

Liberal Democrats hammered in UK elections

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The punishment meted out to the Liberal Democrats for imposing brutal cuts in coalition with the Conservatives was the key feature of the local elections in parts of England, as well as the elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. In England and Wales, Labour was the main beneficiary, but Scotland saw a decisive victory for the Scottish National Party.

In the local elections, the Liberal Democrats suffered losses of 11 percent, their worst result since the party was formed in 1988 in a merger between the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party, a right-wing breakaway from Labour. It did particularly badly in northern cities, registering major losses to the Labour Party.

The party lost 11 seats in Liverpool, leaving it with just 2, and lost all 11 seats it contested in Manchester. It lost control of Hull to Labour, losing 10 seats, as well as Stockport. In Blaenau Gwent, Wales, the Liberal Democrats won just 367 votes, coming some way behind the fascist British National Party.

The most politically humiliating performance was in Sheffield, home to Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg's Hallam constituency. Labour took control, winning 49 council wards out of 84 by taking 9 seats from the Liberal Democrats.

Labour also gained other councils previously registering no overall control, including Leeds. The Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition in Birmingham lost 13 seats to Labour, but retained power.

More generally, the Conservative vote remained stable, with the party winning control of two additional councils. In addition, Labour's gains of close to 800 councillors came mainly at the expense of the Liberal Democrats and were from a low starting point. In 2007, Labour lost 642 councillors and the Liberal Democrats 257.

Labour came within one seat of an overall majority in Wales, with 30 seats, and will probably form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

This result was wholly overshadowed by Labour's poor showing in Scotland. Labour suffered its worst election result there in 80 years, losing 7 seats. Together with the Liberal Democrats' 12 losses and 5 for the Tories, this

produced a 23-seat swing to the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the first majority government since the Holyrood parliament was established in 1999.

SNP leader Alex Salmond declared the days of Labour dominance in central Scotland "gone forever" and pledged to hold a referendum on independence within five years. Before this, he would insist on greater economic powers for the Scottish parliament, including the right to set a lower rate of Corporation Tax to service its relations with global business interests.

Support for independence, still standing at just 30 percent, is not the reason for the SNP's victory. Rather, it has been able to present itself as a force for safeguarding services such as the National Health Service and avoiding tuition fees by striking a harder bargain with Westminster than the Liberal Democrats and Labour—both directly associated with cuts. Salmond has said that a referendum would be "indicative", rather than legally binding.

Whereas Labour has no reason to gloat about its performance, the Liberal Democrats were left tearing their collective hair out. Numerous councillors declared that they had suffered due to being in the coalition. Clegg himself made the anodyne observation that the party was bearing "the brunt of the blame" for spending cuts that were bringing out "memories of things under [former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher".

This is only part of the truth. The Liberal Democrats are being made to pay for their crimes in a way that the Tories have escaped thus far. The Tories have their constituency, which turned out for them in May last year and again on Thursday because they support cuts and other anti-working class measures. The Liberal Democrats entered government after years of making a feint of being to the left of Labour and opposing measures such as tuition fees. Their voters felt betrayed and registered their disgust.

Most of the openly expressed ire among the party's political casualties was directed at Clegg's leadership, rather than a direct questioning of the coalition with the Tories.

Gary Long, leader of the Liberal Democrats group on Nottingham City Council that lost all of its six seats, urged Clegg to "resign immediately".

Ken Ball, Liberal Democrats group leader on Chorley Borough Council, accused Clegg of “letting the party down” and said he was so disillusioned he might quit the party.

Irene Davidson in Rochdale said Clegg should “think about his position”.

The party’s higher echelons have focused on denunciations of the Tories, and Prime Minister David Cameron in particular, for supposedly betraying their trust!

The despair of the Liberal Democrat ranks was evident even before the announcement late Friday evening that the referendum on whether to introduce an Alternative Vote (AV) system instead of first-past-the-post had suffered a crushing defeat. The “no” vote was more than double the “yes” vote.

The referendum on AV was the sole supposed concession wrested from the Tories in return for entering the coalition.

The “No” campaign, which is largely funded by the Conservatives, made hay at its coalition partner’s expense. Leaflets it issued denounced Clegg for breaking promises on job cuts, Value Added Tax increases, tuition fees and spending cuts and said that AV would lead to “more hung parliaments, backroom deals and broken promises.”

Ex-Liberal Democrat leader Lord Paddy Ashdown accused Cameron of a breach of faith in not dissociating himself from a “regiment of lies”.

“The bottom line is that Liberal Democrats are exceedingly angry,” he said. “If the Conservative party funds to the level of 99 percent a campaign whose central theme is to denigrate and destroy our leader, there are consequences for that.”

When it came to stating what those consequences would be, however, Ashdown fizzled like a damp squib. The Liberal Democrats would not leave the coalition until the end of the five-year parliament, he said, “We have set our hands to this task and now it must be completed so the purpose of the coalition has not altered, but the mood music, the atmosphere of the coalition most assuredly has....”

The coalition is clearly politically unstable because opposition to its attacks is rising. But at this point, the Tories and Liberal Democrats are still held together by a joint commitment to do the bidding of the financial elite in imposing savage austerity measures against the working class.

As Ashdown himself acknowledged, “The central proposition of this parliament stands: ‘Is [Chancellor] George Osborne’s economic judgment right?’ I believe it is. The whole of British politics now rests on that single proposition.”

Cameron said his party and the Liberal Democrats would “continue to work together in the national interest”.

As workers in many cities will now come to understand,

even if the coalition breaks apart at some point in the near future, Labour, whether in coalition with the Liberal Democrats or not, offers no alternative. On Monday, Labour councillors in Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool and elsewhere will meet to discuss how to use their electoral gains to push through the cuts and closures being demanded of them.

The Socialist Equality Party stood two candidates in the local elections, Robert Skelton in Ardwick, Manchester, and Simon Walker in Walkley, Sheffield. Skelton secured 82 votes, 3 percent of the total on a low 22 percent turnout in a strong Labour seat. Walker secured 116 votes, 1.8 percent of the vote, and placed higher than the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition.

This was a significant vote.

The SEP advanced a socialist and internationalist programme centring on the demands, “No cuts in pay, jobs and services”, “End the wars in Libya and Afghanistan”, “Build international workers unity” and “For a new socialist party”.

We insisted that working people need their own answer to the crisis and their own socialist leadership. We stressed that Labour agrees with the government that cuts are necessary, while the trade unions have not and will not organise any significant opposition to the attacks on working people.

Our manifesto called for “the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union apparatus, in every workplace and community” as the driving force of “an independent movement of the working class to bring down the coalition government and replace it with a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.”

Those who put their cross against the names of our candidates did so in support of a radical departure in the political life of the British working class. It is a marker for the future.



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