

Labour's party of NATO and austerity tanks in UK local elections

Robert Stevens
6 May 2022

Thursday's local elections saw Boris Johnson's Conservative government lose hundreds of council seats as expected. But the real disaster was the Labour Party's total failure to muster significant popular support out of this sea of opposition to Johnson and the Tories, such is the hostility to Sir Keir Starmer's equally right-wing party.

Councils were contested across the UK, including in most major cities. By the end of counting Friday evening, the Tories had lost 397 council seats across England, Wales and Scotland and Labour had picked up just 252. The Liberal Democrat's gained 189, won mainly at the expense of the Tory Party in the South of England. The Green Party gained 81, taking from both the Tories and Labour.

This translated into an additional eight councils won for Labour, 12 lost for the Tories and five more won for the Liberal Democrats.

In Wales—a Labour stronghold—the party gained 62 new councillors and two councils. It lost control of Neath Port Talbot council as the nationalist Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales) gained seats there. Most of Labour's gains in Wales were at the expense of the Tories. The Conservatives lost 67 councillors and lost control of the only council they controlled, Monmouthshire. While Labour became the largest party, their total in Monmouthshire of 22 seats was two short of a majority. Plaid Cymru lost three seats overall but took control of three more authorities in the process—Anglesey, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire. The Greens won eight seats in Wales, their best ever result.

In Scotland, while Labour became the second largest party at the expense of the Tories, the Scottish National Party (SNP) easily maintained its position as the largest party in local government. Across Scotland's 32 councils, the SNP increased its total number of councillors by 22. Labour gained 20 seats and one council, but finished 13

percentage points behind the SNP in the vote share.

Elections were also held to the Northern Ireland Assembly, where results so far suggest Sinn Féin will be the largest party. This would be the first time an Irish nationalist party has held the most seats in the parliament, allowing them to select the First Minister, and would likely produce a political crisis. The rival Democratic Unionist Party has already signalled its intention to refuse to nominate a Deputy First Minister if Sinn Féin win. If one is not in place after six months, the administration collapses.

According to a projected national share of the British vote released by the BBC on Friday afternoon, Labour's share was 35 percent, the Conservatives' 30 percent, and Liberal Democrats' 19 percent.

Whatever spin is put on it, the results are an indictment of Labour who made the minimum gains possible under the circumstances. Starmer's declared campaign to rescue the party from former leader Jeremy Corbyn's electoral disaster in 2019—which he and his fellow Blairites were as much responsible for as Corbyn—has been a dismal failure.

Labour was up against a prime minister who has overseen the mass murder of almost 200,000 people in the pandemic at the head of an austerity imposing Tory party in power for 12 years; and now overseeing a price surge making life literally unaffordable for the working class. Prior to the election, the Labour supporting *Mirror* predicted that the Tories would lose up to 800 seats, sending the Tory Party into meltdown and leading to the possible resignation of the widely hated Johnson. Others like the *Guardian* suggested Tory losses of over 500 seats.

In the event, Johnson was able to brush off a “mixed set of results” and comment, “We had a tough night in some parts of the country but on the other hand in other parts of the country you are still seeing Conservatives going

forward and making quite remarkable gains in places that haven't voted Conservative for a long time, if ever ..."

According to a Sky News projection, based on local election results from 1,700 wards and an analysis of the change in vote share since 2018 across 87 local authorities, Labour would fail to win the next general election set for 2024. It projected a hung parliament with the Tories on 278 seats—seven more than Labour on 271.

In the so-called "Red Wall" of historically Labour strongholds in the north of England, Starmer's party flopped entirely. In the 2019 general election, the Tories took many of these constituencies—whose working-class areas had been long abandoned by Labour—for the first time in decades, if not ever. There were no signs of this rot being reversed. In Hull, after being in power for a decade, Labour lost control of the council to the Liberal Democrats. Hull was one of the ports hit by the recent mass firing of 800 P&O ferry workers, which Labour and the trade unions did nothing to fight.

Where the Tories suffered heavy losses, Labour was far from harnessing or monopolising the opposition. Most workers simply voted with their feet and did not turn up to the polls. As for those who did cast a ballot, the Liberal Democrats and Greens between them gained more seats than Labour. The further lurch to the right under Starmer has been so extreme that these parties picked up many voters, predominantly from the middle class, repulsed by the reactionary stench of both the main parties.

Since being handed the reins by Corbyn in April 2020, with both professing that they would offer Johnson only "constructive" criticism during the pandemic, Starmer has moved ruthlessly to purge the party of any connection even with his predecessor's watered down "left" policies.

The Labour leader has launched an extended audition for the role of British imperialism's chief warmonger and the support of the City of London's financial oligarchy. Starmer declared "Labour is the party of NATO" and assured the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) last November, "As I said in my speech at Labour Party conference: Labour is back in business... Labour is also the party of business."

The first fruits of his efforts were summed up by victories in Westminster council, held by the Conservatives since 1964, and Wandsworth council, in Tory hands since 1978—the year before Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came to office. Wandsworth was the Tory flagship council, reputed to be Thatcher's favourite, such was its commitment to her privatising, free market agenda.

Starmer pointedly chose to celebrate a stronger performance for Labour in London with a televised visit to newly won Barnet, where false accusations of Labour anti-Semitism have played a major role due to its high concentration of Jewish votes. He declared that his party had won there as a result of this rotten right-wing witch-hunt, which has seen Corbyn expelled from the Parliamentary Labour Party and countless others from the party altogether.

Even then, Labour group leader Barry Rawlings had to acknowledge of the party's victory: "I'll be honest, it's not us being wonderful. I think a lot of Conservatives haven't voted this time, I think they feel alienated from No 10... they've been disappointed with Boris Johnson".

Two other London councils—Croydon and Tower Hamlets—will not declare results until Saturday morning and Saturday evening respectively. Labour is threatened with the loss of Croydon after declaring bankruptcy due to years of financial skulduggery, including the sell-off of public assets.

Financial Times columnist Camilla Cavendish delivered a blunt assessment: "If Starmer can't enthuse voters now, he might never beat Johnson". She writes, "The local elections, which Conservatives had feared would represent a huge backlash against the prime minister, have turned out to be just as much a verdict on Labour. Boris Johnson will be quietly concluding he is safe—and Keir Starmer still has a very long way to go if he wants to win the next election."

The results confirmed that the working class had no dog in the fight in these elections being fought out by the near identical parties of big business—with Labour, if anything, more committed to a programme of austerity and war than the criminals occupying Downing Street. The only way forward for the working class is the rebuilding of a mass socialist movement through the construction of its own party, the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact