

UK by-elections reveal hostility to government

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Six parliamentary by-elections were held in the UK last month. The Corby, Cardiff South & Penarth and Manchester Central vote took place on November 14, while voting in Croydon North, Middlesbrough and Rotherham Central went ahead two weeks later.

The Labour Party won all six seats, including Corby, a former Conservative seat. The results show that the vote for the two government coalition partners, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, is collapsing. In every constituency, their share of the vote has gone down dramatically—in Corby, by as much as 15.6 percent and 9 percent, respectively.

In Middlesbrough, the Liberal Democrats and the Tories were down to third and fourth behind the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) and just three votes ahead of the Peace candidate. In Rotherham, the Tory candidate could only trail in fifth while the Liberal Democrats crashed down to eighth on 2 percent and lost their deposit—the party's worst by-election result since 1945.

The coalition partners are haemorrhaging support from their traditional middle class supporters. Under such conditions, a surge in support for the main opposition party would be expected. This was not the case. Far from increased backing for Labour, there is a growing alienation of the vast majority from the entire political system. The 18 percent turnout in the North West constituency of Manchester Central is a post-war low for a by-election in Britain.

The hatred of the Tories and Liberal Democrats is not hard to understand. The coalition has imposed drastic austerity measures on the working class and large sections of the middle class. As a result, a recent report from the Office of National Statistics shows that the bottom 50 percent of households own less than one tenth of national wealth, compared to the wealthiest 10 percent, who own 43.8 percent. The top 10 percent of households are now 850 times wealthier than the

bottom 10 percent.

But the ruling class has relied heavily on the Labour Party and trade unions to suppress opposition to these attacks. And Labour's version of supposedly "One Nation" Tory-style politics is attractive to very few, leaving it reliant upon an older electoral base with little support among younger voters. With the government in crisis, Labour under Ed Miliband is making a pitch to be adopted as a political alternative for the ruling class in imposing austerity. But while there are still workers who will vote for the party, it hardly commands the support and loyalty of the broad masses.

Sections of the media normally associated with the Tories' euro-sceptical wing are responding by demanding that a new extreme-right political alternative be forged to press on against the working class. They used the November by-elections to raise the profile of the UK Independence Party (UKIP)—an anti-immigration, anti-European party aligned in the European Parliament with fascist parties such as the French National Front and Austrian Freedom Party.

The Rotherham Central by-election was specifically targeted because they believed a combination of demonstrations by fascist forces organised by the state, a sexual abuse scandal involving an Asian criminal gang, and the forced resignation of the town's Labour MP, Denis MacShane, for his abuse of parliamentary expenses gave them the best chance of a big vote and possibly winning the seat.

Andrew Gilligan, editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, calculated the possibilities of a victory so:

"UKIP only got 6 percent of the vote in Rotherham at the general election—but they came second in another by-election in next-door Barnsley last year. Like many working-class Labour areas, Rotherham showed an undercurrent of disaffection with the party, even before its MP was forced to resign for fraud. In the general election, the total broadly 'Right-wing' vote in

Rotherham (Tories, UKIP, BNP and an anti-Labour independent) added up to 39.3 percent, only 5.3 percent behind the Labour vote.”

“In a low-turnout by-election with big protest vote potential,” he added, “if I was [UKIP], I’d pile everything I have, and more, into Rotherham.”

In the event, UKIP failed to take Rotherham Central. Labour won, but with a reduced vote on a 33.63 percent turnout. UKIP came in second, as it did also in Middlesborough, while the fascist British National Party took third place with a reduced vote. At 21.8 percent, Rotherham was UKIP’s best-ever by-election result.

The relative successes of the right wing in exploiting political discontent with the government contrast with the failure of those parties advancing themselves as a left alternative to Labour to make political headway. The Respect Party entertained hopes of repeating the success of party leader George Galloway in Bradford West, particularly in Rotherham, where they fielded high-profile former journalist Yvonne Ridley, and in Croydon North, where they ran Lee Jasper, the former “race adviser” to London Labour mayor Ken Livingstone.

An appeal to its supporters prior to the vote declared, “We are on the edge of a political earthquake in British politics,” and asserted that Ridley was on course to win and Jasper was “neck and neck with the Labour Party to win the constituency.”

In the event, Jasper garnered just 707 votes and came in sixth, while Ridley came in fourth, behind the BNP. Unless Respect stands in a constituency with a large Asian electorate, Galloway’s party is unable to cut the kind of deals he struck with sections of Bradford’s business community, to whom he owed his personal success. In Rotherham, Labour retained the support of the “leaders” of the fairly small Asian community.

In the aftermath of the Rotherham and Croydon North elections, Respect national secretary Chris Chilvers wrote they “have given us the shape of things to come”, a “likely Labour government.... The rapid erosion of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat voting base has created a larger pool of right leaning voters for right-wing parties and above all UKIP to pick up. Left and progressive parties, on the other hand, always face a squeeze in these circumstances.

The main bright spot he cited was that “George

Galloway’s personal profile is getting larger by the day. He now have [sic] over 100,000 followers on Twitter, nearly 100,000 on Facebook and a full diary of speaking events all attended by big audiences.”

He went on to boast that the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) “has been trying to build for the last few years in Rotherham yet managed only a redundant vote.”

TUSC is an electoral front aligning the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party with a small section of trade union bureaucrats led by the former Stalinist leadership of the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union. It focused its efforts on strengthening its contacts with disaffected sections of the bureaucracy to build what is little more than a pressure group on the Labour Party.

Respect’s harsh words towards TUSC are a rebuttal of the efforts led by the Socialist Party to strike a deal with Galloway’s party to avoid “election clashes”. In Rotherham, it also issued an appeal to Labour Party members noting that TUSC and its “many ex-Labour Party members” welcomed “your angry reaction to the New Labour apparatus imposing another external candidate and possible MP on the town.”

The letter was a transparent effort to appeal to supporters of the Labour council’s deputy leader and prominent local businessman Jahangir Akhtar that failed because Akhtar and company remained loyal to the party that provides them with access to funds and influence in the town.



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