

UK by-election deepens divisions in ruling class over Brexit

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The British Liberal Democrats won Thursday's Richmond Park by-election, overcoming a 23,000 Conservative majority in one of their safest seats.

The election in the Greater London constituency was prompted by the resignation of Tory MP Zac Goldsmith over government plans to build a third runway at Heathrow. However, it was fought out, following June's Brexit referendum vote, over whether the UK will, in fact, leave or remain in the European Union.

The Lib Dems, who now have nine MPs, won the seat by campaigning in opposition to Brexit. They have pledged to vote against any move by Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May to trigger Article 50, beginning the process of leaving the EU, if parliament is eventually able to vote on the issue.

Lib Dem candidate Sarah Olney won just under 50 percent of the total vote. Goldsmith finished in second place running for his seat as an independent. Labour Party candidate, Christian Wolmar, trailed in third place, winning just 1,515 (3.67 percent) and losing his deposit. Large numbers of both Tory and Labour voters decided to vote for Olney.

Goldsmith is an outspoken supporter of Britain leaving the EU. The Conservatives did not stand a candidate, instead calling for a vote for Goldsmith. The far-right UK Independence Party also backed Goldsmith.

The loss of the seat reduces the Tory governments' parliamentary majority to just 13.

The vote was seized on by the Liberals and other pro-EU forces as proof of the necessity to build a "progressive alliance" in support of EU membership, or at least continued membership of the Single Market. In her acceptance speech, Olney stated, "[O]ur message is clear: we do not want a hard Brexit. We do not want to

pull out of the single market."

Party leader Tim Farrow declared, "Nearly a third of Tory voters from the last election who voted to leave in June voted Liberal Democrat yesterday," adding that "this was about people trying to say to Theresa May we do not like the extreme version of Brexit—outside the single market—that you're taking us down."

The Green Party stood aside in the election in order to back Olney. Caroline Lucas, the Green's sole MP, stated Friday, "The regressive alliance has been defeated and the government has suffered a hammer blow to its hard Brexit plans."

The vote has heightened significance given the four-day Supreme Court hearing starting next Monday, at which the government is challenging last month's decision by the High Court that the prime minister cannot bypass parliament and use Royal Prerogative powers to trigger Article 50.

However, Richmond Park was hardly a bellwether constituency regarding the national mood over Brexit. The June referendum recorded a narrow Leave victory nationally, with 52 percent voting to leave and 48 percent to remain. But London boroughs voted 59 percent in favour of remain. Richmond Park, an affluent constituency with the second highest concentration of older, wealthy professionals in the UK, voted heavily in favour of remain by a majority of 72 percent.

Pro-Brexit forces responded to the pro-EU assertions of the Liberal Democrats that they had won the seat on a turnout of only 53 percent, a 23 percent drop on the general election in a constituency that would naturally favour their line. The next by-election—to be held on December 8 in the seat of Sleaford and North Hykeham in, Lincolnshire, northern England, would show a pro-Brexit result, they insisted.

The Sleaford and North Hykeham election was prompted by the resignation of Tory MP Stephen Phillips, with a majority of more than 24,000, who opposed May's decision to bypass parliament in triggering Article 50.

How the numbers are crunched is less important politically than the fact that British politics is being recast on the basis of support for a pro- or anti-EU programme. The deepening economic crisis post-Brexit, fuelled by the heightened political uncertainty resulting from Donald Trump's disputed victory in the US presidential election, is reshaping political loyalties in ways that cross party lines. Every event is being seized on to justify the agendas of the two bitterly opposed camps within ruling circles.

A Tory spokesman responded with the aggressive assertion, "This [Richmond Park] result doesn't change anything. The government remains committed to leaving the European Union and triggering article 50 by the end of March next year."

While this will endear May to the party's substantial pro-Brexit hard core block of 80 MPs and the wider party base, it will further alienate its pro-EU wing. Conservative MP Anna Soubry, a vocal remain supporter, tweeted that the Richmond result was "sensational" adding, "[P]oliticians ignore Remainers at their peril & u [you] can forget hardbrexit."

The fissures over Europe tearing the Tories apart are also impacting on Labour, with the staunchly pro-EU Blairite wing stepping up their efforts to remove Jeremy Corbyn as leader and recast the party as the main political vehicle to prevent Brexit. Prior to the Richmond campaign, three senior Labour MPs—Lisa Nandy, Jonathan Reynolds and Clive Lewis—wrote an article calling on Labour not to stand in order to "put the national interest first." The article denounced Goldsmith as a "hard Brexiteer," adding, "the vote against him must not be split." With a nod to the formation of a cross party pro-EU movement, it added, "In this coming Parliament progressives will need every vote they can get."

The Richmond result will be used to put additional pressure on Corbyn.

The immediate aftermath of June's referendum was used by the Blairites to launch an attempted coup against Corbyn by forcing a leadership election on the basis that he was only "lukewarm" on the UK's EU

membership.

Even after defeating these efforts, thanks to broad popular support, Corbyn has continued with his capitulations to the right—most recently in his decision not to back a parliamentary motion calling for an investigation into former Prime Minister Tony Blair's lies justifying the illegal war against Iraq.

Within hours of the defeat of the Scottish National Party motion, thanks to Corbyn's cowardice, Blair announced the formation of a new political lobby group on a "platform designed to build a new policy agenda for the centre ground." He added that "Part of its focus will plainly be around the European debate."

In calling for an active boycott, the Socialist Equality Party insisted during the referendum campaign that the pro and anti-EU factions of the ruling elite are both reactionary.

The advocates of Brexit base their strategy on calculations that the EU is in its death throes and that British imperialism must be freed from all constraints on its ability to exploit global markets. On this basis, the May government is cravenly seeking the endorsement of Trump, a Brexit supporter, while at the same time making concerted efforts to develop closer economic ties with China and India.

The Socialist Equality Party has insisted the Remain camp, representing the interests of the financial swindlers in the city of London, is solely concerned with access to the Single Market and is happily adopting wholesale the anti-immigration rhetoric of the Brexiteers, demanding restrictions on, or an end to, free movement of EU citizens to the UK. In their endorsement of the EU, they glorify the institution hated by millions of workers across the continent due to its continued imposition of austerity.



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