

Left-Horizons

Local election results devastating for Tories

Some newspapers and (of course) the BBC, are doing their level best to portray last Thursday's local election results as a defeat for 'both the main parties'. But the reality is somewhat different. The story of these elections is one of a crushing defeat for Theresa May and the Conservative Party. Even the worst predictions of Tory losses, of "up to a thousand seats", turned out to be a serious underestimation. The Tory losses, of over 1300 seats, were *sixteen times greater* than the losses for the Labour Party and are their worst losses for more than twenty-five years. It is no wonder TV viewers weren't treated with the usual battery of psephologists, predicting "what it would mean" for a general election, because it would mean a Tory wipe-out.

The Tory party is facing the most serious crisis in its post-war history and arguably it is on the same scale as the crisis over the repeal of the Corn Laws more than a century and a half ago. Addressing the Wales conference of the Party the day after the elections, May hadn't got more than two words out before a delegate heckled her about needing to resign. Although it has hardly featured in the national press, for the first time in 185 years, a Tory leader will face a no-confidence motion at a special conference of Conservative Association chairs on June 1st. In the Tory heartlands, party membership is falling away.

Before the election, the chairman of the so-called 'Campaign for Conservative Democracy', in an interview with the *Financial Times*, bemoaned the lamentable state of the party organisation in the country. "In at least half the parliamentary seats, there are fewer than 10 Tory activists, he said. He added that the party's total number of activists was 10,000 to 15,000" (*Financial Times*, May 2, 2019). These results further undermine that meagre Tory base in the constituencies, perhaps by several

thousands. "To fight a national general election on the ground," our Tory 'Democrat' added, "you need 50,000 activists. The Party is in dire straits. No wonder it is nervous."

Tory councillors an endangered species in many areas

A lot of attention has been paid to Labour losses in Sunderland and other towns that voted 'Leave' in the EU referendum, but in many of these traditional Labour areas, where working class people really *do* feel 'left behind', Tory councillors are almost an endangered species. In the Metropolitan County of Tyne and Wear, which includes Sunderland, there are a total of 337 district councillors, of whom only 19 are Tories. Three of the five metropolitan districts have *no* Tory councillors at all. Hartlepool, also in the north-east and another town that voted 'Leave', has three Tories out of 33 councillors. Where Labour have lost seats, it has often been to 'independents'. In Sunderland, for example, Labour lost nine seats to four different parties.

Although these election results have re-emphasised the fact that Theresa May's time is up – she may even be gone by the middle of the year – her resignation in and of itself will not resolve the crisis, because the most popular candidate among the party's geriatric membership is none other than Boris "fuck business" Johnson. His accession to the throne will not soften, but on the contrary will enormously *sharpen* the splits and sense of crisis in that party.

Vince Cable's jaw-dropping hypocrisy

One result of the elections has been a significant increase in support for the Liberal-Democrats, of just over 700 seats, although these gains are heavily weighted towards more rural areas like Somerset, Devon and Cornwall. The Liberals have for decades been touted in the media as an 'alternative' opposition, but only when it is a Tory government in office and it is proving unpopular. Far better for the Establishment that 'protest votes' should go to a *Tory-lite* Party than to a Labour opposition. Nevertheless, there can be few sights more galling than to see the jaw-dropping hypocrisy of Vince Cable on TV, crowing about Lib-Dem gains. Cable, of course, was (with Tory Chancellor George Osborne) one of the main architects of the austerity

regime from which workers still suffer today. There is hardly a cut in welfare or in local government spending that wasn't first conceived and introduced by Cable between 2010 and 2015. The Labour Party's relatively smaller losses, compared to the Tories, are still a concern. It could be said that considering the overwhelmingly unfavourable publicity in the press and TV against Corbyn, Labour's results do not appear too bad. But they cannot be ignored. Predictably, the first thing on the mind of BBC pundits is the question of Corbyn's leadership. What has held back the Labour right-wing to some extent is the fact that they are hopelessly split over the issue of Brexit, the 'Remainer' half condemning him for *not* calling for a second referendum, the rest for appearing to oppose Brexit in principle.

