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Britain

No renewal for New Labour

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The local government election results in England on May 6 saw Labour's worst local government vote on record. Twenty six per cent support on a 36 per cent turnout meant less than one in ten electors could be bothered to vote for them. The three major political parties are converging in the so-called 'centre', which is in fact on the neoliberal right. The major response to Labour unpopularity was a very low turnout at the election, but also a rise in support for the far-right British National Party, for the Greens and or the left wing alliance Respect, which won 12 councillors in the London municipality Tower Hamlets, 3 in Newham and one councillor in two other municipalities.

The decline in Labour support has been apparent for at least five years. Electoral support in local government dropped from 38 per cent in 2000 to 26 per cent in 2006. With lower turnout this time, no amount of 'spin' can put a gloss on this pummelling.

Last year's (2005) general election victory for New Labour did not amount to a reversal in the downward trend in support.. With a poor result on a low turn out, Labour's return to government owed everything to the peculiarities of the British 'first past the post' polling system, and the disarray of the opposition Conservative Party.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/blairbrown.jpg>]

Blair and Brown

Media commentary has focused almost exclusively on the question of the leadership of the party, and the seemingly endless saga of when and if British economics minister ('Chancellor') Gordon Brown will take over from Tony Blair. It's true that Blair has long been seen inside and outside New Labour as 'on the way out'. And with this election his authority has further drained to near invisibility.

But while a Brown takeover might boost Labour fortunes, the revival would be small scale and brief. If "renewal" - Gordon Brown's insistent slogan - had any chance of success it was needed in 2001 or 2002. And to really "renew" Labour, even modestly, he would have had to break with Blair's Iraq policy and his welfare state "modernisation" (read: privatisation) policies that have caused such disenchantment on the street.

Instead Brown has oriented to the right - wrapping himself in the Union Jack, emphasising "security" and spearheading the private sector take-over of public services. What has changed this year has been the systemic character of Labour's failure - across a range of issues and enveloping nearly all its leading players.

The theme tune to Labour's 1997 victory, "Things can only get better", turned into a fallacy - with inequality growing, education standards stubbornly low, unemployment rising, pensions cut and social alienation growing rapidly.

In practice this means the demise of what has been described as the New Labour "project".

A recovery would be difficult without fundamental change. But this is absolutely excluded in today's New Labour party. No significant section of the party is organising for it or even presenting any real alternative.

New Labour's project of hegemonising British politics for a generation or more - claiming the mantle of "natural party of government" - is now looking like history. Once this aura of power crumbles it cannot be easily rebuilt.

Labour's response at these elections was to play on the supposed efficiency of local Labour councils(municipalities) -

something few outside the party seemed aware of - spiced up with a heavy dose of "law and order" authoritarian populism. This strategy blew apart under its own internal contradictions.

The revolt against Blair's Iraq crusade formed the backcloth of the electoral fiasco - a simmering catalyst for radical discontent, driving away thousands of New Labour members and hundreds of thousands of voters. Blair has spent three years vainly trying to stem this drift by a phony sales-pitch focusing on his personal "integrity" and Labour's purported delivery on "bread and butter" policies. But in the months prior to May 4 a string of scandals on precisely these issues provided the crunch point:

- The "cash for peerages" scandal in which it became clear that Labour was raising money from business people in exchange for making them Lords or Sirs.
- The health crisis: thousands of nursing jobs have been destroyed in hospitals, while private contractors made hundreds of millions of pounds from the so-called 'Private Finance Initiative' in which private companies take over the provision of public infrastructure.
- The education revolt: massive opposition to a proposed law that would see the ending of 'comprehensive schools' which include children from all abilities and different social backgrounds, and the return of selection at the age of 11, which would inevitably see a deepening of privilege for middle class and upper class children.
- "Sleaze": salacious sex and corruption stories that ensnared a string of top Labour ministers - former interior minister David Blunkett, Culture Minister Tessa Jowell and deputy prime minister John Prescott.

