

# Britain: Labour suffers a rout in local elections

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party suffered a crushing defeat in local elections, held on June 10 alongside elections to the European parliament and the London assembly.

The vote against Labour represents the most developed expression since the ouster of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's Popular Party in Spain of the mass repudiation of the political criminals who led the Iraq war.

Labour fell to third place in the share of the national vote. It lost more than 460 councillors and lost control of seven councils, including Newcastle upon Tyne, Trafford, Doncaster and Leeds. Labour has never before lost Doncaster, and Newcastle was a stronghold for 30 years. It has held the flagship council of Leeds for 25 years. Even in Barnsley, Labour only clung on by one seat.

The result equates to a 38 percent share of the popular vote for the Conservatives, followed by the Liberal Democrats who stood on an anti-Iraq war ticket at 29 percent, with Labour trailing in third place at 26 percent. The antiwar Green party almost doubled its number of councillors, with an average 11 percent share of the vote where it stood nationally. They have held seats in Leeds and Kirklees, increased their strength in Bradford and taken their first seat in Sheffield.

This is the first time a party in government has finished third in terms of national share of the vote in local elections.

Contrary to media claims that it was antiwar sections of the middle class and the Muslim community that have primarily deserted Labour, the government suffered its worst defeats in its former industrial heartlands. The only exception was in Birmingham, where Muslim wards that were expected to vote against Labour reelected Labour councillors on high turnouts. The Liberal Democrats have accused the party of electoral malpractice. One deposed Liberal Democrat councillor said that local "bigwigs" had come into Asian homes, pressuring voters to cast their

postal ballots in front of them, insisting they back Labour. "This is the politics of Pakistan or Bangladesh and they've brought it here," he said.

Labour's losses were registered despite a 40 percent turnout—an increase of 9 percent on last year and 16 percent on the last European elections. This still indicates that masses of people are totally alienated from official politics to the point where they will not register support for anyone. But it also means that many of those who came out to vote or sent in their postal ballots did so with the sole intention of registering their anger with Blair and the government.

In London, Ken Livingstone, who recently returned to Labour after being expelled from the party in 2002 and being elected mayor as an independent, did not win on first preference votes. He won because he was provided with second preference votes by the Respect-Unity coalition, led by former antiwar Labour MP George Galloway and the Socialist Workers Party, which secured 5 percent of the vote, and the Greens, which secured 8 percent of the vote.

This shows how the antiwar sentiment of the working class is redirected by the middle-class radical groups back towards support for the labour bureaucracy through its largely discredited "left" representatives. One of the last campaigning acts of Respect's mayoral candidate, Lindsey German of the Socialist Workers Party, was on behalf of Livingstone and Labour.

She wrote to the *Guardian* newspaper, warning of a "real risk that Ken Livingstone could be pipped by [Conservative] Steve Norris for the mayoral position" and pledging, "For the sake of London, I will be voting for [Livingstone] on the second preference vote and I hope that Respect voters will too."

As a result, Livingstone's vote in the mayoral contest was 11 percent higher than Labour's miserable tally in the London Assembly poll.

The biggest slump in Labour's vote in the capital was in City and East, which has a high Muslim population. There the Respect-Unity coalition beat the Liberal Democrats into third place, with 15 percent of the poll.

On top of this, there were a huge number of rejected votes—385,952 in the mayoral election and 167,071 in the London Assembly election. On its web site, the Respect coalition complains that Lindsey German polled 87,000 votes, nearly 5 percent of the total vote, but its tellers saw many more declared void: "Almost certainly this was because our voters who have English as a second language did not understand the instruction at the top of the ballots which told them to cast two votes—not one on each paper!—and the overwhelming majority of the disqualified votes had two votes on each paper!"

On the far right, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) won 14 percent of the vote in 148 wards where it stood. The British National Party won an average 16 percent in 80 wards it fought, down 5 percent on the average in wards it fought last year and this year.

The media has naturally focused on the vote as a personal rebuke for Blair, stressing that his leadership of the party is now in question. But his political fate is not the main issue.

Labour can still draw some comfort from the fact that the Tories need 43 percent of the vote to win a general election and face a major loss of votes to the UKIP, which advocates leaving the European Union.

Blair is also helped by the impotence of his nominal opponents within the Labour Party. He has urged his party to be resolute and insisted that there can be no turning back on Iraq or any other policy issue. He proclaimed, "The fact that the government loses council election results doesn't really augur much for the General Election."

Speaking in Washington after former US President Ronald Reagan's funeral, he said, "I think it's a question of holding our nerve and seeing it through."

In contrast, former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook has only said that Blair needs to reassure the public he had heard the antiwar message from the voters: "We understand your feelings and yes you have a point and if you vote Labour again it's not going to happen again."

Labour backbenchers are only reported as calling for Blair to focus on the domestic agenda and display respect for his party. And there is as yet no sign of a serious leadership challenge from Chancellor Gordon Brown or anyone else. Some Labour MPs have even urged Blair to delay a general election until 2006.

Though there are those within the bureaucracy who would like to see Blair step down—primarily to safeguard their own privileged positions—the vast majority of Labour MPs do not want to see any of his policies fail, in regard to either Iraq, his strategic alliance with Washington, or his economic and social agenda at home.

In this, there are great similarities with the situation in the US, where President Bush's main advantage is the political bankruptcy of his challenger, John Kerry, and the Democrats, and the common agreement of the ruling elite that the occupation of Iraq cannot fail.

Outside the major parties, moreover, the antiwar, anti-Labour vote was divided between the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and the Respect-Unity coalition—none of which articulate a viable political alternative to Labour.

Whatever happens to Blair in the short term, however, the more fundamental feature of the elections is that it confirms the thoroughgoing character of the transformed relationship between the working class and its old organisations.

It has been many years since workers believed that Labour was a vehicle for socialism. Indeed, Blair came to power based on an explicit repudiation of its old reformist programme. But even in the general elections of 1997 and 2001, many still saw Labour as being at least more progressive than the Tories. Subsequent events have demonstrated that it is not possible to implement policies shaped exclusively by the demands of the super-rich on both the international and domestic arena, and still maintain a viable social base of support.

Many of the layers who held their noses at the party's rightward turn and stood by Blair also now feel betrayed and took the elections as an opportunity to make this known.



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