

## UK Votes 2007

The ironic thing about this year's elections is that although those voting for English local councillors were still using first past the post, everyone else who voted used other systems. In Northern Ireland they used Single Transferable Vote (STV). In the rest of the UK, those who voted for a Mayor, used Supplementary Vote (SV). Surely we need a short Bill amending that to Alternative Vote (AV), now that Labour Members for the first time have used 1, 2, 3 ... voting for their Deputy Leader. For the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly of Wales people voted under the Additional Member System or for Scottish Local Government using STV. There was definitely a feeling in the air that first past the post days are numbered despite spoilt ballots and not brilliant turnout.

Before the election we heard that the BNP were putting up in all the Scottish regions and for more English local councils. As worrying for democracy and choice, we also heard that Labour was putting up candidates in fewer than half the seats in the South, only 36 per cent in the South West. So after the election it was not surprising that there were no Labour Councils in the South West and only Luton, Reading and Stevenage Councils in the whole of southern England, outside London, below the line from the Wash to the Severn.

Looking at the BBC map of local government held by Labour the weekend after the elections was salutary. Results were patchy. Although Labour did better overall up to 27% from 26% in 2006, there were places where Labour was wiped out. Woking and Tewkesbury where we have strong LCER connections have no Labour councillors. There are other places where Labour did better than expected, in Charles Clarke's Norwich and in Derek Wyatt's seat.

And in Bristol where Fabian Breckels was elected back on to the Council, he observed: "what happened in Bristol was the vote of parties that didn't stand much chance of winning collapsed in the wards concerned. So we did well in some places but in seats where we used to have Labour councillors, we now come last or almost last. As for the BNP, the reason they have done so well is the fact that we have not addressed people's fears on immigration. There has been a huge change in the population in pockets of the UK creating a real fear among parts of the majority population. Unless we start to have credible answers and address those fears, the BNP will continue to gain support. Several people on the doorstep talked about the "pure British". There's no such thing but the damage is being done because we're creating a vacuum. I don't know whether their standing a BNP candidate helped me or nearly cost me the seat. Apparently the Greens didn't get their papers in in time so I could have lost had they done so." *Such is the working of first past the post!*

We also heard from former LCER Chair, Anne Campbell: "In the local elections in Cambridge, one third of the Council was up for election, plus one by-election, 15 seats in all.

Labour LibDem Con Green Others

% share of vote	27	33	25	13	2
seats won	5	10	-	-	-

#### Cambridge 2007 local election results

How can one party get one third of the votes and two thirds of the seats? It is bizarre. How can another get one quarter of the votes and no representation at all? The under representation of Labour voters in the south is clear. The real problem is the peculiar bias produced by first past the post which means that when Labour forms (a small majority) government, our MPs are mainly northern, Scottish and Welsh. When the Tories form a (small majority) government their MPs are mainly from the South. So we tend to get swings in policy favouring the north when we are in power and the south when the Tories are. Not the way to run the country!"

LCER Regional Representative, Mark Ereira managed to get back in St Edmundsbury, now one of three councillors in the whole of west, mid and south Suffolk. Also the group leader! He was thinking of writing to Gordon Brown to explain how badly the system is now for Labour in England and that we must have reform - as they have elsewhere in the UK - even if just for local government. Mike Roberts, Executive Member, is now a member of the Labour Group which is now one of the biggest in the South East. They had two seats up and two defended again.

Under the heading, **There's only a few of us left, but we must be a national party**, Keith Dibble, an electoral reform sympathiser, wrote a letter published in Tribune on 22 June:

"As the leader of the Labour group on Rushmoor council (we have 5 members out of 42), I know a priority for Labour's new leadership team must be to address the problems of the party in the south-east of England."

A failure to act now could result in Labour ceasing to function as a national political party in large chunks of the country.

In the south-east at the recent local elections, Labour lost 80 seats, stood candidates in 65 per cent of wards and only contested 50 per cent of the seats. There is no Labour representation on 30 councils in the region.

