

Britain: Local Elections - Tories take a beating

Tuesday 9 May 2023, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 8 May 2023).

Just before the “Coronation weekend” local elections took place in England. The (complicated) system means that not all councils are up for re-election and not necessarily all seats on the same council in the same year. Given the chaotic last year for the Tory government (three prime ministers) the results were not expected to be good for the Conservative Party. They were worse.[IVP]

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You know a party has had truly awful results when the number of seats lost goes beyond its pre-election management numbers. The Tory press officers were saying beforehand that they could lose up to 1,000 seats. They pitch it high so that when the actual results come in, they can claim the party did better than forecast. The Tories shot through the false target by 60 seats!

Sunak must be thankful that the mainstream press has submerged these results under an avalanche of Coronation coverage. Johnson’s COVID/partygate debacle, Truss’s catastrophic interlude, and the daily experience of a deep cost of living crisis meant voters deserted the government party. The Brexit premium is no longer operative given the lies about a bonus to the NHS, multiple trade deals, and increased control that have all been exposed. Sunak’s clumsy attempt to salvage support through racist or anti-trans culture wars has only meant they are losing liberal-minded (or just human?) Tory voters in the Blue Wall areas. All opposition parties, but particularly the Liberal Democrats and Greens, are gaining there.

The Tory vote share is down to 26%, which confirms the opinion poll trends. Recent exaggerated claims that Sunak was turning things around through the Northern Ireland ‘Windsor’ agreement or the fact that he is more competent than Truss have evaporated. He may compare in some head-to-head polls more favourably than a lacklustre Starmer, but this is unlikely to stave off a near-certain defeat at the next general election. Dozens of Tory MPs are already brushing up their CVs and making contacts for a lucrative life outside politics.

Labour largest party in local government

Labour is now once again the largest party in local government, having won a 35% share of the vote and a 9% margin. The last time it was in this position was in 2002. It gained over 500 seats. Leader Keir Starmer maintained in his post-election statement that Labour was on course to form the next government. There has been some discussion on whether Labour can win an outright majority on these figures or will only have a relative majority. Sky TV’s Thresher, the BBC’s Curtice, and the *Guardian*’s Rob Ford all gave their specialists two pennyworths on the question. Thresher says he

thinks they are 28 seats short on these figures, and Curtice tends to agree.

However, Ford makes the argument that Lib Dem and Green council gains were often in smaller numbers, whereas Labour gained in key urban target seats like Stoke or Medway, and so the actual potential result in seats could be better for Starmer. Tactical voting, where opposition parties vote for the best-placed candidate to kick out the Tories, could also work better for Labour than the Lib Dems. Certainly, there was quite a lot of evidence that this went on in these local elections. An overall majority can be achieved if Labour wins back a lot of the Red Wall seats it lost in 2019 and the Lib Dems significantly gain Tory seats in more rural or suburban areas, particularly in the South and South West.

Some people on the left have argued that unless Starmer adopts a more radical approach, it is unlikely that he will win an overall majority. They quote the bigger lead Labour had in the run-up to Blair's election in 1997. But that was only two percentage points higher. Obviously, we think that Labour's gains have more to do with the collapse in Tory support than any mass enthusiasm for Starmer's policy agenda. Indeed, we have seen evidence in these elections that Labour has lost some voters on what may be called its left or liberal flank. Otherwise, it is hard to explain the continued gains of the Greens in some areas with high numbers of graduate voters (see [Ford](#)).

We support the Labour manifesto policies that did so well in the 2016 general election and oppose Starmer's continued dumping of radical policies like nationalisation of all utilities and ending student tuition fees. Such an approach could make an overall majority more likely. We do not agree that Labour's gains are because Starmer has abandoned Corbyn's policies. Local examples like Preston or Worthing, where some left-leaning policies have been more prominent, show that you do not need to adopt ultra-moderate policies to win well.

However, this does not mean that Starmer cannot win an overall majority if he pursues his moderate pro-business line. It would be taking our desires for reality to believe that is not possible. A Labour overall majority is more likely than not given the degree of Tory disintegration, the state of the economy, and the increasingly popular refrain that it is time for a change after thirteen years.