Main issue for workers is not Brexit

Although nearly all the commentary around these elections has revolved around Brexit, we would argue that this should not have been the case. The idea that leaving the EU is a magic bullet to solve all economic and social problems is a dangerous illusion, especially as it is wrapped around with the Union Jack and all manner of racist and xenophobic hatred. But unfortunately, this illusion is echoed within the Labour Party. The mirror-image of that illusion is that *if only* the Brexit referendum result could be reversed, then that, too would solve all economic and social problems. This is also a mirage, fostered, apparently, by up to 100 Labour MPs. But the central issue facing working class people is not Brexit and never has been. It is *austerity*: the NHS, education, housing, welfare, local authority cuts, pensions, low pay, and so on.

In traditional Labour areas the Leave vote in 2016 was a protest against the fact that they were 'left behind', as they have been since the destructive years of Thatcherism. Thirteen years of Labour governments and decades of Labour councils have not made a fundamental difference to working class people in these areas – they are still economically and socially deprived. In these towns and cities, there have been solid Labour majorities in the councils, but they have meekly passed on Tory cuts without a shred of opposition or protest.

In any of these areas where Labour lost seats last Thursday and where there were Labour councils, was there a council-based protest or a campaign against central government cuts? Not one that we know of. A typical Labour council will have lost tens of millions of pounds of central government funds. Did any Labour party in these areas issue leaflets, spelling out what this loss means in pounds and pence, in terms of redundant teachers, health centre closures, libraries or services axed? Not one that we know of.

If Labour has lost seats in its heartland areas, it is the traditional council-based right-wing of the Labour Party that bears the heaviest responsibility. Too many Labour councils, even today, coming up to four years after Corbyn's election, are dominated by a comfortable right-wing old-guard, happy to pass on cuts to the working class, so long as their councillors' allowances aren't in jeopardy. A heavy sigh and a bit of hand-wringing are not a substitute for a mass campaign in the communities against Tory government cuts, but that mass campaigns are an unknown territory to too many Labour councillors.

No support whatsoever to Tory policies

At a national level the Labour leadership also bears some responsibility the losses of seats. They have allowed themselves to be embroiled in parliamentary games around Brexit. It is not the job of the Labour Party, as shadow minister, Barry Gardiner is reported to have said, to "bail out" the Tories over Brexit. Labour should be using parliament as a platform to address the working class and to campaign for a general election, not to harangue the Tory back-benches or engage in parliamentary minuets. There should be no support whatsoever to Tory austerity policies and nor to their Brexit plans. Their hidden Brexit agenda, in any case, involves cuts to workers' rights, cuts in food and environmental standards, and for a low-wage, low-tax economy. Even if Theresa May were to make 'pledges' to Corbyn today, it will be the new leader, Boris Johnson, who breaks the pledges tomorrow. The Tories cannot be trusted on any matter.

For the first time in living memory, the Labour Party apparatus, finances and membership are far ahead of all the other UK political parties put together. From the top down, Labour should be using that apparatus and party machine to campaign for a general election and for a Labour government committed to socialist policies in the interests of working class people. Policies for the Many not the Few. Labour needs to be leading from the top, in rallies, demonstrations and mass meetings in working class communities, demanding a general election and an end to austerity.

Where a radical lead has been given, it bucked the trend of last Thursday's elections. In North Tyneside, Newcastle and Northumberland, there was a direct election for the first-ever 'North of Tyne' mayor. Once the UKIP, Lib-Dem and independent candidates were eliminated, there was a straight fight with the Tory candidate and Jamie Driscoll, a Momentum member campaigning on radical policies, won by over 16,000 votes. Similarly, the very large surge in support for the Greens – giving them their highest-ever number of councillors – can only be interpreted as a vote for *a radical view of politics*. There is no doubt, if the research were done, that it would show an overwhelming weighting among Green voters towards younger people. That is the natural voting territory for Labour and that ground has been conceded, on the one hand because of the poverty of ideas on Labour councils and on the other because of the national leadership's entrapment in futile negotiations with the Tories.

Opinion polls still show that if there were a general election now it would more than likely be won by Labour. That is the only factor keeping the Tories together – for the moment. Younger voters, which means anyone under 45, still favour the Labour Party against the Tories. But the lessons of the local election results are clear – if the radical message of the 2017 general election campaign is allowed to fade or to slip from view, then Labour risks losing out. That is not something working class people can afford.

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