

UK: Labour scrapes a win in Batley and Spen by-election as support collapse continues

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The Labour Party won Thursday's by-election in Batley and Spen in northern England by just 323 votes—less than a one percent margin over the Conservatives who came second.

Labour's candidate Kim Leadbeater is the sister of Jo Cox, who was MP for the constituency for just over a year until June 2016 when she was murdered by a fascist.

Leadbeater won 13,296 votes, taking just 35.3 percent of vote, and defeating the Conservative Party's Ryan Stephenson who won 12,973 (34.4 percent). Former Labour MP George Galloway, standing for the Workers Party of Britain, came third with 8,264 votes (21.8 percent). The Liberal Democrats came fourth, with just 3.3 percent losing their deposit. None of the other 12, mainly right-wing and fascist parties standing received more than 2 percent and many far less.

After the count, Galloway called for a recount, which was rejected. Later, he declared that “on multiple grounds we will apply to the courts for this election result to be set aside.” Two days before the election, Galloway's denounced as a “blatantly partisan move” the Labour-run local authority taking down hundreds of his campaign posters claiming that they broke election laws due to the imprint being too small. Galloway said a turning point in the election was the “false statement” by her that he had laughed while Leadbeater was abused on the campaign trail.

The vote was necessitated by Labour MP Tracy Brabin winning the party's nomination for the inaugural Mayor of West Yorkshire in the 2021 election. Brabin won that election and resigned her Batley and Spen seat. She had become Batley and Spen's MP after winning what was a practically uncontested election following Cox's brutal murder just days before the June 2016 referendum on British

membership of the European Union. Her killer, neo-Nazi Thomas Mair, shouted, “Britain First” as he shot and stabbed the Labour MP—a Remain supporter.

Following Labour's by-election loss in May to the Conservatives in their stronghold seat of Hartlepool, and the party's dismal fourth place in the Chesham and Amersham by-election—in which the party suffered its worst ever by-election result and lost its deposit—Batley and Spen was cast as a referendum on party leader Sir Keir Starmer. Talk was that he could face a leadership challenge if Labour lost.

Labour narrowly won, but on a turnout of 48 percent. Turnout at the 2019 general election in the constituency was 66.5 percent. Brabin had a majority of 3,525 from the 2019 election, with Leadbeater's majority only a tenth of that. Labour's 35.3 percent vote share was a drop of seven percentage points from the 2019 general election and an even larger fall of 20 percent since the 2017 election.

Labour was also assisted in winning the seat by the absence of a Green Party candidate—the Greens won 692 votes (1.3 percent) in the constituency in the 2019 election. The Greens planned to run a candidate, but he was forced to withdraw last month due to the unearthing of homophobic tweets he made 10 years ago.

The by-election demonstrated that there are no fundamental differences between Labour and the Tories, with both competing over who can best serve the interests of big business and the banks. So toxic is the Labour brand that Leadbeater's campaign leaflet did not mention the word “Labour”, except in tiny almost unreadable text within the imprint. The leaflet instead stated, “Vote Kim Leadbeater,” who was described as a “local champion”.

Asked during the campaign by a friendly *Guardian*

journalist if she would back a 12.5 percent pay rise for nurses, the local champion Leadbeater refused to do so. She riffed on the infamous comment by former Tory Prime Minister Theresa May, saying, “People are also sick of thinking there is a magic money tree, when there isn’t. So we’ve got to be really clear to people about that”.

Much talk before the election centred on the plethora of far right and fascist candidates being able to gain politically in an area which voted Leave in the European Union referendum. But despite their best attempts to whip up racism and Islamophobia in a population which is 20 percent Muslim, the *combined* vote for five extreme right candidates was just 538.

As the Socialist Equality Party made clear in its pre-election assessment of the by-election, the inveterate political opportunist and British nationalist Galloway offered no alternative to Labour from the left. No candidate was “fighting for the independent class interests of workers against all the parties of big business” in a deindustrialised area of West Yorkshire which is scarred by poverty, with more than 40 percent of the population dependent on Universal Credit welfare benefit payments.

Starmer remains Labour leader and will only shift Labour further to the right. He owes his unchallenged leadership position not to a winning victory by a tiny margin, but because he faces no opposition from Labour’s nominal “left.” Following Leadbeater’s “victory,” talk immediately evaporated about any challenge to Starmer’s leadership. And even before that, the challengers mooted were his deputy Angela Rayner and Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, neither of whom is in any way associated with the “left.”

Rayner has spent the last days insisting that she knew nothing about any challenge to Starmer, while Burnham declared, “I ain’t going back any time soon... I’m supporting Keir. I want him to win the next general election and I will do whatever I can to help him achieve that.”

Starmer’s predecessor as leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who eight months ago had the Labour whip removed from him by Starmer based on false claims of anti-Semitism as part of a wider witch-hunt of the left, is a political busted flush. Someone who once regularly addressed audiences in the tens of thousands, last Saturday, as

featured speaker at a national rally of the People’s Assembly in London, Corbyn and similar figures attracted an audience of less than a thousand.

Corbyn’s only response to the election was to congratulate Leadbeater, who he said will begin “the process of bringing a fractured community together.” Interviewed Friday by the BBC, Diane Abbott, on behalf of the rump of Corbynite MPs in the Socialist Campaign Group, refused to oppose Starmer’s leadership and said that she has “confidence in the party.” Her wing of the party, she insisted, would “never do to Keir what the right of the party did to Jeremy.”

For the working class, the only way forward is through a struggle to build the Socialist Equality Party, to represent its independent interests in opposition to every political representative of capitalism.



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