

European Elections in Britain: Farage shakes it all about - The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) breakthrough

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Dave Kellaway examines the results of the European Union elections and the impact of the far right UKIP on the traditional pro-austerity parties. Despite a strong support for the far right, the radical anti-austerity left maintained and increased its votes in some countries such as Greece, but also Spain and Portugal.

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One of the electronic gizmos on the BBC coverage last night was particularly impressive. It showed voting support by the different light intensity of the party colour on a big map of Britain. Change from the last Euro elections could also be demonstrated. That was when the impact of the UKIP breakthrough really came home to you. Apart from the some urban areas and Labour strongholds like London, Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle the purple tide was rising everywhere. At the same time you could enjoy the fading of the LibDem light, which incidentally helped the Greens win another seat in the South West, one of the few bright spots of the evening.

There is no point downplaying the UKIP phenomenon. It is the first time a party outside the mainstream government or official opposition has won a national poll. When UKIP was getting 1% twenty years ago we thought that this is just a crackpot fringe of little Englanders. Nobody took it very seriously on the right or left. Yesterday, UKIP increased its share by nearly 11% and topped the poll with about 28%. This comes after a very good result in the local elections where it dramatically increased the number of its councillors and took votes mainly from the Tories but also significantly in certain Labour areas the latter needs to win to gain a general election win. Why have UKIP had this success.

Farage and UKIP are about Europe but it is a lot more than Europe. Their historic base has been a reservoir of anti-EU sentiment that has always existed more strongly in the UK than elsewhere in Europe due to Britain's imperialist past and 'island' identity. But Europe has become an emotional common sense narrative that it has used to reinforce and amplify many people's feelings that the Westminster mainstream parties do not represent ordinary people. In the early days it was more focussed on the eurocrats and their anti-British policies. This has become more and more overlaid with the crisis of legitimacy of the national parties. The expenses scandal and the fact that all the mainstream parties carry out the same pro-austerity programme has given this line a turbo boost. Farage can champion the little guy against the power of the banks that all the three main parties have cuddled up to for so long. Of course within this narrative, and linked to the lack of control Britain has over Euro laws, is the immigration issue. Again something that has gone up and down in

political relevance from the time of Enoch Powell in the 70s with his dire warnings of rivers of blood. The economic crisis and huge attacks on wages and living standards has exacerbated concerns on immigration among working people and Farage has openly exploited this by arguing not just for a stop on non-EU migrants but also on those who are legally entitled to come and go such as Rumanians or others. The fact that the BNP vote, which was a tidy 6.2% last time, was completely sucked up by UKIP is no surprise. So racism and giving it a respectable veneer is the key driver behind its recent surge.

Some people on the left have suggested that the media, particularly the BBC, has been soft on UKIP and in this way has fundamentally contributed to its astonishing rise. There is some truth in this insofar as the BBC coverage of the local elections tended to downplay the gains that Labour had made and that it was the leading party by focussing a lot of the coverage on UKIP. Nevertheless, that the mainstream media will tend to reproduce the myths of immigration and in this way will be 'soft' on Farage is not new - it applies to Tory or Labour politicians when they talk on immigration too. Inevitably the new brand that is exploding will always get more publicity. That is how the media works, always extolling the new. Most of the printed media apart from the Guardian, Independent and Mirror openly supports the Tories and they are not particularly in the pay of Farage. Indeed most the media ran a lot of the stories about those UKIP candidates who were saying outrageous things, the *Sun* (sic) called it racist. Some of the media which are more anti-Europe and want to push the Tories towards UKIP policies are more obliging to UKIP. However all the scare stories and protests reported against Farage had no impact on his supporters. Some commentators have correctly pointed out that the UKIP voter is not voting for a set of policies against the mainstream parties, they do not slavish follow what the media want - none of whom called for a vote for UKIP. No, they are voting for an attitude, a gut feeling, a narrative represented by the Farage image of the bloke down your local pub whom you can have a pint with and denounce all the politicians and moan about the immigrants. Racist attitudes always present in British society but challenged and weakened somewhat by the practical growth of multiculturalism particularly in the big conurbations has re-emerged more openly in this way. Richard Seymour on his blog Lenin's Tomb has understood this very well. Today it is not surprising that the media are full of UKIP, looking at it historically it is at least a temporary shift in the traditional two and half party system in this country. Who knows if it represents a long-term decline in this system that is also reflected in the rise of the nationalists and consolidation of the Greens.

