

Britain's general election: Labour secures second term, but turnout plummets to record low

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Britain's Labour government has won a second term in office in Thursday's general election. With 638 of 659 seats declared, Prime Minister Tony Blair is projected to hold a majority of 167 in parliament—the first occasion that the Labour Party has secured a full second term in office. The majority of undeclared seats are in Northern Ireland.

Labour's victory, however, is tempered by the fact that the 2001 election is expected to record the lowest turnout since 1918. Approximately 59.1 percent of those eligible to vote did so, compared with 71.6 percent at the 1997 general election—then the lowest turnout since the Second World War. Labour's share of the vote so far has dropped by 2.4 percent on 1997.

The result caused the almost immediate resignation of Conservative Party leader William Hague, whose party now faces its longest period out of office since the 1920s. There was virtually no revival in Tory support. It lost eight seats and won eight seats, including two former safe Tory seats in Romford and Tatton and just one in Scotland—from zero in 1997.

In a dramatic statement to the press outside Conservative Central Office in London at 8 a.m. GMT, Hague said he would stand down as leader as soon as a successor had been chosen who could “take new initiatives and hopefully command a larger personal following in the country.” The first difficulty will almost certainly be finding someone prepared to take on the job, opening the way for a bitter leadership contest in a party that has become gravely divided.

As a consequence of the low turnout, parliament is left virtually unchanged, with a small decrease in Labour's seats, a small rise in the number of Tories and Liberal Democrats. This picture of stagnation is the

result of the fact that the alienation of millions from the official political process has become even greater over the last four years. Whilst Labour had secured the backing of much of big business and the press, its vote has sharply declined in the major urban and working class conurbations.

Some 44 million people were entitled to vote in the general election in 659 constituencies—529 in England, 72 in Scotland, 40 in Wales and 18 in Northern Ireland. Under Britain's simple majority voting system, each constituency elects a single MP, and each voter casts a single ballot.

Despite the government changing the rules on postal voting in an attempt to boost poll turnout, less than three in five people voted. In many areas turnout fell below 50 percent, with declines of up to 18 percent. The lowest turnout so far was recorded in the safe Labour constituency of Liverpool Riverside, where just 34.1 percent of the electorate voted—a massive drop of 17.5 percent on 1997.

This means that far more people failed to vote than voted for the government.

The only area that bucked the trend was in Wyre Forest, where retired consultant Dr. Richard Taylor overturned a 7,000 Labour majority to become only the second independent MP elected to Westminster since 1945. Taylor's “Health Concern” party was formed to protest at the running down of health care, in particular the closure of emergency services at the local hospital.

The Liberal Democrats could celebrate some gains, capturing seats mainly from the Tories, but also scoring well in traditional Labour areas. In Barnsley, there was an over 5 percent swing to the Liberal Democrats, with Labour majorities being substantially reduced. The

Liberal Democrats' increased share of the vote can be largely attributed to their efforts to position themselves to the left of Labour, with their pledge to raise taxes in order to fund improvements in public services. The party's most notable success was winning a 2,586 majority in Chesterfield, until this election the seat of Tony Benn, the leader of Labour's left wing, who stood down prior to this election.

The nationalist parties did not benefit significantly from voters' disgust with Labour. The Scottish National Party lost its Galloway and Upper Nithsdale seat to the Tories and saw its total vote drop by 2 percent. Plaid Cymru won one seat and lost one seat, with a marginally increased total vote. The Tories still have no seat in Wales.

Of those parties standing as a left alternative to the Labour Party, the Scottish Socialist Party won over 70,000 votes in the 72 Scottish seats. In England and Wales the Socialist Alliance received 57,553 votes from almost 100 constituencies. The Socialist Labour Party of Arthur Scargill stood in 114 constituencies throughout Britain and received 57,075 votes. In Hartlepool, where Scargill had stood against disgraced former Labour minister Peter Mandelson, the SLP failed to retain its deposit with just 2.4 percent of the vote.

In Oldham, the fascist British National Party used the campaign against asylum-seekers by the official parties as a springboard to mount provocations and heighten racial tensions, which led to riots between local Asian youth and the police during the election campaign. The BNP took more than 11,000 votes in the town's two seats, their best vote ever. BNP leader Nick Griffin came third in Oldham West and Royston, winning 16 percent of a low turnout.

Whilst Blair was triumphal, his parliamentary majority rests on the support of just one in four people eligible to vote—severely undermining his claim that Labour has a “mandate to govern” and push through a major round of privatisations in health, education and public services.

As reflected in the massive abstention, the social opposition to the Blair government takes as of yet a generally passive form. At the same time, there are indications that many people took a conscious decision not to vote because they felt that none of the parties really stood for their interests. Far from fulfilling his

pledge to broaden the base of politics in Britain, Blair's government has only narrowed it still further. Despite the best efforts of the main parties, there had been indications of the type of social and political tensions brewing beneath the surface during the election with a series of strikes and inner-city disturbances.

The collapse of the Tory Party cannot obscure that Labour will now have to deal with problematic areas it had postponed during its first term in office in a weakened position. In Northern Ireland, where dissident Republicans shot and wounded two police officers outside a polling booth in a drive-by shooting, the so-called peace agreement remains stalled.

Most importantly, the government will have to take a clear stance on the issue of whether Britain should join the European single currency, the euro. On polling day, sterling hit a 15-year low against the dollar as the markets prepared for a Labour victory and an early referendum on euro membership. The fall was compounded by news that the British economy was also weakening—manufacturing output slumping by 0.9 percent on April.

* Results for local government elections, postponed due to foot and mouth disease, were also held Thursday and were expected later in the day.



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