

Barnsley Central by-election shows hostility towards major parties

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The result of the Barnsley Central by-election last week showed there is deep and widespread hostility towards the Conservative Liberal-Democrat coalition. Labour benefitted from this in the poll, although the main phenomenon was a significant decline in voter turnout.

In the final tally, Labour received 14,724 votes, the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) 2,953, the Conservatives 1,999, the British National Party 1,463, an independent 1,266, the Liberal Democrats 1,012, the English Democrats 544, the Monster Raving Loony Party 198, and a second independent 60.

Receiving 60.4 percent of all votes cast, the Labour Party increased its overall majority and finished with nearly 12,000 more votes than its nearest rival, the right-wing nationalist UKIP, with the Conservative Party coming in a poor third. However, the turnout of 36.5 percent ranks as one the lowest ever recorded for a by-election in the UK and a drop of almost 20 percent from the vote in the General Election last May—an already low figure.

The Lib-Dem/Conservative coalition government is becoming increasingly unpopular and isolated. In Barnsley Central, the Liberal Democrats trailed in sixth, only 800 votes in front of the Monster Raving Loony Party, and had the humiliation of losing their deposit—practically unheard of for a major party.

The day after the by-election, the media focused almost exclusively on the Liberal Democrats and their candidate, demanding to know what this disastrous result meant for the coalition and its survival. The general attitude expressed was that the party would weather the storm, taking what leader Nick Clegg called a “kicking” in the election and carry on. Andrew Rawnsley’s headline in the *Sunday Observer* urged,

“The Lib Dems need to whistle their way through these dark days.”

Clegg was interviewed standing outside his home while being quizzed about the hemorrhaging of both members and support from his party. He tried to strike a Churchillian pose, restating his commitment to the coalition’s austerity programme. He was sure that in 18 months’ time, people would understand the sacrifices demanded by his government and agree they had been necessary.

Winston Churchill, the old Tory-class war-horse, could draw on 200 years of British imperialist history to make his famous wartime speeches aimed at uniting the people of Britain in what he declared was the fight for “freedom against fascism”. Clegg, on the other hand, is calling for workers and youth to give up their jobs, take wage cuts, accept mass unemployment, a loss of education and the destruction of the National Health Service and other social services, all in order to save the banks and big corporations. During his remarks, Clegg looked ashen-faced.

The Tories hardly fared better than their coalition partners. The Liberal Democrats’ vote share tumbled from 17.28 percent to just 4.18 percent, while the Tories fell from 17.26 percent to 8.25 percent. The increased vote for the UKIP came at their expense.

Labour benefitted from the mass defections by former Liberal Democrats, who transferred their vote out of disgust with the role being played by their own party in the coalition. But the majority of workers and youth no longer see Labour as a party that represents their interests and continue to abandon it in droves. One reason why the Labour vote held up was because there was no party standing on its left. The Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party sought to prop up Labour during the election, urging an anti-fascist vote against

the BNP in alliance with the trade unions.

In the lead-up to the election, the media was insistent that the social anger amongst workers would take a right-wing form. However, the other big loser in Barnsley Central election was the fascist BNP, whose vote collapsed from 8.9 percent in the general election to 3.6 percent.

The biography of the winning Labour candidate indicates just how right-wing the Labour Party has become. Having joined the Army at the age of 22, Dan Jarvis spent 15 years in the elite Parachute Regiment. He became assistant to a NATO commander in the Balkans and served in Sierra Leone, Iraq, Northern Ireland and Afghanistan, where he led a company of troops from the Special Forces Support Group in Helmand Province. He left with the rank of major just five weeks before the by-election. Politically too he was parachuted into Barnsley by means of the recently adopted “rapid selection system” created by the Labour leadership to impose the candidate they chose onto particular constituencies.

In the election campaign, Jarvis adapted himself to his audience by stating he was brought up in Nottingham and remembered the cuts and closures of the Thatcher years. He wanted to help fight the ferocity of the Coalition’s cuts, he said, but will do so by helping a Labour government bring them in more slowly. His desire to become an MP was the same desire that had prompted him to join the Army—a commitment to public service. Most of all, he wanted to help the people of Barnsley by attracting more investment. As every worker has now learned, this type of rhetoric is routinely used to conceal a wage-cutting programme.

It will not be very long before workers come into direct conflict with Jarvis and the Labour-controlled council, which is about to make millions of pounds in cuts to social services. These reductions will devastate the health service, education and other vital areas in a town that has already seen the closure of its traditional mining and glass industry, and has a high and growing unemployment.



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