UK: Voter turnout collapses by half in "Brexit" by-election

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The ruling Conservative Party held the seat of Sleaford & North Hykeham in Lincolnshire, England in Thursday's by-election, on a much reduced majority and in a turn-out that collapsed.

The by-election was the second in a week caused by the resignation of sitting Conservative MPs. Sleaford MP Stephen Phillips quit the government in protest at Prime Minister Theresa May's insistence that she will press for a "hard Brexit"—exit from the European Union, even if this means losing access to the Single Market—following June's referendum vote in favour of leaving the bloc.

The previous by-election was in Richmond, London on December 1, triggered by the resignation of Tory MP Zac Goldsmith. Although Goldsmith's resignation had nothing to do with Brexit, and was in protest at the building of a third runway at Heathrow airport, the by-election was turned into a ballot on the outcome of the referendum.

The Conservative Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) did not contest the Richmond by-election, backing Goldsmith who was a Leave supporter. The Green Party threw its support behind the Liberal Democrats, who have recast themselves as the leading proponents of a so-called Progressive Alliance in opposition to Brexit. In a constituency that voted overwhelmingly to Remain, this saw Goldsmith trounced, as the Liberal Democrats overturned his 23,000-vote majority to win the seat. The Labour Party, which has said it will not oppose Brexit but argues that the UK should seek to remain in the Single Market, lost its deposit.

The Sleaford by-election was also dominated by the issue of for or against Brexit, as two bitterly opposed camps within ruling circles seek to reshape British politics on the basis of a pro- or anti-EU programme.

The ballot took place against the backdrop of the four-day hearing before the Supreme Court, 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.

The rural market town, which is surrounded by prosperous villages, is considered one of the safest Tory seats in the country. Unlike Richmond, however, 62 percent of voters in Sleaford backed Leave in the June 23 referendum.

The most significant aspect of the result is the fact that two-thirds of those eligible to vote choose not to do so. Turnout was just 37 percent, down by 33 percent on the 2015 General Election.

The government claimed its 17,570 votes to be a victory for its hard-line position on Brexit. However, its vote share was down by nearly 3 percent and its majority slashed by half. That two by-elections have been forced by defections within the government speaks to a gathering crisis within its own ranks. While the majority of the party and its MPs favour Brexit, a small number are opposed.

Given that the government commands a narrow 13-seat majority, this is politically significant. Only the day before the election, May had been forced to accept a Labour motion—with several amendments—demanding the government publish its plans for leaving the EU before beginning formal negotiations over the UK's exit, after up to 40 Tory MPs threatened to back it.

UKIP took second place, but trailed way behind. Its vote (4,426) was also down by just over 2 percent. The party had suggested it might win a shock victory as a result of its campaign accusing the Tories of being "Brexit backsliders." But May's government has largely stolen UKIP's clothes as regards the EU and its anti-immigrant propaganda, and the far-right party failed to make any real headway.

The Liberal Democrats came in third, increasing their vote share by 5.3 percent. The party has pledged to vote against any move by May to trigger Article 50, if

Parliament is eventually able to vote on the issue, and its campaign was targeted at the 40 percent of voters in Sleaford that backed Remain. Even so, its 3,606 votes was an increase of just 106 on its 2015 result.

To the extent that UKIP and the Liberal Democrats can claim any success, it is the result of Labour's own collapse. The party ended in fourth place, from second in the 2015 General Election, and its vote fell by 7 percent to just 3,363. Its ambiguous and divided stance on the referendum and its aftermath meant that it was completely incapable of distinguishing itself from the other parties.

Once again, the Green Party failed to contest the by-election, backing an Independent candidate campaigning in opposition to the closure of the Accident and Emergency unit at the local hospital, who came in at sixth place.

More fundamental to Labour's decline is the growing disillusionment with Jeremy Corbyn who won the party leadership—with the overwhelming majority in two ballots—by presenting himself as a left-wing alternative to New Labour and the political establishment. Instead, he has capitulated entirely to the right-wing, as underscored by his decision last week not to back a parliamentary motion calling for an investigation into former Prime Minister Tony Blair's lies justifying the illegal war against Iraq.

Corbyn has become the invisible man. Following on from his cowardly absence from the vote on Blair, the Labour leader did not speak at all in Wednesday's debate on the parliamentary motion on Brexit tabled by his own party. And he was a marginal figure in the Sleaford campaign.

Labour's right-wing will undoubtedly utilise the result to step up their moves against Corbyn. Labour MP David Winnick said the result was "appalling," while others condemned Corbyn's leadership. But the reality is that the new Labour leader has made not one iota of difference to the party's rightward course. His "left" rhetoric has simply provided a cover for it.

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