

Local elections confirm growing class polarisation in UK

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Local elections held in parts of the UK on Thursday gave a partial indication of the growing polarisation between the classes due to deepening social inequality.

As with any election in Britain, the results are politically distorted due to the electoral system which favours the domination of two parties—Conservative and Labour.

This was not alleviated by the nature of a poll which at least notionally prioritised local issues. Still, the basic framework presented was a choice between support for austerity and war (Tories) and criticisms of militarism and social inequality (Labour).

Polling took place in around 4,300 council seats across England in the first electoral test since last year's general election—when Theresa May's Conservative government lost its majority and Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party won an extra 30 seats. This was against all the predictions and hopes of the ruling elite and its mouthpieces in the media and Labour's Blairites.

In London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle every council seat was up for election and the results there give a more complete picture of the political situation compared to the 100 or so other council areas where only a third were contested. Five council mayors were also up for election in London, as well as a mayoral election for the new Sheffield City region.

Around 40 percent of the seats up for grabs were in London, where Labour already controlled 21 of the 32 boroughs. Talk of the party capturing key London councils including Barnet, Kensington & Chelsea, Wandsworth and Westminster—some under Tory rule for decades and enclaves of the super-rich—was never likely to materialise.

The vote for Labour increased substantially in

metropolitan areas, particularly in London, while the Conservative Party held on outside the large cities—helped by a collapse in the vote for the United Kingdom Independence Party.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, where the Grenfell Tower fire took place, was especially contentious.

Overall the borough turnout increased from an average of 30 percent of voters in 2014 to around 40 percent. The Labour Party saw its vote go up by 27 percent—from 23,845 to 32,816 compared to just 8 percent for the Conservatives—from 47,991 to 52,211. If the popular vote was used to distribute seats it would have resulted in 27 Conservative councillors, 17 Labour and 6 Lib-Dems, but because of Britain's first past the post system the result was 36 Conservatives, 13 Labour and one Lib-Dem.

The split in the vote parallels the levels of social inequality expressed in the child poverty level per electoral ward. In Notting Dale, the ward with the highest poverty at 44 percent, Labour had its highest result, increasing from 4,132 votes to 4,764. In Queen's Gate where poverty affects just 6 percent of the population, the Conservative vote barely changed (3,233 in 2014 and 3,346 in 2016.)

Should the Tories have lost such key citadels of a super-rich clique, May's already precarious existence as party leader would have been sealed. As it was, she claimed that "Labour thought they could take control, this was one of their top targets and they threw everything at it, but they failed."

Quizzed as to why Labour had failed to make the gains predicted, Corbyn replied, "We have consolidated and built on the advances we made at last year's General Election, when we won the largest increase in Labour's share of the vote since 1945.

“In these elections we have won seats across England in places we have never held before. We won Plymouth from the Tories, who lost control of Trafford, their flagship northern council. And Labour has won even more council seats than at our high watermark of 2014.”

The Tories had “talked up our chances to unrealistic levels, especially in London.” However, Labour “came within a whisker of winning Wandsworth for the first time in over 40 years.”

In Trafford, one of only two metropolitan districts alongside Solihull under Conservative rule, Labour became the largest party.

In Newham, East London, Rokhsana Fiaz was easily elected mayor with 73 percent of the vote, 12 percent higher than her ousted predecessor, Blairite Sir Robin Wales, under whose 23-year leadership Newham Council had pioneered social cleansing policies, including seeking to disperse homeless families to social housing in other parts of the country. Homelessness in the borough currently stands at a national high of one in 25 people.

Elections analyst and Queen Mary University of London professor, Philip Cowley, said Labour’s results were the best for more than 30 years.

“In both Westminster and Wandsworth, Labour did better—in seats—than at any election since 1986. To have managed to so misjudge the politics of the election that this is presented as a bad result is quite spectacular.”

However, the theme of the night as results came in was that “peak-Corbyn” had been reached because Labour had not captured key London councils remaining under Tory rule. Typical was BBC Political Editor Laura Kuenssberg, whose mantra during the BBC’s night-long reporting was that Corbyn had failed.

Labour had “moved on slightly since the general election. But, in the words of [pollster] Sir John Curtice, Jeremy Corbyn’s party has come out of this more or less ‘empty-handed’, and they can’t show the kind of progress they would be shouting about if they were truly convinced they were on a rapid march to Number 10.”

The reality is that, to the extent Labour’s advances are in working class areas, then they are anathema to the party’s MPs—who measure political success by their ability to win acceptance from the financial oligarchy.

As an unnamed Labour shadow minister told *the* “Jeremy has not spent the 11 months since the General Election winning Middle England, and now never will.”

There is no doubt the result will unleash another campaign of slander and lies by the Blairites. An inkling of this was given by anti-Corbyn Labour MP Jess Phillips, who complained, “I see everyone is claiming failure as victory.”

One feature of the attack will be a renewed campaign alleging the party’s left wing to be anti-Semitic. Barry Rawlings, Labour Party leader in Barnet, which has a large Jewish community, laid the blame for the failure to capture the council directly on Corbyn’s failure to tackle anti-Semitism. Rawlings declared, “I want to speak directly to our Jewish brothers and sisters. I am extremely grateful to members of the Jewish community who cast votes for Labour. But too many didn’t.

“It wasn’t because they disagreed with our manifesto, but because they felt the Labour party has failed to deal with antisemitism on a national level. They are right,” he concluded.

Labour’s relative successes will, therefore, throw fuel on the fire of the one-sided civil war in the party, waged by the right with no serious opposition from Corbyn.



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