

Labour Tees Up For Next General Election

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With the local elections behind us and the results plain for all to see, it's been widely reported on how bad a day it was for the Tories who lost 1063 seats, considerably beyond their worst expectations, with Labour gaining 537, the Lib Dems up 407 and the Greens gaining 241 in true hockey stick style as they doubled their council seats across the country.

Representing the biggest local poll since 2019, it covered 40m people, 152 districts, 46 unitaries and 32 metropolitan councils. But it did exclude important parts of the country. Birmingham was not included and neither was Scotland, an area where Labour is expecting to take around 20 seats at the next General Election from the SNP.

Much has been made of the Labour gains with a general consensus that this didn't deliver sufficient for a clean General Election win, meaning a coalition may be required. Sky News predicted a Labour vote share in a general election of around 36-38%. As a 95 seat gain this would give them 298 seats, their highest number since they won the 2005 general election, but still 28 short of an overall majority.

The gains made just over a week or so ago are significant with Labour once again becoming the largest party in local government. Taking control of 40 councils on 4th May, it's a position not held by Labour since 2002. Most notably in the West Midlands regaining Stoke-on-Trent from the Conservatives, with their leader Jane Ashworth, overseeing a 13 seat gain, mostly from the 'City Independents' who lost 11.

There were other big gains for Labour – for example in the East Midlands Erewash was lost by the Conservatives after more than 20 years with the Labour Party gaining 9 seats and the Conservatives losing 11.

But these gains were by no means universal for Labour across the wider region.

Tamworth moved from a Conservative controlled council to No Overall Control (NOC), with the Tories losing 5 seats and Labour gaining 7 and in Bromsgrove the Tories lost 6 seats, losing control of the council for the first time in over 24 years as this council also plunged into NOC. There Labour gained just 3 seats with Independents gaining 2 seats making it clear a cross party alliance would be

required to lead the council and my understanding is that negotiations have been ongoing since to determine how this council will be run.

In Worcester City too, a seat which at general elections swings between Conservative and Labour, the Labour Party gained only one seat moving to 13, with the Greens moving up 4, from 6 to 10 seats, whilst the Conservatives were, once again, the big losers, down 7 seats on the day. Labour and Greens have just agreed on a joint leadership model for the first time in this city.

By contrast again in the wider West Midlands, the Liberal Democrats saw a huge swing in Stratford Upon Avon winning 14 new seats representing a 13.7% swing in their favour whilst the Conservatives lost 8 seats.

Warwick City Council was another eye opener, with the Greens now the largest single party on the council with 14 seats, whilst the LibDems lost vote share, with Labour also gaining 6 seats.

In my own area of Malvern Hills in Worcestershire, where I stood as an Independent in Great Malvern, the council remains in No Overall Control but has enjoyed a stable Independent-Green partnership since 2019. The Greens were the biggest gainers on 5th May moving from 5 to 7 seats, but the Independent vote held strong with 14 seats returned and the Conservative vote, once again collapsing, as they lost 5 seats.

In the local elections this year turnout was around 40% compared to perhaps as much as 70% in a general election. Local election voters are canny and interested. They make the effort to get out and vote for services many people only notice once they go wrong. These voters are focussed on delivering specific outcomes available to them given our narrow first past the post system. As Professor Sir John Curtiss has observed, the electorate have become increasingly “sophisticated” in switching between Labour or the Lib Dems, depending on which party has the best chance of defeating local Tory candidates. At a national election these voters can make a difference but with a 70% turnout their impact can be more muted unless voters are thinking the same way.

Professor Sir John Curtiss warned, “Tactical voting would reduce the overall national vote share Labour would need in order to win a majority. It could be the difference between whether Labour gets an overall majority in Commons.”

What hasn't been analysed much is the impact of the 92 councils in No Overall Control on the voting intentions in a General Elections and the 865 Independent councillors nationally – where does their vote go?

With near 100 Councils currently in No Overall Control up 12 councils since the last time, and the best part of 1000 independent councillors having been elected, looking at the varied results in the West Midlands alone, it's clear that the public have worked hard to deliver a blow to the Conservatives picking and choosing Labour, Lib Dems, Greens or even non-aligned Independents, depending on who they see best placed in their local councils.

With these independent councillors representing just under 11% of the councillors elected in total might these votes if strategically deployed shift the polls further in a General Election?

I think it's pretty clear that those who vote Independent do so because they have made an assessment of the options facing them, making a conscious decision that the Independents standing will represent them more fully than national parties when they could simply stick with tribal allegiances. These voters will once again seek out the best candidates in their areas in a general election and, if so inclined, vote tactically to depose sitting Tory MPs.

But whilst this might mean a greater vote share for Labour, what you can't do with local election results is equate a party swing to Independents, Greens or even Lib Dems and assume these voters will return an MP of this colour at the general election. What is happening on the ground at local level is not always replicable at national level.

For example, I don't see Worcester or Warwick going Green at the next General election, but I could see Stratford upon Avon delivering a Lib Dem win and what an historic win that would be for their thoroughly decent parliamentary candidate, Dominic Skinner.

Although the Lib Dems have rejected the idea of a formal Lib-Lab pact or even a Progressive Alliance ahead of the next General Election and regularly contest seats across the board, as they did in Malvern Hills, there is evidence of local parties forming 'de facto' progressive alliances, such as in Bracknell Forest Council where the parties appeared to stand aside for each other. This sort of approach, together with an increasingly knowing electorate, may certainly unseat hundreds of Tories in the general election next year. Whether it will get Labour over the line to govern without the need for support, only time will tell.

In Birmingham City Council, not included in the recent English council elections but essential to the Labour Party's general election prospects, press coverage last week highlighted a 'damning' Labour NEC report from the Campaign Improvement Board, (CIB) stating it will appoint Birmingham City Council's next leader, deputy leader and group members. All are resigning their current positions and the city leadership is being told to appoint its leadership annually from here on.

The press reports make the NECs actions seem very heavy-handed, draconian even, making you question whether it will, in effect, really help a council that's been struggling for years through

seismic funding cuts, high staff turnover and poor morale. I wonder too what the Birmingham electorate will make of central office effectively taking over their local council? How will this endear Labour to local people.

The worry is, of course, that these moves will add more bureaucracy and delay while the CIB panel work through their recommendations. And it's very likely any changes they make would be opposed by the local party. This certainly seems to be the take of some of the region's MPs who've been voicing their concerns over the past day or so.

What I'm hearing from sources close to the Labour Party is that this is far from the actual intention of those involved in the CIB. Apparently, they intend their recommendations to be swiftly implemented. Their report is targeting the stabilisation of the local party ahead of next year's Mayoral and General elections given their strategic significance. This might be the case, but this intention needs to be communicated to the local voters who are hearing very mixed messages at present.

The view is that the City Council needs stability. No one from the Council's cabinet has been prohibited from applying for their jobs again with applications due in for Friday 19th May and the panel interviewing and making recommendations for appointments in a streamlined process intended to produce a quick turnaround.

The NEC's main target has been, apparently, in preventing in-fighting amongst the Local Party with the report explicitly addressing unwarranted union harassment of some council members. For those members who've experienced this, the report is apparently seen in some quarters as a 'breath of fresh air'.

On Monday 22nd May it became apparent that the NEC Board had done what they said they'd do and tackled this matter decisively and quickly. John Cotton and Sharon Thompson were appointed as leader and deputy leader and commented on by Labour party insiders as 'competent and professional operators'. In appointing them with the support of the NEC, it is anticipated that any threat to their leadership is removed for the next three years, providing greater stability ahead of the General and Mayoral elections.

This development is very hard on the previous leadership, Ian Ward and Brigid Jones – especially when the Council has recently delivered high profile events such as the Commonwealth Games, to theirs and the City's credit.

This new leadership is due to be joined by a Chief Whip who will have greater disciplinary and enforcement powers and links into the NEC to deal with any matters, for example leaks to press following confidential meetings, with immediate suspension.

Yes, it's a very big ask to helicopter in a new person into the role of leader of Birmingham City Council. John Cotton is seen as having considerable experience as former Cabinet member for social justice, community safety and equalities with experience as a councillor since 1999 along with being the council's representative on the WMCA board.

However, the NEC approach will have led to further resentments and splits. It will take a master tactician to bring this party together and unite it which is what John has promised to do.

Birmingham City Council has suffered from years of drastic cuts under successive Tory governments. Since 2010 funding has been halved, yet service delivery has continued to a population which has grown by almost 7% during the same period.

On top of that, over the past seven years there've been eight Chief Executives entering and exiting through the Council turnstile. The challenges of stabilising its position along with serious financial challenges are a tall order.