

UK Independence Party wins Rochester by-election

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22 November 2014

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) won its second parliamentary seat Thursday, in the Rochester and Strood by-election, on a turnout of just half the electorate.

The by-election in Kent, southeast England was forced by the defection of sitting Conservative MP Mark Reckless to the anti-European Union UKIP. Reckless retained his seat with a majority of 2,920, down from his 9,953 in 2010.

The result is another blow for the Conservative Party, which lost its Clacton seat to UKIP only last month in by-election caused by the defection of sitting Tory MP Douglas Carswell. It further undermines Prime Minister David Cameron, who had promised to “throw the kitchen sink” into retaining Rochester and Strood and had personally visited the constituency five times.

The election underscores the widespread hostility to the ruling Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. While the Tories were pushed into second place, Cameron’s Liberal Democrat partners came fifth, behind the Green Party. It is the eighth by-election in a row in which the Liberal Democrats have lost their deposit. With just 349 votes, it is the lowest vote total ever for the party in a by-election at just 0.87 percent, down by 15.39 percent in 2010.

Labour came third, with its own share of the vote falling from 28.5 percent in 2010 to 16.7 percent.

UKIP claimed the result was proof that it could hold the balance of power after the general election in May 2015. In his victory speech, Reckless asserted that the party stood in the “radical tradition”, one that historically “took power away from the elites and spread it to the people. It’s the tradition of Levellers, Chartists and Suffragettes.”

Such claims are grotesque. While UKIP makes great play of being against the “Westminster elites”, both

socially and politically it is of the elite—as typified by UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, a former Conservative and city stockbroker. Reckless is a Conservative, privately educated barrister. The party is largely bankrolled by former Tory supporters, aristocrats, publishers and financiers. The list includes property developer Paul Sykes and Stuart Wheeler, an old Etonian investment banker who made his fortune through selling his shares in IG Index, which pioneered spread betting.

According to a 2013 *Channel 4* report, other donors include Julian Blackwell, owner of Blackwell’s publishing; Sir John Craven, former chairman of mining group Lonmin and founder of security firm Phoenix Securities; James Donald Charteris (Lord Neidpath) and Viscount Michael Cowdray, part of the Pearson publishing family and the 10th-largest landowner in the UK.

UKIP speaks for a growing section of the ruling elite and the Tory party who consider that Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union will enable greater deregulation of businesses and taxes. The party has yet to spell out its position on many issues outside of Europe, although Farage is on record as supporting the introduction of a private insurance-based National Health Service.

Much of UKIP’s propaganda is directed against immigration, and on this it stands firmly in the tradition of the Thatcherite right. Only days ago, Reckless was forced to downplay his insistence that EU migrants would face repatriation from the UK if it withdrew from the EU.

With a significant section of his own party favouring UKIP, Cameron faced an uphill struggle in mounting a defence of the Rochester seat. Despite ordering Tory MPs onto the campaign trail, there were reports that most spent less than two hours in the constituency.

Reckless had said that he had been in talks with two other Tory MPs preparing to join UKIP following the by-election. While the Conservatives claimed further defections were “unlikely”, leading Tories are openly siding with UKIP. Typical is Peter Bone who, on the eve of the by-election, joined UKIP in a debate at the Cambridge University Union to support a motion entitled, “This house believes that UKIP has been good for British politics.”

In a *Guardian* op-ed following the result, Bone praised former Tory leader Margaret Thatcher’s “strong right-wing message” and blamed the Conservative Party for “ignoring much of its traditional base”—leaving a “vacuum” on its right that UKIP had filled.

Bone said he would remain in the Tory Party because of Cameron’s pledge to hold an in-out referendum on EU membership in 2017, if the Conservatives win the general election. But he made clear he will campaign for an exit.

In the run-up to the vote, Tory Europe Minister David Lidington and Minister of State Oliver Letwin both spoke out on Europe, with Letwin saying that, should the prime minister fail to reform EU legislation, he would recommend a British exit.

The British government is trying to clamp down on free movement in Europe, claiming that it is enabling too many migrants to enter Britain as “welfare tourists”. So far, legislation limiting movement has been opposed by other EU member states, although the European Court of Justice recently ruled in favour of Germany’s efforts to restrict welfare benefits to certain migrants.

Bone said the solution to the crisis facing the Tories was to “lock David Cameron and Nigel Farage in a room. Don’t let them out until they work out their differences.”

While Cameron has ruled out a pact, there is no doubt he will go further in embracing UKIP policies in an effort to keep his party together.

Labour has been unable to make any gains from the crisis of the coalition government. To all intents and purposes, it abandoned any campaign in the by-election. Its electoral strategy consists of hoping that UKIP will be successful enough in eating into the Tory vote that Labour will win the 2015 general election by default.

At the same time, Labour is utilising UKIP’s advance to position itself further to the right. The party is committed to greater austerity should it win office and has pledged to introduce greater border controls and even tougher limitations on EU migrants being able to access public services.

Its efforts to kowtow before UKIP plunged new depths shortly after the polls closed in Rochester, claiming the scalp of Labour’s Emily Thornberry. The party’s attorney general had tweeted a picture of a house in Rochester draped in English flags, with a white van parked outside. There was no comment with the tweet but “white van man” is a media metaphor for a white, self-employed male invariably portrayed as right wing and racist. With the Murdoch press leading the charge that she was guilty of “snobbery”, Thornberry was reportedly given a dressing down by Labour leader Ed Miliband and resigned, apologising if she had “upset or insulted anybody”.

Obscured in all the commentary on the by-election was the fact that turn-out was just 50.6 percent—far below what could be expected for such a high profile ballot. Electoral results are wholly dependent on small shifts within a diminishing core of disproportionately aging and middle class voters, rather than any popular mandate.

The reason is not hard to find. On the eve of the by-election, the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings was published, which showed that living standards in Britain had plummeted since the financial crisis of 2008.

Median full-time gross weekly earnings fell by 8.8 percent in the six years to 2014, after adjusting for consumer price inflation. The *Financial Times* noted that the “fall in real wages for those aged 18 to 25 has been so extreme, they are now back to levels last seen in 1988”. With all of the parties committed to making greater inroads into living standards, the real concerns of working people have been airbrushed from official political discourse.



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