

THE FORGOTTEN ELECTIONS: London Borough Elections May 2010

A Paper by Cavendish Communications: June 2010

The Other Elections

Everyone's attention on May 6 was, understandably, focused on the drama of the elections to Parliament. But one of the attractions of the May 6 date for Labour was that it coincided with the local elections date, when many council seats in Metropolitan (and some rural) districts were up for election and, most significantly, all 32 London boroughs held "all-out" elections. This meant that, even if Labour was facing a tough challenge in the Parliamentary elections, it could still expect to make gains in local contests, especially in London.

The reason for this is that the last London borough elections were held in May 2006, when the Blair government was unpopular, and many Labour voters had stayed at home. Generally, anyway, Labour voters tend to be less enthusiastic about local elections and in local government turnout is the key: normally only around one-third of voters bother to cast their ballot in local elections. But when local votes are held on the same day as parliamentary elections that figure can almost double – helping Labour.

Overview

And so it proved. On what was overall a pretty depressing night for Labour, at least in England and to some extent Wales, the party had a good night in London. The Parliamentary elections were less bad for Labour in London than they might have been – they held on to Westminster North for example, and seats such as Hampstead and Kilburn (only just) and Eltham, where the swing was less than 2%, and overall in London the swing to the Conservatives was half that of the country as a whole (2.5% as against 5%).

Turning to the boroughs, Labour won pretty much everything they must have been hoping for. Their gains were: Brent, Camden, Ealing, Enfield, Harrow, Hounslow, Islington, Lewisham, Southwark and Waltham Forest. They are also in minority control of Merton. When added to their existing strongholds of Barking and Dagenham, Greenwich, Hackney, Haringey, Lambeth, Newham and Tower Hamlets, Labour are in outright control of 17 of the 32 boroughs.

For the Conservatives, it was a disappointing set of results, though they may have been heartened that where they had been running a Council effectively and with a strongly political emphasis since 2006, they held on: comfortably in Hammersmith and Fulham, one of the most radical Tory administrations, where they lost only a couple of seats, more narrowly in Croydon, where they retained a majority of only four. Regaining Richmond (a real see-saw council) from the Lib Dems was also a highlight. But the straight losses to Labour in Ealing, Enfield and Harrow were poor results.

The Lib Dems also had a pretty miserable night. In addition to losing Richmond, they lost their position as lead partners (with the Tories) in Camden, and similarly in Southwark. They were formerly the largest party in Brent, but lost 10 seats and saw Labour take control. Sutton and Kingston remain their only councils in the capital, though they are junior partners in a coalition with the Conservatives in Redbridge.

Other Features of the Results

In addition to changes of control (summarised in the Table, below), the following features of the results are worth noting:

- Two councils have only Labour councillors: Barking and Dagenham, and Newham
- Three councils in south-west London (Sutton, Kingston and Richmond) have no Labour councillors between them
- All 12 BNP councillors in Barking and Dagenham were defeated
- Only two councils are now under No Overall Control – Merton and Redbridge
- There are two Green councillors in London
- Two councils (Haringey and Islington) have no Conservative councillors
- No fewer than nine councils (one-quarter of the total) have no Lib Dem councillors.

Summary of Changes

Council	Before Elections	Now
Brent	LIB DEM / CON COALITION	LAB
Camden	LIB DEM / CON PARTNERSHIP	LAB
Ealing	CON	LAB
Enfield	CON	LAB
Harrow	CON	LAB
Hounslow	CON / COMMUNITY GROUP COALITION	LAB
Islington	LIB DEM MINORITY	LAB
Lewisham	LAB MINORITY	LAB
Merton	CON MINORITY	LAB MINORITY
Redbridge	CON MINORITY	CON / LIB DEM PARTNERSHIP
Richmond	LIB DEM	CON
Southwark	LIB DEM / CON PARTNERSHIP	LAB
Waltham Forest	LAB / LIB DEM COALITION	LAB

Note: Hackney, Lewisham and Newham also have elected Labour Mayors.

Implications of the Results

One immediate consequence of the results is that Labour win control of London Councils, the umbrella lobbying organisation for the 32 Boroughs and the City of London. Jules Pipe, elected Mayor of Hackney, is the new Chair of London Councils.

But does the fact that Labour now controls more than half the capital's boroughs also spell doom for Boris Johnson, assuming that he stands again for Mayor of London (as seems likely) in 2012? Far from it. One reason is that the London Mayoralty is partly a personality / popularity contest, with voters not necessarily voting on party lines; the other is that Boris Johnson derives much of his support from outer London where the Conservatives remain strong.

Much may depend, however, on factors outside the incumbent Mayor's control: such as the identity of his opponent and the popularity (or otherwise) of the coalition government in May 2012. The only two hopefuls with a realistic chance of being selected as Labour candidate are former Mayor Ken Livingstone and former Blairite MP Oona King. A close contest between either of these, but especially perhaps Livingstone and Johnson, looks likely, and Boris' ability to hold on might be determined by how successfully he can distance himself from the government. That might also suit his longer-term political ambitions.

But Labour will have been heartened by what happened in London on May 6 and will believe that they can recapture City Hall in two years' time.