# UK: By-election defeat for Conservatives but Labour almost wiped out

**Robert Stevens**
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Boris Johnson's Conservative government suffered a humiliating defeat in Thursday's by-election in the Welsh farming constituency Brecon and Radnorshire, reducing its working parliament majority to just one.

The seat was won by the anti-Brexit Liberal Democrats, with candidate Jane Dodds overturning a Tory majority of more than 8,000. Dodds becomes the Lib Dems 13th MP. The by-election was called after Tory MP Chris Davies was unseated by a recall petition, after being charged in February with claiming false expenses. He pleaded guilty in March and the following month received a community order sentence requiring him to do 50 hours unpaid work and a £1,500 fine.

The local Tory party decision to stand Davies again as its candidate no doubt contributed to the heavy defeat, but the almost 10 percent collapse in his vote and 14 percent increase in the Lib Dems vote confirms the polarisation of politics in the UK into opposing camps over Brexit that cuts across traditional party loyalties.

Dodds won 13,826 votes, with Davies receiving 12,401 on a turnout of 60 percent. The candidate of Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, Des Parkinson, came third with 3,331 votes. Had the Brexit Party not stood and its vote gone to the Tories, Davies would likely have won.

The vote for the Labour Party collapsed, with Tomos Glyndwr Davies coming fourth with 1,680 votes and only just retaining his deposit on a 5.3 percent share of the vote.

The by-election saw the initial implementation of a pro-Remain electoral alliance. The other staunchly anti-Brexit parties—the Greens and the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales)—stood aside to ensure the Lib Dems were the only major party standing on a ticket for the UK to remain in the European Union (EU). The Lib Dems were therefore able to take most of Labour's lost vote, with a smaller percentage switching to the Brexit Party. Plaid Cymru only won 3.1 percent in Brecon at the last general election, while the Greens did not stand—meaning most of the Lib Dems gain came from Labour.

This meant the Lib Dems taking the seat even though a slight majority of 50.3 percent of the Brecon vote went to the pro-Brexit Tories and Brexit Party—in a constituency that voted narrowly by 51.9 percent to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum.

The result narrows Johnson's working majority to just one seat, but it is understood that its suspended MP, Charlie Elphicke, who had the whip taken away after being charged with sexual assault, would still vote for the Tories in any confidence vote, giving them a two-seat majority.

Most commentators now consider it unlikely that Johnson will call a snap general election prior to the October 31 deadline for Britain's leaving the EU. Instead various sources point to his advisers planning for pulling the UK out of the EU without a deal, with an election taking place after. It would then campaign on the basis that a pro-Remain Parliament is seeking to thwart the "will of the people" over Brexit.

On Sunday, the Tory house organ, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Times*, owned by Brexit supporting oligarch, Rupert Murdoch, both led with stories reportedly leaked by Johnson's main adviser, Dominic Cummings, who led the Vote Leave campaign. The *Telegraph* reported that Cummings "told ministers and officials that the prime minister will honour his October 31 pledge even if [Labour leader] Jeremy Corbyn and pro-Remain Conservatives succeed in forcing a general election." It added, "Cummings suggested that the Labour leader had missed his opportunity to secure an

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election before the UK's intended departure date from the EU."

The report cited Cummings saying EU leaders, including French President Emmanuel Macron, think Johnson's declaration that the UK could leave in a no-deal Brexit "is a bluff." Cummings is reported to have told civil servants, "They don't realise that if there is a no-confidence vote in September or October, we'll call an election for after the 31st and leave anyway."

Central to the Tories' calculations is that the split in the Remain vote gives them a chance to secure a majority in Parliament—provided Johnson can stem any significant losses to the Brexit Party.

Were Johnson to go for a no-deal Brexit on October 31, swathes of Brexit Party voters could return to the Tories ahead of a general election. But even if this fails and the Brexit Party does well, Johnson could seek some form of electoral arrangement or coalition with Farage and continue working with the Democratic Unionist Party to provide the basis for government.

The *Sunday Times* reported, a "source familiar with some of Cummings's thinking" who said "It's a two-pronged strategy, which is underpinned by two assumptions, the first of which is that they can kill the Brexit Party, which they are in the process of doing. The second thing, which is not in their gift but determines the success of the strategy, is that by [the Tories] becoming the Brexit party, the Liberal Democrats become the remain party, which takes votes principally from the Labour Party."

This would see the Tories "give up 20 or 30 existing Tory seats [to the Lib Dems] on the basis that the Labour vote collapses and that huge swathes of northern England, the Midlands and Wales collapse back to the Conservatives where they score barely over 30 percent. That's how the next election is going to be run. He has seen a pathway where the left are split and Boris wins through the middle."

This is a high-risk strategy. However, as far as working people are concerned the parliamentary arithmetic involved counts for little. The Tories have been refashioned as a Brexit party, while Farage himself describes his Brexit Party as "the modern-day Conservative Party."

Extrapolating a nationwide result from the Brecon by-election—in a rural part of Wales, with only the southern part, a former mining area being historically a Labour voting area—and last won by Labour as long ago as 1970, is highly problematic. But it is clear that the Liberal Democrats, widely reviled for their role in imposing austerity in the 2010/15 coalition with the Tories, can inflict significant electoral damage to Labour. In preparation for a general election, a cross-party group of MPs, led by former Tory MP Heidi Allen, now an independent, have formed Unite to Remain—to put "allegiances aside" and secure more agreements among Remain parties to field a single candidate in a number of seats. Moreover, the Blairites in Labour would be most happy if the Lib Dems do well and a pro-Remain coalition becomes ever more likely.

Political responsibility for both these rotten scenarios—a pro- or anti-Brexit national unity government, rests with Corbyn. His leadership of the party has only succeeding in making Labour an irrelevance for its millions of voters, under condition of the worst political crisis to face British imperialism in peacetime.

Corbyn has tried without success to "bridge the Brexit divide," in the country as a whole and in the Labour Party, by elaborating a programme that upholds the "national interest" of British imperialism by maintaining access to the EU single market and customs union while still leaving the EU. He has never once put forward an independent strategy for the working class. This would mean rejecting any alliance with the pro- or anti-Brexit sections of big business, advancing a socialist perspective to oppose austerity, militarism and war by British workers in alliance with their class brothers and sisters throughout Europe.

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