

Britain: Labour's electoral meltdown continues to worsen

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The meltdown suffered by the Brown government in last week's local elections, coupled with Ken Livingstone's defeat by Boris Johnson in the contest for London Mayor, is a major staging post in the ongoing collapse of New Labour.

The party's share of the vote fell to a 40-year low of just 24 percent, compared with 44 percent for the Conservatives and 25 percent for the Liberal Democrats. But its eclipse by the Tories is only part of the picture. Turnout was just 35 percent, confirming the widespread alienation from all the major parties.

Labour has long ago lost most of the support it once enjoyed in working class areas. The May 1 poll demonstrated that it has now also lost much of those sections of the middle class electorate it had won from the Conservatives in 1997.

In England, these twin factors found expression in the Conservative victory in Bury, in the north, for the first time in 22 years, and Labour's loss of Reading, one of its few strongholds in the southeast.

The picture in Wales is even more devastating. Long considered Labour's heartland, the party has continued to hemorrhage support and lost control of Merthyr Tydfil, Blaueu Gwent, Torfaen, Caerphilly and Newport councils. No one did particularly well, least of all Labour's coalition partners in the Welsh Assembly, Plaid Cymru, as Labour's vote dispersed across the political spectrum and resulted in victories for the Liberal Democrats, Tories and independent councilors.

Even so, the rise in support for the Conservatives amongst those who turned out to vote would be enough to secure them a general election victory. The poll has been compared with the situation that faced John Major's Conservative administration in the local elections that preceded Labour's landslide victory in 1997.

Just as devastating for the government was Livingstone's defeat in London. Conservative candidate Boris Johnson has a high media profile, having cultivated his image as an eccentric plain speaker. He is in fact an arch right-winger, whose racist and anti-Islamic statements, and denunciations of people from Liverpool, has necessitated him making public apologies and made sections of the Tory party extremely nervous about his candidacy. In the final weeks, he was told to keep his mouth shut and maintain a low profile, leaving his campaign firmly under the control of Lynton Crosby who had spearheaded

electoral campaigns for former Australian prime minister John Howard.

The pro-Labour press and the party apparatus—along with Respect Renewal, the Socialist Workers Party and the Greens—had all urged support for Livingstone. Labour promoted Livingstone's support in the City of London, but it also hoped, with the aid of the nominally left and socialist parties, to be able to mobilise support in the inner-city areas, particularly amongst black and Asian workers, by portraying Livingstone as the “progressive” candidate.

Labour's vote did rise slightly in these areas, but not by nearly enough to counter Johnson's gains in the outer suburbs. The more fundamental problem for Livingstone and his left apologists was summed up by journalist Andrew Gilligan, who led the pro-Johnson offensive in the pages of the *Evening Standard*.

Responding to accusations that he was backing a reactionary, Gilligan retorted that, “Livingstone is the ally of some of the most reactionary forces in this city. I'm thinking of [Police Commissioner] Ian Blair, I'm thinking of property developers he's in bed with, I'm thinking of City big business.”

The reaction in Labour circles to its electoral meltdown centred on disaffection with Gordon Brown's premiership. He was condemned privately and publicly for his performance since taking over from Tony Blair in June 2007.

Martin Kettle, a personal friend of Blair, wrote in the *Guardian* that “the answer that stares these [Labour] MPs in the face is that, echoing Cromwell, they should tell [Brown]: ‘in the name of God, go.’ ” And there was widespread speculation as to whether a leadership challenge would be mounted and if so, when. Others more loyal to Brown urged him to “reconnect” with the electorate and Labour's traditional supporters, or to “renew” New Labour's “coalition,” supposedly marrying economic efficiency with social justice.

All that this produced was the pathetic spectacle of Brown seeking to emulate former US President Bill Clinton by telling the media how he felt “the hurt” of people struggling with rising prices and mortgage repayments.

