

# Britain: local government elections reveal political disaffection and stagnation

Julie Hyland  
4 May 2002

Elections in 5,800 local authority seats in England were held on May 2. Covering as they did 32 London boroughs, 36 Metropolitan authorities, 88 district councils and 18 unitary authorities, some 22 million people were eligible to vote. With most results in, but a detailed breakdown as yet unavailable, certain provisional points can be made.

With one or two exceptions, the overall picture is one of disaffection with all the major parties resulting in a general political stagnation. Great efforts had been made to turn out the voters, after last year's council elections had recorded an all-time low 29 percent participation. For the first time, voters in several areas were able to cast their ballots online or by text message, and eight councils held all postal-ballots. Whilst this did increase turnout—the all postal-ballots raised participation by up to 25 percent—the overall impact was marginal. Just one in three of those eligible to vote did so.

The Labour Party was defending almost half the seats up for election. Winning 33 percent of the vote, the government lost a net 290 councillors, and 20 councils. Such losses are considered minimal, however, and, although patchy, the Labour Party's vote generally held nationally.

A significant factor seems to be the reaction to the government's recent budget announcement that it will raise income tax by one percent to increase funding for the National Health Service (NHS). Within limits, the measure has proved relatively popular amongst the working class, who are completely dependent upon the NHS, despite the fact that the across the board tax hike hits their incomes most heavily. However the measure was resented most strongly amongst better off sections of the middle class, who are hostile to any increases in taxation to fund public services. This appears to explain

why Labour did most poorly against the Tories in the more prosperous areas of London, with an 8 percent swing that lost it control of former gains from the Conservatives in areas like Wokingham and Enfield, but increased its vote marginally in more heavily working class areas, like Sheffield and Birmingham where it had suffered losses to the Liberal Democrats in recent years. But attitudes towards the measure on either side are not so strongly held so as to have produced more significant upsets.

The Conservatives performed poorly, with new party leader Iain Duncan Smith doing little to stem the party's bleeding-away of support. Duncan Smith had sought to position the party further to the right of Labour, making the government's tax rise one of its major campaigns. Although winning 34 percent of the vote—one percent more than Labour—and gaining 211 seats, this fell well short of the 500 or so needed to show that it was making a comeback. The Tories stand against increased health spending did not make it any friends, outside of the more prosperous constituencies. Indeed, the Tories lost control of one of only two metropolitan councils that they had held, in Calderdale, West Yorkshire.

The Liberal Democrats, who try to position themselves slightly to the left of Labour on social issues, made bigger, but still modest gains with a swing of around eight percent away from Labour. With 27 percent of the vote, the Liberal Democrats gained just 25 councillors. Significantly, whilst taking a few seats from the Conservatives and Labour in areas where it forms the main opposition party, in those areas like Sheffield that it had previously won from Labour, it lost ground because it is easier to see the difference between rhetoric and reality.

Most attention had been focused on Burnley and

Oldham in northwest England, where the fascist British National Party (BNP) fielded the bulk of their 68 candidates nationally. The official parties and the press exorcised its campaign before the election, with sweeping comparisons being made between the electoral danger posed by the BNP and that represented by Front Nationale leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in France.

The BNP were able to gain three seats in Burnley, with its total vote in the 19 seats it stood averaging 18 percent. Whilst this is the highest percentage for the fascists since the 1970s, reaction to it should be kept in proportion. The BNP targeted just one or two areas, working to stoke up racial tensions in an already polarised atmosphere. A hysterical media campaign—designed above all to frighten people into voting for the official parties—had enabled it to monopolise headlines and column inches beyond all relation to its support. In the event, even those successful BNP candidates managed to mobilise no more than a few hundred people (and it seems in relatively prosperous areas) on the basis of xenophobic appeals to advance “rights for whites”.

The overall for vote for “other” parties nationally was just five percent. Outside of the BNP’s vote, there is no breakdown so far of what this percentage is comprised of politically. Certain high-profile campaigns by candidates who appeared independent of the establishment parties made some headway in local areas. These include a residents group in Elmbridge and the Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern (IKHHC), in Wyre Forest.

The results were even more diffuse in the several mayoral elections held at the same time. Piloted by Labour as part of its claim to be “reinvigorating democracy”, the polls for the first directly elected mayors outside London took place in Watford, Doncaster, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Lewisham, Newham, and North Tyneside. The official parties managed almost evenly to divide the seats between them. In Hartlepool, seat of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s former chief spin-doctor Peter Mandelson, voters elected a monkey as mayor, or rather a man dressed up as one. Stuart Drummond, alias H’Angus the Monkey, Hartlepool football club’s mascot, won 60 percent of the vote with his slogan “free bananas for schoolchildren”.

This last result is perhaps most emblematic of the

character of the entire election—one entirely removed from the concerns and interests of working people, and therefore of little interest, much less excitement. Whilst the main parties may congratulate themselves for having largely preserved the status quo, there is no denying the underlying alienation from official politics.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**