

Election losses for Labour prompts further rightward shift by Starmer

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9 May 2021

The opposition Labour Party suffered massive losses in the “Super Thursday” elections throughout the UK.

Elections were held for the devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales, and in 143 English councils, where more than 5,000 seats were contested including 35 metropolitan and 59 district councils. Mayoral elections were contested in major cities and regions including London and Greater Manchester.

Elections for the Hartlepool’s parliamentary seat saw Labour lose for the first time in over 60 years, with a 16 percent swing to the Conservatives. This was only the second ever by-election victory by a ruling party, taking a seat from an opposition party, since the Second World War.

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party stayed in office for a fourth successive term, falling just short of winning an overall majority.

With all 143 council results declared, the Tories made a net gain of 13 councils, electing 2,345 councillors (up 235), while Labour has lost control of eight, electing 1,345 councillors (down 326).

In Dudley, in England’s West Midlands, the Tories gained 12 seats, all but one from Labour, leaving them with 46 and in control. In Harlow, Essex, an area that heavily backed leaving the European Union in 2016, the Tories took control with Labour holding only one of the seven seats contested.

While Labour lost control of councils, this did not necessarily come as a result of a switch by Labour voters to the Tories. In Sheffield, among the UK’s largest cities, Labour lost eight seats and overall control of the council for the first time in a decade. A third of Sheffield’s seats were contested, with the Greens taking five from Labour. The Liberal Democrats took three seats. The Tories won just one seat in the city, Stocksbridge, their first since 2007.

The Greens and Liberal Democrats made gains

nationally, with Green councillors gaining 85 seats—from the Tories and Labour—taking their nationwide total to 151. In Bristol, the Greens gained 13 seats from Labour, with both parties on 24 councillors each. The Greens elected councillors for the first time to local authorities in Northumberland, Stockport, Hastings and Derbyshire. The Liberal Democrats won St Albans council, previously under no overall control.

It was mostly in Brexit voting areas that the Tories made gains, as those who voted previously for the anti-EU UK Independence Party/Brexit Party switched. All 59 council seats were being contested in Rotherham, with the Tories taking 20 seats, from zero. Labour lost 12 seats while still maintaining control.

In the north east of England, Labour lost control of Durham County Council, which it has run since 1925, losing 15 seats as the Tories took 14. Labour fell short of a majority, with the loss compounded by the fact that a host of already well established Independents held their seats, and, along with smaller parties, saw a gain of three seats for a total of 31.

Labour was able to hold councils in some of its strongholds, including in London, Manchester and Liverpool. In the 25-member London Assembly elections, Labour retained its majority, with 14 seats contested and none changing hands.

Labour’s right-wing figurehead Sadiq Khan was re-elected as London’s mayor, winning 55.2 percent of the vote including second preferences—after a better-than-expected performance by Conservative Shaun Bailey fighting on a law-and-order ticket. Turnout was 42 percent, down from 46 percent five years ago. Khan won 40 percent of first round votes, against 35.3 percent for Bailey, in a field of 20 candidates. There is little to distinguish the pair.

Labour Mayors also retained power in Liverpool, Greater Manchester and Salford with comfortable wins.

Turnout was generally low in the council elections, manifesting the growing alienation of millions of working people from the entire political establishment. This is shown even where it rose slightly from already low levels—for example in Durham at 36.35 percent, up from 31.25 percent in 2017, Bristol 41.04 percent, down from 44.76 percent at the 2016 elections.

In Wales, Labour was able to stay in office for a sixth successive term, primarily as the beneficiary of an anti-Welsh nationalist vote. Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales) won just five seats, taking their total to 13 on a manifesto committing them holding a referendum on independence by 2026 had they secured a majority in the Welsh Parliament (Senedd) this election.

Labour won 30 of the 60 seats, including the Rhondda seat of former Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood. The Tories took second place, finishing with 16 seats. Plaid Cymru presents itself as a reformist party but has never been able to win office in national elections, with support for Welsh independence only backed by a minority.

Labour's dire showing was the occasion for the media to conclude—with fervent backing from party leader Sir Keir Starmer and his supporters—that a sharper turn to the right was needed. The official narrative is that more than a year after Starmer took over as leader from the nominally left Jeremy Corbyn, Labour did not do enough to distance itself from him, and was suffering from “Long Corbyn”. In addition, Starmer was supposedly unable to “shine” and connect with Labour voters in the party's northern traditional heartlands in the so-called Red Wall because of the pandemic.

None of this is true. Corbyn's collapse in support in 2019, after Labour made significant gains in 2017, was not due primarily to the confused pro-Brexit sentiment of some older workers in the de-industrialised north, and certainly not because his policies were too left-wing. It was the deserved result of his refusal to honour his commitment to shift Labour to the left by fighting to end the domination of the Blairites—which lost Labour just as much support among pro-Remain young workers and students in the metropolitan areas.

Whatever result Labour had secured on Thursday, the Blairites would still be arguing for a right-turn. Labour's political evolution—as demonstrated under the five years of Corbyn's leadership—is dictated by its historic role as a pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist force, under conditions where the global capitalist crisis and the polarised relations between the classes precludes any genuine appeal to working people.

Over the weekend Starmer carried out a reshuffle of his shadow cabinet that included the promotion of several leading Blairites.

Initial talk was that Angela Rayner, the party's deputy leader, would be demoted as party chair. An inveterate careerist previously sympathetic to Corbyn, her use value to Starmer was as a woman from a northern seat who “got” the Brexit sentiment in “Red Wall” seats. In the event, due to opposition from her supporters who complained that Starmer was scapegoating her, she was removed as chair and national campaigns coordinator, while being handed a leading position of shadow chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, shadowing Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove. Rayner also got a new post as shadow secretary for the future of work.

Shadow Chancellor Anneliese Dodds, who had also served in Corbyn ally John McDonnell's shadow treasury team, was removed and given the lesser post of party chair. Dodds was replaced as Shadow Chancellor by Rachel Reeves, who is on record that Labour would be tougher on benefit claimants when in office than the Tories. Another figure from the Corbyn era, Nick Brown, was replaced as chief whip by Ian Campbell. Anti-Corbyn coup plotter Wes Streeting was handed a newly created position of shadow minister tackling child poverty.

Writing in the *Financial Times* Saturday under the headline, “Starmer must listen to voters, not Labour factions”, Tony Blair's closest collaborator Peter Mandelson, wrote, “The idea that the party, freed from the incubus of Corbyn, can continue to uphold his policies is ludicrous. Starmer needs to wipe the slate clean and address the fresh challenges of the post-Covid, post-Brexit era with boldness and realism.”



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