Yet, with targeting, having the ability to organise, highlighting the issues and maintaining a high profile, Labour can win in the region. This was done with great success in Hastings, Southampton and Slough. But we must accept there is a problem and not dismiss it as mid-term blues.

Labour must, for example, acknowledge that not everyone in the south east lives in four-bedroom detached houses on a high income.

People need Labour representation, wherever they live. The Government must implement policies that are relevant to the region. These include affordable social housing, decent public transport and the retention of local post offices.

The small Labour groups in the region must be treated with respect and given support.

We should encourage trade unions to affiliate to every CLP (Constituency Labour Party). Every voter should always have the opportunity to vote Labour. We must never forget we are a national party and not just the party of the urban heartlands.

John Denham, our LCER Co-Chair, gave a lecture for the Fabian Society in Portcullis House on Wednesday 23 May *Southern Discomfort Revisited*. He argues that one of New Labour's unquestioned achievements was the solid base of councillors and MPs from the South of England. Ten years later that advance has been halted and, in many councils, reversed. John argued that Labour cannot comfortably govern the UK as a whole without a significant presence in its largest and most prosperous region, the South East. By looking at the lives and aspirations of southern voters, and by examining the stresses and tensions that lie beneath the South's apparent prosperity, John argued that Labour can and should be a significant power in the region. But also, as you would expect from a key electoral reformer, he pointed out that a more representative voting system would, at a stroke, give Labour better representation and greater legitimacy in the South. It would, almost certainly, increase Labour's overall vote somewhat by bringing into the open our support which is currently suppressed in unwinnable seats. A reformed electoral system would also force Labour to consider more explicitly the interests of voters outside the areas we currently hope to hold." But, he acknowledged that: "electoral reform is not a magic bullet. It does not guarantee the political debate about our overall strategy and approach." *Necessary but not sufficient then? You can find the whole speech on [www.fabian-society.org.uk](http://www.fabian-society.org.uk)*

It is salutary to look at the list of authorities which have no Labour councillors: Adur, Aylesbury Vale, Babergh, Boston, Broadland, Caradon, Castle Point, Chelmsford, Chichester, Chiltern, Christchurch, Congleton, Cotswold, Craven, East Cambridgeshire, East Devon, East Dorset, East Hampshire, East Hertfordshire, East Northamptonshire, Eastbourne, Eden, Elmbridge, Epsom & Ewell, Fenland, Forest Heath, Fylde, Guildford, Hambleton, Harborough, Harrogate, Hart, Horsham, Huntingdonshire, Kennet, Lewes, Maldon, Malvern Hills, Mendip, Mid Bedfordshire, Mid Devon, Mid Suffolk, Mole Valley, New Forest, North Cornwall, North Devon, North Dorset, North Kesteven, North Norfolk, Oadby & Wigston, Oswestry, Poole, Purbeck, Restormel, Ribble Valley, Richmondshire, Rochford, Rother, Runnymede, Rutland, Ryedale, Shepway, South Buckinghamshire, South Hams, South Holland, South Norfolk, South Shropshire, South Somerset, Spelthorne, Stratford-On-Avon, Teignbridge, Test Valley, Tewkesbury, Tonbridge & Malling, Torbay, Torridge, Tunbridge Wells,

Uttlesford, Vale Of White Horse, Waverley, Wealden, West Berkshire, West Devon, West Dorset, West Lindsey, West Wiltshire, Windsor & Maidenhead Royal, Woking, Wokingham, Worthing, Wychavon.

