

Britain: Significant losses for Labour in local elections

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Most of Britain went to the polls on Thursday, May 1, with the exception of London, as elections to the Scottish parliament, Welsh Assembly and English local authorities took place.

The results give certain indications about the state of the body politic. Above all, they scotch media claims that Prime Minister Tony Blair would benefit from the equivalent of the “Falklands factor”—the postwar surge in support that enabled Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government to be reelected for a second term in 1983.

Far from seeing a “Baghdad bounce” as a reward for the military success in Iraq, the election showed that popular opposition to the war that gave rise to the largest ever demonstration held in Britain on February 15 has not gone away.

Overall the turnout averaged just over 30 percent, a poor record even for local elections and one that would have been significantly lower were it not for the introduction of all-postal ballots in certain areas and electronic voting in several others. Even in these areas the number of votes cast stayed at around 48 percent—a significant expression of the level of disaffection with all the official parties and with Labour in particular. In general the lowest voter turnouts were in urban areas that were once Labour strongholds.

Amongst those who voted, Labour made its biggest losses since the Winter of Discontent in 1978/79—when the government of James Callaghan faced a wave of strikes against its efforts to clamp down on wages and impose cuts in public spending.

Labour was down by more than 750 council seats, causing it to lose control of some metropolitan areas such as Birmingham—previously the party’s largest local authority. The result is a double blow for Labour, in that it expresses the party’s growing alienation from

its traditional working class supporters and particularly amongst Britain’s Muslims—both as a result of its right-wing domestic policies and popular opposition to Blair’s war against Iraq.

A similar pattern is expressed in Wrexham, which Labour lost to the independent John Marek, who recently resigned from Labour and fought on a pro-public sector programme that included supporting striking firefighters.

For the same reason, the Liberal Democrats who have sought to position themselves to Labour’s left and who at least initially made a show of opposing a US-led war of aggression, recorded their best-ever result with a 30 percent share of the vote.

This pattern of those perceived as being more left-wing, antiwar, pro-welfare or at least anti-Blair winning support was underlined in Scotland and Wales.

In Scotland, Labour’s losses included Edinburgh South and Strathkelvin & Bearsden to an independent candidate protesting the closure of Stobhill hospital—leaving it with no overall control in the parliament.

The most significant beneficiary from anti-Labour sentiment was the Scottish Socialist Party, which is expected to win at least eight seats and combines advocacy of Scottish independence with anti-capitalist rhetoric and calls for social reforms. Others who benefited were the Greens and four independents. The Scottish Nationalist Party, like their Welsh counterparts Plaid Cymru, saw their support fall.

At first glance Wales seemed to have brooked the trend of Labour losses. The party’s share of the vote as a proportion of the turnout (just 34 percent) rose slightly, giving Labour overall control of the Assembly. But Welsh Labour, as it is now known, has taken pains to distance itself from the most right-wing excesses of

its parent body and champions certain limited “Old Labour” welfare measures under its leader, Rhodri Morgan—a man whom Blair had made clear he was opposed to and whose public standing in Wales rose as a result.

As for the Conservatives, they were left in the strange position of gaining more than 540 council seats and becoming the largest party of local government, but still being rubbished in the media for having made no significant electoral recovery.

In truth its apparent success owes more to Labour’s failures than any real growth in its own support and the party is still suffering from intractable factional infighting. This was underscored graphically by the resignation of frontbench MP Crispin Blunt from the Tory Party frontbench, just as the polls closed. Branding Duncan Smith a “handicap” to the party, Blunt said, “Whatever the headline results in today’s local elections, the fact is the Conservative Party is making no real progress.”

The swing to the Tories, even if repeated in a general election, would still mean Labour winning a third term in office. The results indicate that whilst the Tories have been able to cling on to what remains of their traditional supporters—most of whom are aged 60 years and over—Labour is not only failing on this score but has also failed to keep the support of those floating voters in Middle England it convinced in 1997.

The success of the fascist British National Party in Burnley, England—where it became the town’s second largest party—seems to be localised and was not repeated elsewhere despite the party fielding one of its largest ever national slates. Its limited successes were the product of two factors—its ability to tap into the fears generated by the media and the official parties of Britain being swamped by asylum-seekers and the successful use of populist rhetoric denouncing Labour for its indifference to the fate of (white) working class communities.



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