

Conservatives win UK local elections, as Labour and UKIP vote declines

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Local council and mayoral elections held Thursday in England, Scotland and Wales were characterised by widespread abstention, as only around a third of those eligible turned out to vote.

The ruling Conservatives were the main beneficiaries from the low turnout, making significant gains at the expense of Labour and, even more so, the far right UK Independence Party (UKIP). UKIP's vote completely collapsed. Projected national vote share for the Tories is 38 percent, 11 points above Labour's 27 percent, with the Liberal Democrats at 18 percent and UKIP 5 percent.

Some 4,851 seats in 88 councils, mostly outside the UK's largest cities, were being contested, including all 32 councils in Scotland, 22 in Wales and 34 county councils and unitary authorities in England. Election of "Metro Mayors" were held in six areas—West of England, Greater Manchester, the Liverpool City Region, the West Midlands, Tees Valley, and Cambridge and Peterborough.

The local election campaign was a non-event and generally invisible until election day, due to Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May, last month, calling a snap General Election for June 8. Local elections are usually held on the same day as a general election, but Thursday's ballot was held nearly a month earlier.

With all results declared across the country, the Tories gained 563 seats with Labour losing 382 and the Liberal Democrats down 42 seats. UKIP lost 144 seats.

In England, the Tories took 10 councils, with Labour losing 150 seats and losing one council overall. The Liberals lost 29 seats. UKIP lost 145 seats and gained just one.

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) remains the main party in local government, but did not

do as well as expected, losing seven seats. The Conservatives won 164 seats to become the second party, displacing Labour, which lost 133 seats. Labour lost overall control of Glasgow City Council—a council it had held since 1980—to what will be a minority SNP administration.

In Wales, Labour lost seats in a number of the South Wales heartlands, including Bridgend and Merthyr Tydfil, in which Labour's founder Keir Hardie won his first seat. In Merthyr Tydfil, Labour council leader Brendan Toomey lost his seat to an Independent candidate, with the Independent group taking 16 seats to win. Despite projections of even bigger defeats at the hands of the Tories, Labour held control of Swansea, Cardiff and Newport councils and remains the largest party overall.

The Liberal Democrats failed to win any significant support, campaigning as the party committed to overturning the government's decision to leave the EU following last year's referendum vote. In councils such as Somerset and Dorset in South West England, where it was previously a force in local government—but where the electorate voted to Leave in the EU referendum—the Lib Dems lost out to the Tories.

The mayoral elections also saw significant defeats for Labour, with the Tories winning four of the six regions being contested. Although comfortably winning in two of their strongholds—Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City region—Labour lost to the Tories in the solidly working class West Midlands, which has the largest urban population outside London. It also lost in the Tees Valley in the northeast of England, an area which has been de-industrialised, leading to the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs, and which voted heavily to leave the EU.

The low turnout nationally was reflected in the

mayoral elections, with less than a third of those eligible turning out. In Greater Manchester, the turnout was under 29 percent, while in the West Midlands it was 26 percent and in the Tees Valley just 21 percent voted.

The results are a massive indictment of Labour's nominally left leader Jeremy Corbyn and his backers among Britain's pseudo-left groups. Since his election in 2015, Corbyn has refused to oppose the party's right wing, repeatedly kowtowing to them on every policy. Just weeks after winning re-election with a landslide vote on a ticket opposing austerity and war, Corbyn allowed a free vote on military strikes in Syria. A third of Labour MPs voted in favour, allowing the Tories a comfortable majority, with air strikes going ahead straight after. Corbyn then instructed Labour councils, which run the vast majority of the UK's main urban areas, to continue imposing austerity.

Labour's continued enforcing of austerity played a central role in its defeat. Many councils they run have imposed massive cuts in adult social care—hitting the elderly particularly hard—and enforced huge council tax increases. Labour lost Derbyshire council to the Tories, in an area which covers a parliamentary seat the party has held since 1935. Labour councils in the county have imposed more than £100 million in austerity measures

Many people in Merthyr Tydfil had already protested cuts by the Labour-run council of more than £15 million prior to Corbyn becoming leader. These have continued since. On why he was defeated, Labour leader Toomey said, “We've had to take some tough decisions and unfortunately I've had to pay the price for that...”

Following the Brexit referendum and resignation last July of Tory Prime Minister David Cameron, his successor May adopted the anti-EU programme of UKIP root and branch. As a result of the Tories taking UKIP's mantle, the vast majority of its voters deserted the party in favour of May's Brexit means Brexit agenda.

Financial Times political editor George Parker could barely contain his glee as he told Sky News, “This is a government that has been implementing an austerity programme for seven years ... and yet here they are gaining hundreds of seats across the country at the expense of Labour, the SNP, the Lib Dems and UKIP.”

On UKIP's collapse, Parker said May had “been using the language of UKIP, adopting some of the policies of UKIP and at the same time flattening UKIP.”

Douglas Carswell, the Tory turned UKIP MP who then left the party in March this year said, “Speaking as UKIP's first and last Member of Parliament... I would not want to say anything unkind, but we all know that it's over.”

Labour's heavy defeat was utilised by the party's right wing, which has plotted to remove Corbyn since his election, to step up calls for his ouster. Despite Corbyn's refusal to fight the right—many of whom would rather see Labour defeated in the General Election than have Corbyn as prime minister—his association with Labour's past reformist programme is unacceptable. Stephen Kinnock, the son of the former Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, said Friday, “[M]y vision of the Labour party is not one where we are anywhere near the hard left.”

Andy Burnham, who won the contest for Greater Manchester mayor, refused to meet Corbyn when the Labour leader arrived in Manchester late Friday. As Corbyn made a speech to Labour supporters to congratulate Burnham, the new mayor reportedly chose instead to quaff champagne in one of the city's upmarket restaurants just a few hundred yards away. Burnham was one of the three Labour right-wingers who Corbyn resoundingly defeated to become leader.



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