Of these 92 councils a high percentage are below the line from the Severn to the Wash. Lewis Baston points out that: "In 1983 (let alone 1995!) there was Labour representation on every council in Surrey (except Surrey Heath where ironically we do have councillors now) – often not much, but a Labour voice in local affairs in Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, Guildford, Woking, Waverley, Spelthorne, Runnymede, Elmbridge where now there is nothing. Surrey has the most dramatic withering away but it's broadly similar in a lot of suburban/ rural southern England. In a number of rural authorities (such as Uttlesford in Essex) the Labour representation in the past has been from the principal small towns in the council (Saffron Walden in that case), based on local party activity and often long-serving councillors whose service to the community dampened the national swings (enabling survival in 1983 for instance). Now we have lost all that, and as a party Labour is poorer for it.

"A slight note of caution on some of the local election analysis although the broad picture of retreat/decline is very important. Labour gained this year in Leeds and this was part of a broader upswing in the northern metropolitan areas since last year. There was a swing to Labour in most of them. The seats/votes in local elections is not directly comparable because of differences in size. This year there were a lot of seats up in smaller rural councils in Conservative areas, which dominate the seat count. For instance, two Birmingham wards together have the same total electorate as entire 30-seat local authorities."

But it is clear that the first past the post is now working against Labour in local elections, with 27 per cent vote translating into 18 per cent seats, whereas the LibDems got more seats on 26 per cent of the vote. The Tories got 50 per cent of the seats on 40 per cent of the vote. Labour consoled itself on the absence of Tories in Liverpool, Manchester and Liverpool, forgetting what was happening in other seats where Labour has no presence or in key marginals where the story was mixed.

*LCER is monitoring what it is calling Labour Retreat and will produce a pamphlet Reversing Labour Retreat in the summer. If you have local information or would like to see the Labour Retreat document produced from our consultation, please contact us at [lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk).*

## **Change in Scotland**

Now that the Scottish elections are over, and Gordon Brown has become Prime Minister, we may hear a lot more of the West Lothian or English Question. The impression given after the elections was of spoilt ballots and chaos. But the true story of the Scottish elections has yet to be told by Ron Gould, brought in to head the Inquiry into what went on. However Labour grabbed a loss by a single seat, 46 MSPs, from the jaws of outright rejection, hence we imagine the vote of

confidence given to Douglas Alexander at the Manchester Conference when he was made General Election Coordinator. Second, the Single Transferable Vote (STV) was not so difficult for the voters as anticipated. (See the report from Andrew Burns who reported to the ERS AGM). Third, there was a clear problem of ballot design, and instructions were unclear for the Scottish Parliament. Fourth it might be useful to have either one system for the Scottish Parliament and the local elections or hold them on separate occasions. Last and not least, the SNP stood candidates in every region, "to test the water" as they said. Looking at the lampposts in part of Scotland it seemed that the SNP were fighting for seats throughout the country, ie fighting a PR elections, whereas Labour is much happier fighting in marginals and still hasn't adjusted to the equal importance of voters in safe seats, Labour's or definitely not Labour's, under PR systems. Labour cannot afford to stay in the Western Isles and the Lothian-Strathclyde belt with less than a third of the vote anywhere else. STV in Local Government can begin to build the base that is needed for future parliamentary success.

There were several people associated with LCER or electoral reform in the past, who got back into the Scottish Parliament: Jack McConnell, Wendy Alexander, Sarah Boyack, Rhona Brankin, Malcolm Chisholm, Frank McAveety, Pauline McNeill, Peter Peacock. David Stewart, former supporter and MP in Inverness where he appeared on several platforms with Robin Cook, joins Peter Peacock and Rhoda Grant as Highlands & Islands regional MSPs. We lost a supporter in Livingston and need to see if we have support in Gordon Brown's backyard, in Mid Scotland & Fife, where Labour lost two constituency seats, Dunfermline West to the LibDems, who won the by-election there, and Mid Fife which Labour lost to the SNP. Labour did at least gain three on the regional list, John Park, Claire Brennan-Baker and Richard Simpson.

