence of Britain's monarchy, Blair's welfare cuts and private education.

Grant's successor is barrister David Lammy, who at 27 is now the youngest MP in Westminster. In his victory speech, Lammy, dubbed Labour's new “great black hope”, claimed the result proved that “the heartlands of Tottenham are safe in the hands of New Labour”. In reality, the party's majority has been slashed to just over 5,000. The BBC noted that the result was Labour's second largest fall in its voter share

in an English constituency. Two of the three worst turnout figures in by-elections in almost 100 years have also been recorded during the last 12 months. Since Labour was elected in 1997, almost two-thirds of by-elections have seen the abstention rate going over 50 percent.

Although at this point inchoate, the Tottenham by-election is indicative of a leftward shift amongst working people. The Liberal Democrats have sought to position themselves to the left of the Labour Party on issues such as National Health Service funding and welfare payments and gained votes for doing so. The London Socialist Alliance, a coalition of middle class radical groups advancing limited social reforms, came in fourth with 5.39 percent (885 votes). The Green Party came fifth with 3.69 percent (606). In contrast, Conservative hopes of picking up support for its racist, anti-immigrant policies amongst white workers in the constituency foundered, with the party falling to third place on 2,634 votes. The right-wing anti-European Union UK Independent Party recorded just 136 votes.



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