

General election produces political earthquake in Britain

By Chris Marsden and Julie Hyland
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The Conservative Party has won a narrow majority after Thursday's General Election. With 331 seats in Westminster out of 650, it will not have to rely on support from Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party or the Liberal Democrats, as some had predicted.

The result owes nothing to popular support. The Conservatives polled approximately 36.9 percent of the vote, a small rise on 2010, but due to Britain's first-past-the-post constituency-based system it increased its number of seats by 24.

This is an election that Labour lost rather than one that the Tories won. There was actually a swing of 15 percent against the two governing parties, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, who won 59 percent between them in 2010 and only 44 percent Tuesday. But the entire brunt of this fell on the Liberal Democrats, who won only eight seats, compared to 57 in 2010.

Labour saw a slight increase of its overall vote and won a dozen additional seats in England, but this was more than offset by its spectacular collapse in its former stronghold of Scotland, where it was wiped out by the Scottish National Party (SNP). There is now a solitary Labour MP in the whole of Scotland—and just one Conservative and one Liberal Democrat—as the SNP swept the board, securing 56 seats compared with six in 2010.

The stark contrast between the fate of the two parties is primarily because the SNP made a pitch to anti-austerity sentiment, whereas Labour did not.

Labour leader Ed Miliband centred his election campaign on an assertion that his party would be a more “sensible” advocate of austerity, which would still allow for some growth in highly circumscribed areas. He combined a pledge for a “budget responsibility lock” with a promise to clamp down on immigration, to defend the European Union and maintain Britain's role as a leading military power.

This enabled the SNP to exploit widespread hostility to Westminster, especially to Labour itself, and to channel this sentiment behind its nationalist agenda. In this it was aided and abetted by the pseudo-left groups such as the Scottish Socialist Party and Solidarity Scotland, who endorsed an SNP vote.

The SNP is now the third largest party in Westminster, with major ramifications for the future survival of the United Kingdom as a unitary state. In many constituencies in Scotland the swing against Labour was well over 30 percent.

High voter turnout in Scotland masks a national figure that would otherwise have been lower than in 2010.

The election has claimed the scalps of three party leaders.

The Labour Party is decapitated. Within hours of the result, Miliband resigned as the anticipated last-minute surge to Labour failed to materialise. Deputy leader Harriet Harman said she would step down as soon as a successor was elected. The party's shadow chancellor, Ed Balls, and Douglas Alexander, shadow foreign secretary, lost their seats.

Labour was unable to offset its losses in Scotland with any significant gains in Tory marginals and its vote even in major urban conurbations was poor—leaving it almost 100 seats adrift of the Tories in its worst result since 1987.

The UK Independence Party is the third most popular party on 13 percent, having picked up support from both the Conservatives and Labour. Nonetheless, with around 4 million votes—nearly triple the total of the SNP—it took just one Westminster seat.

Nigel Farage resigned as UKIP leader after he failed to win his Thanet constituency. UKIP's main donor, Arron Banks, had called for a vote for the Tories in the seat because Prime Minister David Cameron has pledged to hold a referendum on British membership of the

European Union by 2017.

The result for UKIP mirrors the success of the SNP, not in its right-wing nostrums, but from the essential standpoint of the dangerous cultivation of nationalist sentiment.

Liberal Democrat leader and former Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg also resigned, after his party suffered what he described as a “cruel and punishing night. Clegg only narrowly managed to retain his own seat due to tactical voting by Tories, with the majority of Conservative gains coming from former Liberal Democrat seats. All other leading Liberal Democrat figures, such as former Business Secretary Vince Cable and former Chief Secretary to the Treasury Danny Alexander, lost their seats—leaving a parliamentary group of just eight Liberal Democrats who could travel to Westminster in a minibus.

Caroline Lucas remains the Green Party’s sole MP, despite the party quadrupling its national share of the vote due to its nominally “left” programme.

Britain’s ruling elite got the result they had wanted. Virtually all the media and leading business figures insisted that a Tory majority was necessary for the “stability” of the financial markets—the only constituency that counts.

But it is a pyrrhic victory. It heads a government that not only might preside over a British exit from the European Union, but also the break-up of the United Kingdom. Moreover, it commands the support of just 22 percent of the electorate, under conditions in which it is pledged to further savage cuts that will devastate the lives of millions.

The overriding message from the election is that, for the vast majority of people who sought change, it will not come through parliament and certainly not from the Labour Party.

Labour is a bureaucratic organisation with no real base in the working class and no ability at all to make a popular appeal to their fundamental concerns. They are not seen as an opposition tendency, but rather as a pale copy of the Tories.

It has already responded to defeat with complaints that it drifted too far to the left and calls to recapture the glory days of Tony Blair.

There has never been an occasion where the gap between the sentiment of the broad mass of the population and the structures of official politics has been so vast. This is only the ideological reflection of the gulf which has opened up between the super-rich oligarchy,

who dictate the policies of all the major parties, and the working class.

This situation will have explosive political consequences.

Parliamentary democracy is in a state of advanced decay and cannot be revived. The working class must intervene independently and in its own interests if it is to combat the ongoing destruction of jobs, wages and social conditions and the growing danger of militarism and war.

It can only do so on a socialist programme.

The Socialist Equality Party stood two candidates in the general election, Katie Rhodes in Glasgow Central and David O’Sullivan in Holborn & St. Pancras, London. Rhodes secured 58 votes and O’Sullivan 108. The purpose of the SEP’s campaign was to raise the necessity of a new socialist movement of the working class, one based on the fight for a workers government in Britain within the framework of a United Socialist States of Europe and a world socialist federation.

The prerequisite for the development of such a movement is the historical and political education of the most advanced and self-sacrificing elements in the working class, especially the young.

In the course of our campaign, the SEP distributed thousands of election manifestos and spoke to thousands more. Our candidates addressed almost a dozen hustings and wrote extensively on the programme and class character of all the major parties, as well as the pseudo-left groups that gravitate around them.

Most importantly, the SEP placed the International May Day Online Rally against imperialist war, hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, at the centre of its campaign. Two highly successful meetings were held in Glasgow and London to listen to the event.

The outcome of the election is a stark confirmation of the programme and perspective advanced by the SEP. We urge workers and young people to respond by taking the decision to join our party.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>