In reality, Labour's performance under Brown has only deepened a crisis that began under Blair. When Blair left office, he was widely hated and led a government condemned for the

war against Iraq and viewed as a corrupt party of the super-rich. Its previous electoral showing in May 2007 gave it a predicted 27 percent of the national vote in a general election—just 3 percent higher than last week.

With Brown's successions to leadership, there was a concerted campaign to claim a new era for Labour. The *Daily Mirror* described him as a man "on fire," with a new "moral purpose," while the *Guardian* wrote of a new "dawn" for a "new government."

What actually took place was that Brown continued the big business agenda of Blair, bringing into government figures such as Sir Digby Jones, former head of the Confederation of British Industry, and praising Margaret Thatcher as a "conviction politician."

The deluded belief within Labour circles that the new premier would somehow restore the party's popularity found finished expression in Brown's humiliating retreat from plans to hold a snap election as early as November last year when it became clear that, at best, Labour's majority would be slashed and that it might even lose.

Brown's climb-down at that time took place in the aftermath of the collapse of Northern Rock, amidst scenes of savers queuing up to withdraw their money. Since then, the economic crisis that began in the US subprime mortgage market has spread throughout the world and had a particularly severe impact on Britain.

Brown admitted, "What people are most worried about...[is that] petrol prices are going up, food prices are going up, they are worried about utilities bills, they are worried about their standard of living, there is an uncertainty about the economy.... People's immediate priority is how to deal with the family budgets and the problems we face as a result of what is an economic downturn which started in America."

But while Brown claimed to understand the "anxiety" over economic insecurity, his government suffered particularly badly at the polls because of its decision to abolish the 10 pence tax band for lower-income workers. The move, which had been announced by Brown when he was chancellor in 2007 and took effect this year, hit millions of people earning less than £15,000 per annum. In the same budget, Brown had slashed the headline corporation tax rate by 2 pence.

Under these circumstances, how could anyone believe that Labour's support would not continue to plummet?

Since it came to power, New Labour has functioned as the political representative of the oligarchy, presiding over a historically unprecedented transfer of wealth from working people to the fabulously rich and the City. Only the flooding of the economy with cheap credit and rising property prices helped to partially conceal this process. Now that this possibility no longer exists, the full scale of Labour's decline becomes apparent.

There had been calls for the prime minister to modify the 10 pence tax rate change or make some kind of recompense. But,

beholden as it is to big business, Labour's room for manoeuvre is strictly limited. Writing in Rupert Murdoch's *Times* newspaper, Peter Riddell warned that "the real danger is that the government will find it hard to resist calls for relaxing spending controls and public sector pay limits in order to respond to the worries of Labour MPs and core working-class voters." This is equivalent to instructing Brown not to do so.

Neither does Brown face any substantial unified opposition within the parliamentary Labour Party, let alone one that in any way advances the interests of the working class. Speculation that the leader of the Campaign Group of Labour MPs, John McDonnell, would stand against Brown was quickly dashed by McDonnell himself. In any event, McDonnell could only count on a few MPs and was unable to mount a leadership campaign last year.

For his part, Dagenham MP Jon Cruddas, who has the support of the Compass group and is portrayed by the media as a more traditional Labourite, limited himself to calls for Brown to "learn from Boris Johnson and from [Tory leader] David Cameron as well.... They seem to be more emotionally literate than us. Boris Johnson is connecting with people emotionally."

Aside from that, there are merely reports of 40 or so MPs supposedly considering the possibility of making their unhappiness with Brown public, Brown being "safe" from direct challenge for at least a year and Labour's Frank Field speaking about a sense of "private despair" amongst MPs.

What is unfolding is not simply the crisis of a premiership, but the crisis of a party. Labour's fortunes cannot be restored by changing leaders. It is dead on its feet due to the impossibility of securing a popular mandate for policies that serve the interests of a tiny minority at the expense of working people. Labour is not merely exhausted and in need of reinvigoration. From the standpoint of the working class, it is a hostile entity that must be replaced by a genuine party of socialism.



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