The Local Government Elections Washout – Preliminary thoughts

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

Friday morning left me musing on two recent blogs in *the Guardian* by Tom Kibasi and Rafeal Behr. Each made a particularly prescient point that summed up the current Brexit myopia. Kibasi argues that an "agreement" between the Conservatives and Labour to get a compromise through Parliament remains further away than ever; whilst Behr argued that with the looming parliamentary summer recess and any lack of manifest urgency in the Government's Brexit agenda we face the prospect of reconvening in September with the Halloween exit deadline looming ("Trick or Treaty Day") and being no further forward in securing Parliamentary agreement.

To which I can only say that I concur with these views. For the Conservative Party, the manifest failure to secure a Brexit agreement through Parliament is leading to increased frustration from their aged, predominantly Brexiteer membership; and the wider frustrations from their voter base are also fuelling poll support for Nigel Farage's "Brexit Party", which is currently vying with Labour to gain the biggest vote share in the looming European Parliament elections in which the country appears all-but-certain to take part in.

And so as Westminster lurches on in the wake of the sacking of Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson and the current Brexit hiatus leaves political and media pundits scratching around the entrails looking for other signals of public sentiment, we turn to the local authority elections held yesterday – widely interpreted by commentators as a public verdict on the Government, and the Labour Opposition.

It always strikes me as curious why local authority elections should be dominated by national issues (and even more so Brexit as the issue); but in a political culture where voting is not compulsory it appears generally that only those with an axe to grind turn out to vote, as it were. If this is indeed the case then it is a sad indictment on democracy as single-issue candidates can end up trumping (if you'll pardon the pun) more legitimate concerns germane to the level of

government in question (social and community services and roads for local government, for example). But here we are.

What does one say about these results? Are they a verdict on the Tories and Labour's approach to Brexit? Short of questioning everyone who turned out to vote (and then doing a "decliner survey" on those who didn't) we can never really know. Also notable is that the parties whose *raison d'être* is Brexit; Farage's Brexit Party and Change UK, did not field candidates, weakening the significance of Brexit still further. So let us consider the fortunes of the Liberal Democrats and UKIP, as the standing parties most identified with Remain and Leave across the UK, as a "proxy" for a Brexit verdict.

The table below summarises the overall results to date (at 9am on May 3rd) by Party, detailing the approximately 50% of results declared at this stage for the 8,000-odd seats across 248 English Councils:

Councillor gains and losses for English Councils

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	UKIP	Green	Other
Change	-426	-58	293	-8	40	92
Holds	1,173	815	268	9	6	219
Gain	37	79	294	8	42	151
Lost	463	137	1	16	2	59
Total	1,210	894	562	17	48	370

Source: Press Association (accessed at https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2019/may/02/local-elections-2019-live-results-for-english-councils

Clearly the Lib Dems have far and away performed the best, with the Party particularly benefitting from the decline in the Conservative vote share across the south of England; notably taking control of Bath and NE Somerset council from the Tories. As expected, the Conservatives lost seats but still look likely to have the most council seats. For

Labour the performance is muted and can only be seen as a disappointment; with some blaming the Party's fudged stance on Brexit for its inability to gain seats.

In contrast, UKIP have made no headway at all, and suffered a net loss, having also fielded fewer candidates than in 2015 when the majority of these council were last contested. One could certainly surmise here that the emergence of Farage's new party has haemorrhaged their vote and organising ability. In addition, flirting with more obviously alt-right movements could also have turned off some voters. Either way, UKIP look to be a busted flush and are unlikely to resurrect any popular appeal.

How then have parties performed in the West Midlands? Given our location in Birmingham and the fact that the Midlands recorded the strongest Brexit votes in 2016, it is particularly interesting to see how the parties performed in our home region. Notably, Birmingham City Council had no seats in play this time so our largest city is excluded. The table below provides some interesting results; demonstrating that Labour continues to struggle in areas that were once regarded as traditional heartlands but had a strong Leave vote in 2016; most notably in Stoke on Trent, which has passed to No Overall Control (NOC), where the Conservatives recorded a strong swing towards them.

Councillor gains and losses in selected West Midlands urban and peri-urban areas

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	UKIP	Green	Other / Ind	Summary	
Coventry							Lab 40 out of 54	
Dudley	1					-1	Con 36 out of 72	NOC
Sandwell		2				-2	Lab 72 out of 72	
Walsall	2	-2					Con 32 out of 60	
Wolverhampton	1	-1					Lab 50 out of 60	
Stoke on Trent	8	-3				-5	Con 16 out of 44	NOC
Worcester	-1				1		Con 17 out of 35	NOC
Rugby							Con 24 out of 42	
North Warwickshire	-1	1					Con 21 out of 35	
Tamworth	1	-1		1		-1	Con 22 out of 30	

Source: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-

It appears that the West Midlands must be one of the few remaining bright spots for the Tories, whilst Labour mirrored their national performance with what would be a disappointing result for them. Notably, the Lib Dems, in contrast to their performance in the South, have had no shift towards them, although in fairness to them, Birmingham, where they have councillors, was not in play and they could still increase their vote share in locales that have not yet declared (some districts in Warwickshire might be worth watching).

For "Remainer" parties then the West Midlands might continue to represent a particular challenge, the election of an additional Green councillor in Worcester notwithstanding.

However, we must temper such thoughts with the fact the voter turnout was low to begin with and not all Council areas (or seats) were in play. For the Tories in particular, nationally they seem to be doing better in pro-Leave areas with a high percentage of older, white working-class voters (i.e., those who might have voted UKIP previously). True in Walsall and Stoke but also true anywhere like North East Lincs (Grimsby), which they also won. In contrast, traditional "Tory" voters in leafy areas (particularly well-educated, middle class voters) appear to be deserting the Party (e.g. in Winchester, Bath, Cotswold, Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire, St Albans etc.). It is in this then, that Brexit could be having an impact on the vote result.

However, how then this would translate into the expected European Parliamentary elections remains to be seen.