In Scottish Local Government, Andrew Burns, Stephen Curran and Willie Sullivan all won. Willie was leading all the time the first preferences were being shown on the monitor and some wonder if Labour should have put up another Labour candidate in his Dunfermline seat. The Single Transferable Vote seems to have confused fewer people than expected. It was only that some voters did not want to rank candidates of the same party and put two 2<sup>nd</sup> or two 3<sup>rd</sup> or even two 1<sup>st</sup> preferences which meant that their ballot was voided. Labour's vote was spread across Scotland rather than concentrated in urban areas which will need to be built upon because it changes the dynamics of targeting under first past the post.

*Andrew Burns adds:* Labour controlled 13 Councils before the May elections and dominated many of them on a minority vote under the first past the post. Now under STV, it holds a majority in only two councils, Glasgow and North Lanarkshire. But if one looks at the Leaders of Councils, depending on the very different coalitions which have been formed, there remain twelve which are Labour led. Despite the fact that my own Council Edinburgh is now in the hands of a coalition which excludes Labour, run by Scottish Liberal Democrats working with the Scottish Nationalists, and I have to work very much harder in my

multimember ward than I ever did before, Labour did distinctly better than was expected and the distribution of Labour councillors throughout Scotland is much more even. The Labour led coalitions include only one Lib-Lab council, Dundee, which is strange since this coalition had been running Scotland for 8 years. East Dunbartonshire and South Lanarkshire are Lab-Con coalitions and two are Rainbow councils, Falkirk and East Renfrewshire. Midlothian is minority Labour as is Clackmannanshire, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire and Stirling. This gives 27 councils in no overall control, 3 in Independent control and 2 in Labour control. The main reason for the change was that the SNP won 182 more councillors and Labour lost 161.”

The SNP and Plaid have both succeeded in getting ethnic minority candidates elected onto their assemblies before Labour. The percentage of women has gone down slightly along with Labour's representation. The introduction of STV in Scottish Local Government has only temporarily reduced the percentage of women elected very slightly. Where women candidates were stood they were more likely to be elected, giving hope that STV will prove women friendly in the future.

### **Change in Wales**

In the Welsh Assembly, Labour managed to stay on as first party, unlike Scotland. Labour gained the highest share of the vote in both the constituencies (32.2%) and the regions (29.6%). This gave them 26 out of the 60 seats, to Plaid's 15, the Conservative 12, and LibDem 6. In Blaenau Gwent, where by-election victor Trish Law retained her seat, Labour's vote fell by 38.9%. The Labour vote is concentrated in the north and the south and is lowest in mid Wales and Anglesey. The Conservatives are strong in East Wales and in Pembrokeshire, with Plaid's vote stronger in West Wales but a few pockets now in the Valleys. The LibDems are concentrated in Mid Wales. UKIP fielded 33 candidates and got none elected. Neither did the BNP, but they achieved 5.1% of the regional votes, with 20 candidates, which is a clear warning for the Greater London Assembly Elections in 2008 where the same percentage will give them a seat.

John Harris, whom LCER met at the Manchester Leadership Conference, didn't see a problem with the AMS system. He is living in Hay-on-Wye, where there are no Labour representatives except in the region of Mid & West Wales where Labour won no constituency seats but has two Assembly Members (AMs) in the region, Alun Davies and Joyce Watson. The vote for Labour went up in Cardiff Central by 2% but the overall vote fell by 7% in the regions and 7.8% in the constituencies. We need to do more work with AMs but notice that Lesley Griffiths, once an electoral reformer, now represents Wrexham. Rhodri Morgan, a prominent electoral reformer, has made a coalition with Plaid without any agreement for local government reform.

### **Welsh Local Voting Reform**

The document encompassing the Coalition agreement, *One Wales: A progressive agenda for the government of Wales*, makes no mention of changing the voting system for local elections. There is talk within the electoral reform movement of setting up a Fairshare equivalent in Wales, perhaps with a Welsh name which resonates with the electorate, to see whether a campaign for change to STV in local government can encourage the AMs to take this up, inside and outside the Coalition.

*If you would like to be involved in this and live in Wales, just contact [lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk)*