

UK Labour Party by-election defeat prompts new moves against Corbyn

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The British Labour Party's loss to the ruling Conservatives in Thursday's by-election for the Copeland constituency has been seized upon by Labour's right wing to renew its campaign for the removal of the nominal "left" Jeremy Corbyn as party leader.

By-elections were held Thursday in the constituencies of Copeland, Cumbria and Stoke-on-Trent Central in Staffordshire. Both seats are in Labour's "heartland" and have been held by the party for generations.

The by-elections were triggered by the resignation of two right-wing Labour MPs, Jamie Reed and Tristram Hunt, who have opposed Corbyn since his election as Labour leader in September 2015. Reed vacated the Copeland seat in order to take up a position at the local Sellafield nuclear decommissioning plant.

The Conservatives won Copeland with the biggest increase in vote share by a governing party at a by-election for more than 50 years. Trudy Harrison won with 13,748 votes (44.25 percent) to 11,601 for Labour's Gillian Troughton, an increase in the vote share for the Tories of more than 8 percent and a fall in Labour's of nearly 5 percent.

The Liberal Democrats came in third with 2,252 votes (7.25 percent) and the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP) finished fourth with 2,025 (6.52 percent), a decline of 9 percent from its 2015 General Election result. Turnout was 31,068 (51.27 percent), down 12.53 percent from 2015.

Labour won Stoke-on-Trent Central, with Gareth Snell receiving 7,853 votes (37 percent). His closest challenger, Paul Nuttall, the leader of UKIP, received 5,233 votes (24.7 percent), narrowly besting the Tories, who finished third with 24.4 percent of the vote. Labour's vote fell by 2.2 percent and just 21,170 voters turned out, 36.6 percent of the electorate, a decline of

13.2 percent from 2015.

Copeland has been a Labour stronghold since 1935. Stoke-on-Trent Central has been held by Labour since 1950. That seat had been targeted by UKIP because it voted by a large margin, nearly 70 percent, in favour of the UK leaving the European Union in last year's referendum.

Nuttall described Stoke as the "capital of Brexit," but the Tories under Prime Minister Theresa May have taken on UKIP's agenda in its entirety. Anxious to bury UKIP, the media mounted a campaign against Nuttall over his lies about losing "close friends" in the 1989 Hillsborough soccer disaster, in which 96 supporters of Liverpool Football Club perished. Even so, the combined vote of the Tories and UKIP was nearly 50 percent.

Speaking on behalf of the Labour right, John Woodcock said the party was heading toward a "historic and catastrophic defeat" at the next general election.

Guardian columnist Owen Jones, who has played a central role in supporting moves against Corbyn, stated on Twitter, "Unless something drastic happens, Labour are on course for their worst defeat since the 1930s with terrible consequences for this country ... this is not sustainable."

Just a week before the election, former Labour leader Tony Blair called for those in favour of UK membership of the EU "to rise up and fight Brexit at any cost." In a swipe at Corbyn's leadership, he said, "The debilitation of the Labour party is the facilitator of Brexit... All of this would be easier [reversing Brexit] if you had a party challenging the government on their position, but that isn't the case."

Blair's intervention was followed just days before Thursday's elections by Blair's adviser and co-

architect of the New Labour project, Peter Mandelson, who told a meeting convened by the *Jewish Chronicle*, “I work every single day to bring forward the end of his [Corbyn’s] tenure in office.”

In the face of this renewed offensive, Corbyn and his key supporters once again called for unity with his opponents. Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, when asked if Blair had contributed to the loss of Copeland, replied meekly, “It’s not his fault. I’m just saying, advice: please don’t do that.”

McDonnell said of Mandelson, “[T]hree days before a by-election he attacks the party. What I’m saying is the central principle of how you win elections is you have a united party, you do not divide the party.”

It is thanks to Corbyn and McDonnell that Blair and Mandelson remain safely ensconced as Labour members. Their renewed attacks on Corbyn demonstrate that politics continues to follow the pattern of the last two years, in which the right wing seek Corbyn’s head on a plate and he begs them to be his friends.

Labour’s crisis is not to be measured by the party’s electoral prospects in this or that constituency, or even in a general election. The central issue is the fact that a leftward moving section of the population that looked to Corbyn—electing and re-electing him with overwhelming majorities over the past two years on the basis of his stated opposition to war and austerity—has been politically thwarted by their chosen leader.

Since taking office, Corbyn has utterly betrayed the mandate handed him. He named Blairite warmongers to his first cabinet and granted free votes in support of bombing raids on Syria and the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme. He and McDonnell then instructed local Labour councils to abide by the law and impose austerity cuts demanded by the government.

All this has been carried out in the name of maintaining the unity of the “Labour family.” What it means in practise is that the Labour right effectively control the party and determine its policies.

Corbyn may as well not be leader for all the difference he makes. Indeed, Tom Harris, a Blairite and former MP, wrote with obvious glee in his *Telegraph* column of the scale of Corbyn’s capitulation:

“Under any previous leader, under any functional regime, there would be no debate, no speculation about what might happen to a frontbencher of any rank who

breaks party discipline. They would be gone, either by resignation or by being sacked. No discussion, no compromises—bye bye, don’t let the door hit you on the backside on the way out, etc.”

As a result, few but the politically naïve believe any longer that Corbyn represents an alternative to the right wing in his own party, let alone someone who can form a government. Voters stay away in droves, as Labour’s right wing, backed by the media, are empowered to portray events on their terms as a refutation of all things “left,” while the Tories and UKIP mobilise their constituencies and reap the benefits.

This week’s by-elections reflect a political trend throughout Europe, in which Social Democratic parties—through their betrayal and abandonment of their traditional working class base—have paved the way for right and far-right parties to dominate political life. This is the case in France and the Netherlands, where the neo-fascists Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders are expected to score highly or even win upcoming elections thanks to the right-wing austerity policies imposed by the Social Democrats in government. Similarly, in Britain, Corbyn and the pseudo-left groups that act as his cheerleaders have thrown a political lifeline to May’s crisis-ridden and widely hated government.



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