Party managers responded to this crisis, with the elections approaching fast, by cranking up the authoritarianism. Critics of Labour who defended civil liberties were labeled "poisoners". But the exposure of Home Office incompetence in the management of released prisoners exploded this in a second - like a pinprick to an over-inflated balloon - as hypocritical cant.

Not only did these scandals wreck Labour's self-description as the party of competence and integrity, but in erupting so spectacularly during an election campaign highlighted Labour's loss of political control. This was a devastating blow to supporters for whom at least some semblance of authority was the bottom line, having long said "goodbye" to principle.

How things have changed. In 1997 Blair rode to power pledging to end the corruption, sleaze, maladministration and individualism of the Tory years.

In the preceding two decades there were few major conurbations that weren't solidly pro-Labour. A prime example was London. The Greater London Council and nearly all the inner city municipalities were ruled by a Labour Party at its most left wing. Now they run barely a handful.

How ironic, given the 2006 results, that the shift to the right from the mid-80s was sold as necessary to win back support. To achieve this, Labour collaborated with Conservative attacks on local government - savage cuts, "parental choice" in education, council house sales and so-on.

A decade later with Labour in government it was full steam ahead - assets were sold, services privatised, education taken out of effective democratic local authority control and local accountability and democracy dismantled through the introduction of mayoral and cabinet government for councils.

For the past decade Britain's third party the Liberal Democrats - with a ruthless and opportunistic local party machine - has reaped the benefit. The Conservative revival appears now to have put a stop to that. The question is how far this will go?

A full swing of the pendulum back to popular endorsement for the Conservatives seems unlikely. The 'deferential

vote' (working class people voting for the Conservatives) is a fading memory and New Labour is wearing Thatcherite clothes.

Nonetheless, the peculiarities of the voting system can allow a party with barely one third of the popular vote to form a government, making new conservative leader David Cameron a possible future prime minister in what would be little more than a lottery on a three-way split, with the abstention rate probably being the decisive factor.

As the three main parties converge into the same political territory - barely distinguishable on a left-right continuum - a continuing cycle of public disillusion seems almost inevitable. Whereas most voters have expressed this by not voting, a growing minority are clearly turning to the small parties.

Most worryingly this includes the BNP - which is carving out a dangerous space with a doubling of its councillors. Labour's complete abandonment of depressed working class communities is the primary dynamic behind this fascist resurgence.

The Greens did well, showing an emergent new strength in some inner city areas. But the fact that Green councillors have been in the local administration in the major northern city of Leeds in coalition with Conservatives and Liberal Democrats for the past four years shows that there are problems. While many voted Green to punish Blair from the left, the party is nationally incoherent and in some areas locally opportunist.

Respect, confounding critics on left and right, performed impressively - well into double numbers of councillors. There has been a genuine breakthrough in two East London boroughs and most of the 150 candidates performed strongly - with many coming second or third.

But new problems are now posed. Respect cannot continue as an ad hoc coalition. It needs the democratic machinery of a political party to ensure its representatives are accountable, policies are developed and its profile and campaigning is developed. To build a serious base it must draw thousands of the new voters into active participation - not just rallies and leafleting.

Secondly, in countless wards, Respect councillors were running neck and neck with the Greens - the combined vote of the two sufficient to allow one to win or come very close second. This has to be addressed. Respect need to push the environmental agenda to the fore and try to make local agreements with the Greens where possible.

Last but not least, fighting for a proportional representation voting system has to become a central concern.

More broadly, the loosening of Labour's links to the unions will continue. State funding for political parties is a real possibility. After all, Blair and Cameron's only alternative is continuing corruption scandals or rebuilding mass individual memberships. This calls for a decisive new orientation by Respect.

With Labour poised to go through a period of instability, signified by Blair's panicked reorganisation of his government in which several senior ministers were sacked, the dream of a 'smooth transition' from Blair to Brown and then endless Labour government has all but disappeared.

Respect - having established itself as the only serious left alternative - must seize these opportunities.