Gains for the Greens

The forward march of the Green Party cannot be denied. It had already made a breakthrough the last time these seats were contested. The [Bright Green website](#) summarises:

- The Greens have gained more seats than in any local election ever before, with over 230 gains at the time of writing. The previous record was set in 2019, when the party gained 198.
- The Greens have also broken records by taking majority control of a council for the first time. In Mid Suffolk, the Greens have won 24 out of the 34 seats.
- The Greens have also become the largest party in more than half a dozen councils, including in Warwick, Lewes, East Hertfordshire, East Sussex, and the Forest of Dean.
- The Green Party has broken into a series of new councils for the first time, including in Havant, Southend, South Kesteven, South Ribble, and more.
- Other major gains have come in Worcester, South Tyneside, and Darlington.

Clearly, its voters represent a varied constituency depending on where they are. In some urban and university towns, they are clearly picking up people who see themselves as progressive, ecological, or even on the left—some are ex-Corbyn supporters. We all know people from the Labour left who have joined the Green Party after the defeat of the Corbyn project. In fact, one ex-Corbyn supporter, Jo Bird, won a seat for the Greens in the Wirral. In other areas, they operate perhaps as a slightly

more ecological or progressive variant of the Lib Dems. In terms of a formal programme – for example, the monarchy or the green transition—they have more radical positions than Labour.

Despite the extreme difficulties that the anti-democratic first-past-the-post system places on parties outside the two-party system, the Greens have managed to build up a national presence. The number of candidates they are able to stand for and the areas where they win seats have increased. It shows how the ecological question is important to ordinary voters and that political loyalty to the two main parties is not as solid as it once was.

These elections also saw the success of a few independent candidates to the left of Labour. Alan Gibbons, along with two other Liverpool Community Independents, defeated the official Labour candidates. They had been forced out of the Labour Party after refusing to accept the budget of the Liverpool Labour Group on the council. Gibbons won a stunning 1400 votes, or 77% of the vote. Their success was due to their consistent work defending the interests of the local community. The official Labour candidates were seen as being ‘parachuted’ in (see the fuller story at [Labour Hub](#)). In Portsmouth, former leader Cal Corkery and others had been deselected by Labour. He won, and another five independents did too. Left-leaning Labour candidates have the best chance of success in local elections where they have formerly been good community Labour councillors.

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It is much more difficult for people to stand for new parties without having a connection with Labour or the local community; the record of the Socialist Party electoral front, the Trade Union, and the Socialist Coalition is testimony to that. Results for the Breakthrough Party candidates were mostly between 2 and 5%. This puts into perspective talk of setting up new parties to challenge Labour from the left at the next election. One thing is for Corbyn or another sitting Labour MP to stand as an independent after being expelled, but it is quite different for a regroupment of left-wing political groups to come together and set up a challenge. This is even more unlikely since if Corbyn stands, he is unlikely to call for the formation of a new party.

These elections show both a mass rejection of the Tories and a desire for a new Labour government. However, there are hardly any radical Labour policies—apart possibly from the green energy plans—that can build up enthusiasm for a new government. There is also a big gap between the push for this new government and the need for the ongoing strike struggles to defend workers’ living standards.

Socialists need to campaign to kick out the Tories, to call for a vote for Labour, and at the same time to build a socialist alternative project to Starmer’s pro-business policies among activists both inside and outside the Labour Party. A vote for Labour does not mean support for Starmer’s programme but recognises that the terrain for struggle is better under a Labour government. Union struggles

can have a more immediate impact on the party they are affiliated with, and Labour in government tends to put forward some partial reforms. For instance, we support the ending of non-dom tax breaks but argue for a serious wealth tax.

It is easier to campaign on these issues under a government that is proposing some modest progressive tax changes than one that is constantly favouring regressive tax changes. Refusing to openly call for a vote for Labour on the basis that Starmer is not Corbyn would risk isolating socialist activists from the mass of class-conscious workers. Building organised resistance from the ground up, independent of any government, remains our priority. Working alongside strikers to win their demands or campaigning against the increasingly anti-democratic and repressive turn of this government is what we do. Nothing is put on hold in anticipation of a Starmer government that will supposedly deal progressively with all these issues. The stronger we can build the movement now, the better we can try to impose real change on a Labour government.

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P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 8 May 2023:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/local-elections-tories-take-a-beating/>
- IVP. TUESDAY 9 MAY 2023:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8085>