One factor that should not be ignored in the UKIP success is the fact that some key wealthy donors, in particular Paul Sykes, have bankrolled the party through the long march to today's success. The significance of the local and European elections is that the party's embedding in the institutions provides a much stronger material base for its further growth. Many pundits used to say that UKIP will do okay in Euro-election, which does not elect a national government and is ideal for protest votes, but will find it harder in real elections. Today UKIP has hundreds of councillors who can deal with real day-to-day local politics. Are parliamentary MPs a glass ceiling for UKIP? Looking at the results in Newark, which were flashed up yesterday giving them a majority or the way it has acquired local strongholds in Kent, the South West and the East of England, who can be sure? Farage is even talking of having a handful of MPs who could be the powerbrokers in a hung parliament. Nobody thought we would see coalition government for a whole parliamentary term so stranger things have happened.

The impact on Labour and the Tories

More important than how many MPs they may get it is the impact on the other mainstream parties. This is the most important immediate political consequence. Even though they are in a quandary

about what to do with UKIP: debate them? Look what happened to the Lib Dems, down to one MEP and Clegg's head on the line. Attack them? Some Labour luminaries did this at the end over the reluctance of backroom strategists. It just seemed to give the UKIP brand more resonance.

But they are all moving more urgently now. A number of Tory MPs are floating the idea of pacts with UKIP in certain areas to hold off a Labour win in a general election. The in-out referendum on Europe has moved centre-stage with Cameron talking it up and Labour dissenters like Frank Field pushing Miliband – who is very lukewarm on this – to commit to it. More serious from the point of view of defending working people is the way the Tories and Labour are scrambling to make themselves tougher than the other on immigration. Duncan Smith has already announced reducing how long an EU migrant can receive benefit to three months and Sadiq Khan had penned an open letter to UKIP supporters grovelling about how Labour were wrong on immigration. Just as in France the effect of the rise of far right, nationalist parties with racist policies is to shift the entire political system to the right. More than ever Left Unity, Peoples Assembly and other forces to the left of Labour have to campaign more vigorously against UKIP without letting the other parties off the hook.

What about Labour? Did they do well as Dianne Abbott on the *Sunday Politics* show was enthusing – she said the UKIP bubble would burst at the Newark by-election and definitely by the general election. She encouraged us all to get behind Ed with his excellent policies. Well Labour did regain support from its 2010 disaster both in the local and Euro elections. However UKIP prevented it winning Thurrock, a target marginal and weakened its support in places like Rotherham. Although it regained support (+10%) from its quite poor result in 2009 it became the first official opposition since Neil Kinnock, thirty years ago, to fail to win a Euro election. Worse it only beat the Tories by 1.5% points. Indeed one of the ominous signs for Labour, apart from the ghost of Kinnock, is the surprising level of support for the Tories. If the perception that the economy is improving extends to broader layers of the population then this is not good news for Labour. The problem as Andrew Rawnsley mentioned in the *Observer* yesterday is not that Labour do not have some progressive policies that are popular such as on the minimum wage, rents, railways and GP appointments but that it has a problem communicating them which is completely tied up with a massive scepticism about whether they will or can carry out any of these policies. Labour is still hamstrung with its image as the party that was in hock to the bankers and led us into the crisis. Because its political programme is austeritylite with a few progressive add-ons this fails to convince and above all fails to mobilise. If on the other hand (and pigs would fly) it was fully involved in building the June 21st anti-austerity demo or the July strike action or making sure all its councils refused to evict bedroom tax defaulters, then we might see a surge in support. We often forget that all the so-called political earthquake we are witnessing is based on a turnout of 37%. A fighting Labour Party defending working people would be getting more people to come out and vote.

