

Britain: Labour faces wipe-out after defeat in Glasgow East

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26 July 2008

Labour's defeat by the Scottish National Party in the Glasgow East by-election is a devastating blow to the party and leaves Prime Minister Gordon Brown one of the walking dead.

Labour saw its vote collapse in what was previously its third safest seat in Britain, losing a majority of over 13,500 in the 2005 General Election. The SNP, which came in a distant second three years ago, gained 11,277 votes on Thursday, a narrow majority of 365 with a massive swing of 22.5 percent from Labour.

It is Labour's third by-election defeat in nine weeks, not counting the recent Haltemprice and Howden vote in which the government would not even put up a candidate.

Up until the last hours of voting, most pundits speculated that Labour's huge majority would be eroded or even halved. Labour, while acknowledging the possibility of a big swing against it, pointed out that it had campaigned extensively in the seat, with local activists and party workers from across Scotland visiting over 20,000 homes.

In the end voters expressed a level of hostility towards the government that far exceeded these expectations.

Turnout was relatively high for a by-election in an inner city area, particularly during the period when businesses in Glasgow have their holidays. At 42.2 percent, it was only slightly lower than the figure for the seat at the last General Election.

If the swing away from Labour in Glasgow East was replicated in the next general election, the party would retain just one of its current 41 seats in Scotland. Among those who would lose office would be Gordon Brown and Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling.

Expressing the growing hostility of millions of

workers across the UK to the party and the government, many traditional Labour voters either switched to the SNP or stayed at home. Journalists and candidates have reported the mood in the constituency—among the poorest in the UK with high levels of unemployment and ill-health—as one of disillusionment with and hostility toward Labour, which has dominated the city's politics for generations. Many voters cited rocketing food and fuel prices as key factors in their opposition to Labour, as the government holds down or cuts public sector wages and welfare benefits.

In May 2007 the SNP won a plurality of seats in elections to the Scottish Parliament, overtaking Labour to become the main party in Scotland. The SNP campaigned heavily in the area, with party leader and First Minister of the devolved Scottish government Alex Salmond visiting the constituency 12 times. Commenting on the campaign, Salmond said that the election was a “test of strength between two governments.”

During the campaign the SNP deliberately tried to play down its key policy of independence for Scotland, focusing on local health problems and rising domestic prices. Despite the SNP's claims that the vote represents a ringing endorsement of their policies at Holyrood, most commentators have put the vote for the SNP down to the collapse of Labour's support.

The Conservative Party could only poll 1,639 votes in Glasgow East, only slightly higher than three years ago. It only came in third because the Liberal Democrat vote also collapsed to just 915 votes—suggesting that many of its supporters, along with traditional Labour voters, stayed at home or switched directly to the SNP to give the government a beating.

Conservative leader David Cameron responded to the result by calling for a general election. In response,

Brown said lamely, “My task is getting on with the job. It’s exactly what people want me to do.” Looking like a condemned man, he commented on the loss of an area that Labour has held since the 1920s, “We’ve got to listen and hear people’s concerns and that’s exactly what we are doing.”

The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and Solidarity also stood in the constituency. The parties split from each other in 2006 after founding member Tommy Sheridan left the party over a successful libel case against Rupert Murdoch’s *News of the World*, which the SSP refused to support. Both parties, which have identical programmes, campaigned largely on local issues. Francis Curran, the SSP candidate, received 555 votes, with 512 votes cast for Solidarity.

At just over four percent, the combined result for the two parties is slightly higher than the 3.5 percent of the vote garnered by the SSP alone in the constituency in 2005. It is lower, however, than the result for the SSP in the 2001 election, when it received 6.8 percent of the vote in the now defunct constituencies of Glasgow Baillieston and Glasgow Shettleston.

At the count in the early hours of Friday morning, Labour’s candidate Margaret Curran requested a partial recount, claiming that some of her votes may have been wrongly awarded to her rival from the SSP, Francis Curran. Following this recount, Labour actually lost 11 votes.

Brown may have rejected calls for his resignation, but pressure is mounting on the prime minister from within the party. Reflecting concerns among Labour MPs fearful of losing their seats at the next election, Graham Stringer, MP for Manchester Blackley, commented: “We need a new start and that can only come from a debate around the leadership. I hope those discussions take place.”

An unnamed Labour MP told the BBC that the party “could not simply ignore” such a bad defeat, and predicted that Brown would face senior figures “shooting from the hip” at the party conference in the autumn.

There is little wonder. The pro-Labour *Guardian* newspaper was moved to ask: “Does Labour face defeat at the next general election—or obliteration? The result from Glasgow East early this morning was more than simply terrible for Gordon Brown: it raises the spectre of a parliamentary wipe-out from which his

party would struggle to recover.”

It added, “Perhaps the closest parallel is the 1990 Eastbourne by-election, which saw a 21% swing to the Liberal Democrats and triggered Margaret Thatcher’s ejection from office a month later. Some will speculate that the same could happen to Brown this autumn.”

Labour is a party on its last legs. Labour membership has rapidly declined since 1997, falling to fewer than 200,000 mostly inactive and elderly members. In 2007 Labour reported that it had 17,000 members in Scotland, a fall of almost 50 percent since 1997. In 14 Scottish constituencies the party has fewer than 200 members, of whom only a small fraction participate in local meetings and campaigns.

Electorally, Labour has lost the support of those sections of the middle class who jumped ship from the Tories in the mid-1990s to give it the victories in the 1997 and 2001 general elections. In May, Labour lost a by-election in the safe seat of Crewe and Nantwich, in which its majority of over 7,000 was turned into a 7,680 lead for the Conservatives.

More fundamentally, having alienated millions of working class voters with its right-wing policies, militarism and slavish subservience to big business, even the safest of Labour strongholds can no longer be counted on to return a Labour MP.



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