

Eastleigh by-election used to shift UK politics rightwards

By Dave Hyland
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Mike Thornton of the Liberal Democrats won the Eastleigh by-election last week, but the party suffered a 19.34 percent swing to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

The result was the product of many factors, not least the way the capitalist press intervened to move official politics even further to the right. But this could only be accomplished because the Labour Party and the trade unions have led this rightward lurch.

The working class has effectively been politically disenfranchised. The right-wing press attempt to fill the vacuum by igniting middle-class moral outrage over one scandal or another to shift the Tories and Labour to the right by boosting UKIP.

A discernable pattern is beginning to emerge from the last few by-elections. In the Rotherham by-election in December, a scandal was unleashed in the final week of the campaign over the issue of children from Eastern Europe being taken away from their UKIP-voting foster parents. It was used to attack the Labour Party-controlled council's social services and boost the electoral prospects of the UKIP candidate.

The final week of canvassing in Eastleigh, in Hampshire, England was dominated by a scandal stoked up by the media, involving accusations first aired on Channel Four News of "improper behaviour" towards female party activists by former Lib-Dem party president Lord Rennard. No real evidence has yet been produced to support these allegations, which depend entirely on the statements by women who claim that Rennard sexually harassed them some years ago.

The most prominent of his accusers is Alison Smith, an Oxford University politics lecturer and former Aberdeen councillor. Smith was part of a Lib-Dem/Scottish National Party coalition that ran the council. Whatever the truth of her accusations, they are not the subject for the criminal courts, but civil action.

Yet the scandal has dominated Britain's newspapers. To understand why requires examining the motives behind the motives of the major players involved. Whether those making the allegations know it or not, they are being used to manipulate public opinion in order to achieve a definite political goal.

This involves sections of the media including Rupert Murdoch's News International, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* who believe that the coalition with the Liberal Democrats hinders the energetic pursuit of cuts and prevents the Conservatives from adopting a stand sufficiently hostile to the European Union. Prime Minister David Cameron's pledge to renegotiate Britain's position and hold a referendum on membership has not placated such sentiments.

The Liberal Democrats were targeted as the weakest link in the chain. Its leadership already had Eastleigh's former MP, Chris Huhne, awaiting sentencing for "attempting to pervert the course of justice" over a speeding offence thanks in large part to his former wife Vicky Pryce providing details to the press. Pryce spoke to journalists for several months, initially telling the *Mail on Sunday* a false story that a "constituency aide" had taken points for Huhne in late 2010. She subsequently spoke to Murdoch's *Sunday Times* political editor, Isabel Oakeshott, in March 2011, even trying unsuccessfully to record him confessing. The story was published by both newspapers on May 8, 2011.

Attempts by the Lib-Dems leadership to set-up their own internal investigation into the allegations against Lord Rennard failed. The *Daily Telegraph* disclosed that "transparency campaigners" were concerned about Baroness Parminter's role because she is married to Neil Sherlock, one of Mr Clegg's special advisers. As a result of this pressure Clegg was forced to hand over the running of the whistle blowing email address to *Public Concern at Work*, the UK's leading whistle blowing

authority.

In a desperate attempt to appease these press scandal-mongers by showing he was serious about investigating these allegations party leader Nick Clegg went so far as to call in the police. A Scotland Yard spokesman said, "The Metropolitan Police Special Investigations Command has been approached by officials in the Liberal Democrat Party and is working with them to ascertain whether or not criminal activity has taken place".

Labour, ever anxious to be onside with Murdoch et al., staked its own claim to this move. Labour MP John Mann told the press he had written to police to ensure a "proper investigation" into the allegations.

The by-election confirmed the deep unpopularity of both coalition partners, who suffered a combined drop in votes of 27 percent—with the Tories knocked into third place. Labour, who ran author John O'Farrell, barely shifted their fourth place total of less than 10 percent of the vote. UKIP were given massive publicity, with party leader Nigel Farage presented as a kind of jovial English eccentric who likes nothing better than to be down at his local pub on Sunday lunchtime. The truth is Farage leads an extreme right-wing party with close ties to fascist groups throughout Europe.

In the aftermath of Eastleigh, the campaign to shift politics rightwards began in earnest. The Tory Party's vice-chairman, Michael Fabricant, who recently called on the Tories to form a pact with UKIP, tweeted that the party had "clearly connected with Conservative policies!"... "The Conservative voice is muffled and not crisp. It does not clearly project Conservative core policies or principles."

The *Guardian* reported that a "large group of [Tory] MPs plan to call for a leadership contest if this month's budget and May's local elections go poorly."

"If our poor performance continues, then there will be a problem," one senior Tory MP said. "Letters will start to be sent to Graham Brady. There will be trouble in May if things don't get better." Brady is the chairman of the backbench 1922 Committee. A contest would be triggered if just 46 MPs—15 percent of the parliamentary party—wrote to him.

Financial Times political editor, George Parker, predicted a similar shift by Labour. "Finally there is 'One Nation' Labour, which inserted high-profile author and comedian John O'Farrell as candidate but still failed to make any ground in a seat that was once a three-way marginal," he wrote. "Eastleigh is far from a Labour

target seat but [Labour Party leader] Ed Miliband is already drawing the lessons from the doorstep. Expect him, too, to start ramping up Labour's rhetoric on immigration in the coming weeks."

The shift was not long in coming. Writing in the pro-Labour *New Statesman*, Toby Perkins MP, Labour's campaign manager in Eastleigh, declared, "All mainstream political parties need to take seriously the concerns people have about the country, whether it is the cost of living, fairness or immigration. Under Ed Miliband's leadership, Labour is determined to meet those concerns."

Patrick Diamond, who helped draw up Labour's last election manifesto, wrote in the *Guardian* that "one nation Labour must restore the party's reputation for economic competence and fiscal discipline" and "must show it understands the tight fiscal context."

Self-proclaimed "Blairite cuckoo" Dan Hodges complained in his pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* column that Labour leader "Ed Miliband has a One Nation slogan, but he isn't pursuing a One Nation strategy... [Eastleigh] doesn't mark the end of Ed Miliband's dreams of reaching Downing Street. But I suspect we've just seen a glass ceiling sliding between him and his chances of winning an outright majority in 2015."

In such a fractured political landscape, with no party enjoying genuine mass support and class tensions becoming ever more acute, the fight over policy towards Europe will continue to escalate—especially given the UK's loss of its AAA credit rating. But all the major parties will continue to vie for the affections of Murdoch and his ilk in the financial oligarchy by mixing demands for austerity to be imposed on working people with the scapegoating of immigrants for the mounting social crisis now affecting millions.

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