

Right-wing UK Independence Party benefits from disaffection in British by-elections

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11 October 2014

The right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has once again benefited from growing alienation from the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, registering political gains in two by-elections Thursday.

This follows its winning the European elections, pushing the ruling Conservatives into third place for the first time in a national British election.

UKIP won its first House of Commons seat in what was previously considered the safe Conservative seat of Clacton in Essex. The by-election was called after sitting MP Douglas Carswell defected to UKIP in August. Standing for UKIP, Carswell won the seat by a margin of 12,404 votes, taking a 60 percent share of the ballot and retaining the vast bulk of his previous Conservative leaning support.

Carswell is the first MP to be elected as a UKIP candidate. In 2008 another Tory MP, Bob Spink, defected but was voted out at the 2010 General Election, after standing as an Independent.

The Tories came second in Clacton, with their share of the vote down by 28 percent compared to 2010. Labour in third place was down by 14 percent. The Liberal Democrats, the Tory's national coalition parties, were wiped out once more, receiving just 483 votes and losing their deposit.

Given that Clacton has a constituency that UKIP could readily appeal to, a perhaps more significant result for UKIP was in the seat of Heywood and Middleton in Greater Manchester, part of Labour's northwest of England heartland. The by-election was due to the death of its former MP. Labour had held the seat with sizable majorities since the constituency was first created in 1983. UKIP cut Labour's majority to just 617 votes, with Labour holding it by just two percentage points (41 to 39). Labour's Liz McInnes had

11,633 votes, with UKIP on 11,016 votes, necessitating a recount.

The vote of the three main parties haemorrhaged, as UKIP also took votes from both the Conservatives, who came third with their vote falling 15 percent, and the Liberals, whose vote fell by 18 percent to just 5 percent. Labour was only able to increase its share of the vote by 1 percent, while its total vote collapsed from the 18,499 votes it won in 2010.

UKIP has now finished in second place eight times in a by-election. Six of these, including Heywood and Middleton, were in seats previously deemed safe Labour territory. It is expected to make further gains in the by-election in Rochester and Strood in Kent, next month—an election triggered by another defection to UKIP of a sitting Tory MP, Mark Reckless.

UKIP makes its core appeal based on its opposition to the European Union, while peddling anti-immigrant chauvinism. But its main trump card is that it is not one of the three main parties, with its leader Nigel Farage making great play of representing a disenchanted “People's Army”.

Farage is a former Tory and a stockbroker. He ensures that UKIP is vague enough in its political message that its Thatcherite economic and social policies are understood by few of those from whom it is able to enlist support.

On this basis, it has been able to appeal to a generalised political disaffection with all three main parties and the hated austerity programmes they have imposed over the last six years, resulting in ever more brutal levels of exploitation for workers and an ongoing decline in the provision of health, education and vital social services.

Blaming each and every social ill on “rule from Brussels”, immigration and an “out of touch” political

elite, UKIP has helped shifted politics further to the right.

In the hours following the results, senior figures within the Labour Party responded by claiming that UKIP's success showed that the party is out of touch with their former working class "core". But this is solely to legitimise Labour adopting UKIP's nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric as being "in tune" with the thinking of working people. John Mann, the Labour MP for Bassetlaw in Nottinghamshire, said, "If [Labour leader] Ed Miliband does not broaden the Labour coalition to better include working class opinion then we cannot win a majority government."

Last May, Mann advanced his programme to defeat UKIP—based on restricting the free movement of labour in Europe and a clampdown on benefits. Attacking UKIP from the right, he declared, "Nigel Farage with his German banker wife and his salary paid in euros is a beneficiary of the free movement of Labour. Many of my constituents are the losers."

The *Financial Times* reported the comments of a "member of the shadow cabinet," who said, "We clearly need to do more on immigration. I can't believe how close that result was. It's astonishing."

Speaking in Heywood and Middleton after the result, Labour leader Ed Miliband said, "It is not prejudiced to worry about immigration."

The deputy political editor of the billionaire Rupert Murdoch-owned *Sun*, Steve Hawkes, tweeted in response to the Heywood and Middleton result, "Crikey. UKIP came close in Heywood. Will Labour toughen their stance on immigration and EU freedom of movement?"

The xenophobic and right-wing nostrums espoused by UKIP and echoed by all the parties of the political elite and media are not held by the broad mass of the population. Hardly referred to in the aftermath of the by-elections was the low turnout in both—just 51 percent in Clacton and 36 percent in Heywood and Middleton—barely a third of those who were registered to vote.

The by-elections reveal most starkly that the growing chasm between the super-rich elite and their political representatives and the rest of society can find no progressive response in the existing political set-up. This groundswell of resentment for all the representatives of the political elite was acknowledged

by Douglas Alexander, the shadow foreign secretary and Labour's election co-ordinator. Labour had to "tackle the alienation that lies at the root of the anger that so many voters feel," he said, before warning, "There is no instant magic policy, no speech or campaign tactic that can itself address the depth of disengagement we are seeing across the electorate."



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