

Local and mayoral elections in Britain: Brexit Election Delivers Carnival of Reaction

Monday 8 May 2017, by [HEARSE Phil](#) (Date first published: 6 May 2017).

The huge Labour losses in the local council elections are just what the Labour Right was hoping for. Peter Mandelson said as much late last year, when he stated he was hoping for Theresa May to call an early election that would result in a disastrous Labour defeat and therefore the removal of Jeremy Corbyn. It's exactly what all Corbyn's reactionary detractors in the press and television wanted as well.

The Left has to be crystal clear about what is happening here. There are many subsidiary factors, but the root of the Tories' substantial gains – 500 seats won against about 400 losses for Labour – is the xenophobic nationalism of Brexit which the Tories have used ruthlessly. The sky is black with Brexit chickens coming home to roost. There never was, or could be in the current period, a Left Brexit (Lexit) or a People's Brexit; racism and xenophobia were built into the DNA of the referendum and post-referendum process.

Unless there is a major mobilisation to stop it, a Labour meltdown could happen in the general election, leading to the most right-wing government in Britain since the 1930s.

Looking at some of the key factors in the local council elections we should note:

- Council elections, as opposed to mayoral elections, did not take place in the big cities which are among the heartlands of Labour support. This distorts Labour's level of support, which is likely higher than the 27% they received in these elections. And the Labour vote in the big city mayoral votes was 41%.
- UKIP has collapsed, having played out its historic purpose giving a major jolt to the political shift to the right. Theresa May's Conservatives have swallowed UKIP not just organisationally, but politically as well. It seems that ex-UKIP votes have gone disproportionately to the Tories, and some of those – we don't know how many – will be former Labour voters.
- Doubtless a major subsidiary factor was that Labour councils everywhere are doing their bit in implementing local government cuts – and are usually hugely unpopular. Turnout was low in most places, which hurts Labour disproportionately, because the people most likely to vote are always the over-50s and they are, by nearly every measure, the most reactionary section of the population. This effect was on display in the narrowly lost mayoral elections in the West Midlands and Tees Valley.
- Labour continues to do extremely badly in Scotland, a consequence of its unionist stance in a situation where opposition to Westminster-applied neoliberalism has taken the form of a surge in pro-independence sentiment.
- The right and centre of the Labour Party continues to do its best to inflict maximum damage on the Corbyn leadership. On the evening of the election this was in full view as Andy Burnham refused to appear at a victory rally with Jeremy Corbyn. Anti-Corbyn guerrilla warfare, by the majority of the

Parliamentary Labour Party, Blairites inside and outside Parliament, and by some right-wing trade union leaders, is a major factor in undermining the Labour leadership. There is a symbiotic relationship between the Labour parliamentary right and the Tory press and their backers in the TV studios, especially BBC studios. The more the Blairites say Corbyn is rubbish, the more the media report that Corbyn is rubbish – and eventually it becomes established ‘common sense’ among millions of voters. And doubtless the parliamentary right and their trade union backers are preparing to knife Jeremy Corbyn at the earliest opportunity.

If Theresa May is elected on June 8th the incoming Tory government will claim a mandate for a toxic mix of measures aimed at the working class and immigrants: continuing to push for a calamitous hard Brexit, the crushing of the NHS, sweeping cuts in every aspect of public spending, drastic defunding of state education at every level, stopping the ‘triple lock’ which keeps up pensions, ramped up repression against asylum seekers and refugees, new attacks on trade union rights (especially against public sector strikes), and substantial tax rises for workers in a situation of inflation and declining real wages. Part of this will be making a bonfire of workers’ rights and environmental protection, currently part of EU legislation, which can be ripped up in an instant if there is a massive Tory majority in the Commons after Brexit.

The whole Left must now mobilise with all its might to maximise the Labour vote. Of course. But Labour must give leadership to the millions who are against a hard Brexit by saying that it will vote against any Brexit deal that doesn’t include free movement and access to the single market.

But the socialist left now needs to re-evaluate the pro-Brexit position that the majority of them took in the referendum, and continue to espouse in the form of a Left Brexit and People’s Brexit fantasy. The EU referendum was a crucial demand of the Tory right, the Telegraph, the Daily Mail, the Sun, of UKIP and of course of key players in the media, such as Rupert Murdoch and Mail editor Paul Dacre. They wanted it not because they had an irrational bee in their bonnet, or as David Cameron said, just couldn’t stop ‘banging on about Europe’, but because leaving the EU was the main banner of their plan for a hard right takeover of the Tory party and to push the whole of politics to the right.

This hard right plan has succeeded brilliantly, and UKIP, having played its historic role, can now be safely dropped in the historical dustbin. Nigel Farage saw this coming, which is why he moved on to pastures new. Much of the Left failed to grasp what was going on, pretended that a considerable part of the pro-Brexit vote was not reactionary and simply an anti-establishment protest, and glared immobile at the hard right Brexit headlights bearing down on them.

The move to the right internationally is palpable. Ex-UKIP MP Douglas Carswell lauds the sensible British for supporting a vicar’s daughter from Oxfordshire, rather than a British version of those Continental ruffians like Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders. The point is of course that the Tory leadership has adopted exactly the tactics of Wilders, Le Pen and Donald Trump – the use of xenophobic nationalism, based in the end on anti-immigrant sentiment – to build support in significant sections of the working class.

It is improbable that any large section of the British working class wants to vote for a major decline in living standards and the crushing of the welfare state. If some workers vote for the Conservatives in the general election, it won’t be because they want that, although that’s what they will likely get. It will be because they are persuaded by the xenophobic notion that the most important thing in the country’s future is Brexit.

Phil Hearse, 6 May 2017

P.S.

* <http://leftunity.org/brexit-election-delivers-carnival-of-reaction/>