

Major UK parties given drubbing in local elections

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The local council elections in England saw an overwhelming rejection of the UK's three major parties, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour. Many abstained from voting, with turnout estimated to be around 36 percent. In many wards turnout was around 20 percent and less.

Demonstrating widespread hostility to their austerity policies, the ruling Conservatives lost 231 seats, while the Liberal Democrats, their coalition partners, were wiped out, taking just 13 percent of the vote and losing 307 seats. Finishing fourth behind the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) for the second year in a row, the Lib Dems share of the vote fell by 1 percent from last year's record low.

Indicative of the party's collapse was the loss of all their remaining seats in the London boroughs of Lambeth, Lewisham, Waltham Forest and Islington. In the borough of Newham, the Lib Dem candidate won just 2 percent of the vote. The party also lost its remaining nine seats to Labour on Manchester City Council in North West England.

The Labour Party took 31 percent of the vote. Gaining 338 council seats, it finished two percentage points ahead of the Conservatives, who came second.

But Labour's lead over the Tories fell substantially from its 4 percent lead last year and 7 percent lead in 2012 and represents as much a disaster for the party as that suffered by its competitors.

Unsurprising given its years of pushing right wing economic and social policies, the result is not enough to translate into an overall victory at next year's general election. A BBC projection showed that Labour would only reach 322 seats in the House of Commons, leaving it short of a working majority. This would represent the second time in a row that the UK would be left with a hung parliament—an historic first.

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was the main beneficiary of the turn away from the major parties, taking a total of 161 seats, with around a 17 percent share of the vote. It took votes from all three major parties, with an average share of 19 percent in Lib Dem-held wards, 20 percent in Conservative and 25 percent in Labour. UKIP made gains in a number of areas, including the county of Essex and areas in the north of England. In Rotherham, South Yorkshire it won 10 seats, becoming the official opposition to the Labour Party.

However, while UKIP was able to win its most-ever seats its percent share of the vote was considerably down on the 23 percent it won in last year's local elections. In London, UKIP only came fourth on around 7 percent, finishing behind the Lib Dems.

The central factor in UKIP's success is simply that it was not one of the three major parties, who are all widely despised. The *Daily Mail* commented that UKIP was “now firmly established as Britain's None-of-the-above Party”.

As far as the national media is concerned, however, UKIP must be praised to the skies and its successes shouted from every rooftop. Their promotion of UKIP is part of a deliberate strategy within ruling circles to channel social discontent its way and to thereby move politics sharply to the right. UKIP is being afforded major party status because it spreads the same type of nationalism and scapegoating of immigrants as the British National Party, but without its overt fascist colouration. UKIP also endorses yet more savage job losses, wage cuts and privatisations, having called for an additional £77 billion in cuts on top of those imposed by the Tories and Lib Dems.

A *Times* editorial insisted, “Ukip's surge in Thursday's elections means other parties will suddenly

have to pay more attention to grassroots concerns over housing and immigration.”

True to form, all three major parties responded on cue.

With some backbenchers demanding a general election pact with UKIP, Prime Minister David Cameron declared, “[W]e have got to work harder and we have got to really deliver on issues that are frustrating people and frustrating me, like welfare reform and immigration and making sure people really benefit from this recovery.”

During the election campaign Labour’s Ed Ball was interviewed by the *Financial Times* who reported, “The shadow chancellor said Labour needed to “make more noise to say we’ll take tough decisions on the deficit” and show it was serious about tackling immigration, welfare abuse and reforming the EU.” He added, “I don’t think Labour will win the next election as an anti-business party.”

Meanwhile Jon Cruddas, a backbench MP who supports Labour’s “Blue Labour” project, called on the party to support the “disenfranchised English”. In language hardly different from that espoused by UKIP he said Labour “will conserve our common life by tackling immigration: reforming transition controls for new EU countries; enforcing rules to protect agency workers, and prioritising English language teaching for newcomers over non-essential translation services.”

Cruddas said Labour had to build “a sense of belonging and purpose and pride in one’s country. Labour is the party of the people and it wins when it is patriotic.”

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, a creation of various pseudo-left formations, allied with sections of the trade union bureaucracy and a handful of dissident Labour councillors, advanced itself as the “biggest left-of-Labour electoral challenge in sixty years”.

TUSC was co-founded by the recently deceased Bob Crow, the former Stalinist leader of the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers’ union (RMT), and draws its main political support from the pseudo-left Socialist Party, led by Peter Taaffe. It has on its steering committee leading trade union bureaucrats from the RMT, the PCS civil servants union, the National Union of Teachers, the Fire Brigade Union, and Prison Officers Association. Fielding 560 candidates in the

election, its list was stuffed with national and regional trade union bureaucrats and many local officials.

Having not lifted a finger in opposition to mass austerity over the last four years; the trade unions are discredited in the eyes of many workers. Despite the still substantial resources of these organisations, TUSC received a small vote. TUSC reported Saturday, with additional votes still to come in, that its hastily-assembled list of candidates had received 50,000 votes--an average of 89 votes per candidate.

TUSC candidates were asked to endorse a local election campaign consisting of the most minimal demands, most of which would have been standard fare in any Labour Party programme up until the 1980s.

The most politically telling of its demands is a call to “Vote for councils to refuse to implement the cuts. We will support councils which *in the first instance use their reserves and prudential borrowing powers to avoid making cuts*. But we argue that the best way to mobilise the mass campaign that is necessary to defeat the dismantling of council services is to set a budget that meets the needs of the local community and demands that the government makes up the shortfall.”

This is framed specifically to appeal to those Labourites and trade union functionaries wanting to distance themselves politically from the cuts being made, while opposing any political struggle against the government or those in their own party imposing cuts on the ground.



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