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Britain

Council election results reveal polarised situation

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Local elections took place in cities in England on Thursday 3 May 2018. The results were saw a small further shift to Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, but not as significant a success as in the snap general election in 2017. The media and Labour right had talked up the likelihood of Labour victories - as a stick to beat the leadership afterwards when these unrealistic expectations were not met. Unfortunately, some on the left fell into the trap and echoed the same message.

Labour nationally did not project forward a strong anti-austerity message; one which made promises about a Labour government restoring funding to local government which has been significantly decreased by the Tories. This was a particularly unfortunate omission in the context that the majority of those standing as Labour councillors are not Corbyn supporters and that most local manifestos only talk about managing scarce resources.

In this context it was not surprising that most of those who voted on 3 May were committed supporters of one party or another - rather than the pattern we saw in the 2017 general election where Labour turned out many people to vote for their radical manifesto that had not voted before or for a long time. This time we saw a much more static and polarized situation. [*International Viewpoint*]

The council election result in Kensington and Chelsea is a good indicator of how polarised the political situation is in Britain. The Conservative-controlled council there was responsible for the completely avoidable deaths of 71 people in the Grenfell fire. [1] They then ran on manifesto promises of twice weekly bin collections and lower council tax, and lost only one seat. Tory voters think saving a few quid on their council tax is more important the lives of the people of Grenfell Tower. That is what class hatred and racist indifference look like.

As soon as the results started coming in, the story was that they were a setback for the Corbyn leadership. BBC reporters were repeating the weird phrase "peak Corbyn" from 6am onwards as though they had all developed the same nervous tic. This was the line of attack also pursued by the Labour right with the ever reliable Jess Phillips, probably the only MP in her party willing to defend Amber Rudd's handling of the Home Office's racist treatment of the Windrush generation, and similarly rightwing Labour MP Chuka Umunna. [2]

Yet the figures tell a different story. Labour control 74 councils nationally, the Tories 46; Labour won 2350 seats, a gain of 77 and the Tories won 1332, a loss of 33. In a context where Tory voters are so loyal they do not stop voting for the party even when it is responsible for 71 deaths in their own neighbourhood (as in Kensington and Chelsea) that is not a negligible gain.

Labour knocked the Tories out of Manchester borough Trafford, an all the more remarkable result given the lack of support given to leftist Steve Longden in Brooklands ward by the party apparatus. The left mobilised for Steve, including a high-profile campaigning visit by Owen Jones, and succeeded in taking Brooklands, as well as the official target seats. [3] Labour took Plymouth, winning four seats previously held by the Tories. There were other places where Labour took seats they had not held for decades: Blenheim Park in Southend for example.

Much of the Tory crowing and the Labour right's carping has been over the results in Wandsworth and Westminster. Many Labour supporters in London had convinced themselves that these former Tory bastions would fall. It was a close-run thing. In Wandsworth, Labour won 38.7% of the vote and the Tories 38.%, with the Conservatives managing to win more seats and in Westminster, a Tory flagship, Labour won 41.1% of the vote against the Tories'

42.%.

Every dirty trick in the book was thrown at the Corbyn leadership in the weeks before the election. He was a Czech agent. Moscow had helped his election campaign. He had waited three hours before sending a message about the birth of a royal baby. He is responsible for "rampant antisemitism" in his party.

This nonsense filled the TV and radio. Some of the mud probably stuck, but as Jewish socialist activist David Rosenberg observed, in Redbridge, a borough with a large Jewish population, Labour increased its number of councillors from 36 to 51 and in Barnet, another area with a significant Jewish community, Labour's vote went up by 2.7%.

Ukip voters are now the Tories' electoral lifeline. The racist, xenophobic organisation is now dead, but the nearly 4 million people who voted for it in 2015 in full knowledge of what it was, now largely vote Tory. Many of them want a racist, xenophobic version of Brexit and see the Tories as their best chance of getting it. Labour under previous leaders more than dabbled with trying to win that racist vote on its own terms and the section of the party that supported that is the one which is most hostile to the Corbyn leadership. [4]

These local government elections were a modest victory for Labour. Results can be very idiosyncratic when politics are fought at the parochial level and we've all seen candidates barely capable of expressing a political idea do surprisingly well while more impressive women and men don't even make the shortlist.

The general election will not be fought over potholes and streetlights. The last one showed that with a radical programme Labour can turn the tide against the Tories and few council candidates were able to fight on that type of platform. Nevertheless, in many parts of England there are now more left councillors than there have been in a generation. Socialists in the party need to work with them to break the passivity and defeatism that has been the hallmark of Labour in local government for a decade.

PS:

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[1] See "[Theresa May's Katrina: Grenfell Tower and the Election Outcome that Wasn't Supposed to Happen](#)".

[2] See "[Rudd goes - oppose racist immigration regime](#)" re Windrush generally and *Big Issue* "[Jess Phillips defends Amber Rudd in Windrush row](#)" re Jess Phillips.

[3] Wards are the electoral sub-divisions within a local council area. Owen Jones is a well-known left-wing columnist, notable for the *Guardian* newspaper.

[4] See *New Statesman* March 2015 "[Labour's anti-immigrant mug: the worst part is, it isn't a gaffe](#)".