Britain: Labour's electoral meltdown continues

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The Norwich North by-election July 24 continued the electoral collapse of the Labour Party, as its 5,459-vote victory in 2005 turned into a loss by 7,348 votes to the Conservatives Friday.

The ballot was the first since the expenses scandal involving Members of Parliament (MPs) in May. Labour's incumbent MP Ian Gibson resigned his seat, after the party disbarred him from standing at the next general election because he had sold an expenses-funded flat to his daughter at a discount.

Allegations that Labour's hierarchy were acting unfairly, combined with its decision to impose its own choice of candidate, was said to have further alienated its support in one of its safest seats, leaving the party with just 18 percent of the vote.

The Norwich North result is part of a broader meltdown in Labour support. In elections for the European Parliament and England's local authorities in May, Labour won just 22 percent and 16 percent of the vote respectively, as its former supporters either switched or, more often, stayed at home.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Polly Toynbee warned, "Labour voters are on strike, 70% deserted in Norwich since 2005: they think the party deserves to die".

With less than twelve months to go before a general election, the Conservative Party celebrated its win as proof it was on course to take office.

But, just as in May's ballots, its gains were more a product of Labour's unpopularity than any real increase in its own support. The Conservative Party actually picked up fewer votes than in 2005, and its share of the poll was down. The Liberal Democrats also fared poorly, failing to achieve their goal of beating Labour into second place, with 14 percent of the vote.

The main beneficiaries were the smaller parties, such as the United Kingdom Independence Party and the Greens.

John Curtice, Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde, noted that UKIP's 11.8 percent share of the ballot was its highest ever in a by-election, as was the Greens with 9.7 percent.

"These two performances come in the wake of the record 40 percent of the vote secured by non-Westminster parties in last month's Euro-elections," he said.

This trend was underscored by the Green Party winning a council by-election in the Goldsmith constituency of Brighton and Hove. The little reported result saw the Greens overturn a Tory majority with a 17.6 percent swing to become the second largest party on the council.

What predominated in both elections was widespread abstention.

While millions of workers clearly believe that Labour "deserves to die", they have no means of articulating their independent class interests within the existing political set-up. The mass of working people are effectively disenfranchised as all parties accept the framework of the capitalist profit system, arguing solely over the scale of "sacrifices" necessary to fund the billion-pound bail-out to the banks.

Under these conditions, the ruling class is pressing ahead with plans for cuts in public services of as much as 20 percent. Having given over an estimated £1,269 billion to Britain's major banks, they are demanding that working people shoulder the burden.

At the weekend, Philip Hammond, Tory Treasury spokesman, warned that the most dangerous outcome from any general election "would be an unclear political result".

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The Tories required a significant majority, he continued, so that they can claim to have a mandate for public spending cuts. Without this, he threatened, the international financial markets would downgrade Britain's credit-worthiness, precipitating a major economic crisis.

"It is absolutely essential that we send a signal to the markets that we have a credible plan to resolve the fiscal crisis and the debt crisis over a sensible period time", he said.

Hammond acknowledged that Tory plans would mean he was "likely to become a great figure to pin up on the dartboard, and throw darts at".

Such statements were not enough for Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper, however. While welcoming the Tory gain in Norwich North, it cautioned that Conservative leader David Cameron must "spell out more clearly what a Tory government will do—particularly on public spending".

While Cameron has made clear his party is prepared to make significant cut-backs, the newspaper took him to task for claiming he would "protect front-line services such as health".

"Is he saying, then, that the over-managed NHS is so perfect that not a penny can be saved through efficiency?" it complained. "Is he saying that gold-plated public sector pensions must be preserved even if they bankrupt Britain?"

Behind the scenes, the ruling elite is pressing ahead with plans for massive spending cuts without even the pretence of a democratic mandate they know cannot be secured.

Hammond has said that civil servants are already drawing up a list of cuts, "without waiting for instructions from on high." The *Guardian* reported, citing Hammond's boast, that "There is a sense of liberation that we are going to empower public sector professionals to undertake the reform".

The newspaper reported that "within Whitehall there are Treasury seminars and think-tanks deliberating hard on the years of fiscal tightening ahead", with seminars and blueprints being drawn up by organisations such as the Institute for Government, the think-tank Demos, PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Institute for Public Policy Research.

Proposals being discussed include the raising of the retirement age and introducing charges for doctor's visits.

In a bid not to be outflanked by the Conservatives, various pro-Labour advisers are arguing most vociferously for spending cuts.

David Halpern, a former adviser to Tony Blair, who runs the Institute for Government—a supposedly "independent charity aimed at improving government effectiveness"—has argued that no area of the public sector can be seen to go untouched as "there needs to be a sense that everyone is bearing the pain".

"If you ring-fence a huge swath of sections of public spending it's really hard to go to the others and say, 'You lot bear all the costs,'" Halpern claimed.

The Demos think-tank was originally established to help craft Labour's right-wing evolution in the 1990s. It was recently announced that former Work and Pensions Secretary James Purnell is to oversee discussions as to how to "reinvent New Labour".

It was Purnell who had piloted Labour's Welfare Reform Act, a draconian attack on millions of the poorest and most vulnerable people who rely on Incapacity Benefit (IB) as their primary social security payment. The recession, Purnell warned at the time, "was not an excuse for anyone to avoid getting a job", even those currently deemed too sick and disabled to do so.

A die-hard right-wing Blairite, Purnell suddenly announced he was resigning the government just 10 minutes before the polls closed in the May elections. In a recent interview, Purnell revealed that one of the first actions he took after making his decision to resign was to inform "three national newspapers". His resignation letter, in which he sought to blame Brown entirely for Labour's haemorrhaging support, was published in Murdoch's newspapers, the *Times* and the *Sun*.

One of Demos's latest initiatives is to help develop the political justification for a major assault on public services, piloting discussions on "Less is More: How to achieve efficiency in the public sector."

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