The left of Labour

The Greens, although they got another MEP, actually slipped back in their vote share losing nearly a percentage point. However they are still on around 8% and this represents a solid achievement for a left of Labour party. It confirms our analysis that Labour, unlike in previous periods like the 50s and 60s no longer have an overwhelming hegemony, either ideologically or organisationally inside the working class. Policies put forward by the Greens were more radical than Labour on a series of issues. For Left Unity and other projects aiming to recompose the left it is unlikely that the Greens can be left out of the equation. An extra MEP provides the left and the labour movement with another ally in campaigning to defend the environment and working people.

NO2EU the radical left campaign backed by the RMT and the Socialist Party lost votes compared to last time, it won around 32000 votes or 0.20 %, a decline of 0.80. It came below groups like the Christian Peoples Alliance but it did get more than groups like the Pirate Party or the Roman Party (who are they, do they have toga evenings?). So not a resounding success to say the least. It was prefigured by the reluctance of even the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), which includes the SWP, to support its campaign. The name and its general line appear to have been drowned in what ordinary punters saw as the main anti-EU party, UKIP. Hopefully this setback, coupled with the lack of progress in the TUSC local election results will lead to a re-evaluation of the whole project. It would be positive if TUSC could come to an understanding with Left Unity that you cannot build a real electoral presence with patched up coalitions of groups that only really exist during election campaigns. The lesson of the Greens shows that campaigning real parties with local membership groups and democratic functioning from the base up, can steadily bring results.

Results across Europe

How does the British result fit within the Euro election results throughout Europe? Nationalist anti-EU parties with varying degrees of racism have generally done well with the big success being the 25% and top place won by Marine Le Pen's Front National in France. But similar parties in Denmark (23%) and Austria (20%) and Hungary (14.5%) also scored well. Generally governing parties carrying out austerity policies have been punished except in Germany where the crisis is less severe and in Italy. There the media honeymoon with the youthful Renzi gave the governing Democratic Party (PD) an historic 40% with his right of centre partners falling to 20%. Grillo's anti-EU and anti-government M5S movement fell back from its general election high to 21%. The left of PD Tspiras for Europe slate just sneaked past the 4% threshold and got MEPs.

In the Spanish state and Greece we saw progress for the radical left. The Izquierda Plural (a version of the IU Izquierda Unida) got 10% of the vote and Podemos, a recently established expression of the Indignados movement that is considered to the left of IU got an astonishing 8%. The mainstream right of centre government and the social liberal PSOE both lost big chunks of its support. This result reflects the severity of the austerity policies there and the strength of the resistance. In Greece Syriza has become the biggest party (26.5%) but the fascist Golden Dawn got 10% and the former did not do enough to create an immediate political crisis. But it is four points ahead of Samara's governing party and this is a good launch pad for future general elections. The radical left in France did not progress, the Front de Gauche got 6.6 % and three MEPs. This score is slightly up on last time, in line with local elections recently but down on the presidential elections. Tensions between Melenchon's Left Party and the CP over the fact that the latter stood in slates with the PS in the first round in some areas in the local elections, have not helped. Groups to the left of the FdG such as the NPA and Lutte Ouvriere did not get across the threshold.

Portugal saw another government sanctioned with the opposition Socialist Party winning and radical opposition forces still in play. The traditional CP and its Green allies won 12.6 % (up 2 points) and the Bloco de Esquerda managed to save one seat with 4.5%, down from its 3 MEPs. The protest party MPT (Land Movement Party) came from nowhere to get 7.1 % on a populist campaign against all political parties - previously it has participated in coalition governments so it appears to be a maverick type of party that like Grillo's M5S movement is not easy to classify. Generally the radical left group in the European parliament will be strengthened by about 4 MEPs to a group of 39 according to the BBC although they might not have factored in the Podemos group. This is bit less than they were hoping for.

Both in the UK and Europe we can see that the ruling classes in a number of countries are

continuing to have problems in managing a crisis of political representation where large numbers of voters, faced with the austerity crisis and its associated democratic deficit, are abandoning the mainstream parties. They have lost confidence in them and are supporting anti-EU or anti-government or populist parties and in some cases more radical left currents. Although the rise of far right, nationalist and racist currents is negative this crisis continues to provide us with the opportunity of building broad class struggle parties like Left Unity as a political alternative to social liberal left of centre parties.

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P.S.

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