



**SETBACK OR BONANZA
FOR LABOUR IN THE
LOCAL ELECTIONS?**

The predominant reactions to the outcome of the Metropolitan and non-Metropolitan District Council elections on May 1 this year were relief on the part of the Government that Conservative losses had been relatively light and an affected public optimism about Labour's performance among several party spokesmen — including Roy Hattersley talking on the late-night BBC television programme that reported the early results. However, did these elections really amount to, or even foreshadow, the anti-Tory swing that Labour politicians seek in order to see the party back in office at the next general election? Evidence has recently been adduced from opinion polls that Labour is regaining lost support among those groups of the electorate — particularly skilled manual workers and (even more so) their wives — whose defection to the Tories in the last general election was unusually high, thus producing dramatic anti-Labour swings in supposedly strongly Labour constituencies in parts of the south-east and of the Midlands where these groups were a disproportionate component of the electorate. To what extent do the local election results corroborate this scenario of Labour recovery?

Of course, a fully adequate comparison between results of a general election and those of local elections is frustrated by several well-known practical difficulties. While it is a simple matter in many local-authority areas to aggregate results at the level of individual wards (the area unit at which local elections are fought) into their constituent parliamentary constituencies, some problems in the construction of a proper comparison cannot be fully resolved: the occasional presence of Ratepayer and similar candidacies in local contests; the often uneven distribution of a Liberal presence in local races combined with the further consideration that such candidacies may have a

different significance in local as opposed to parliamentary contests; the difference in turnout percentage between local and parliamentary elections, which is usually thought to disadvantage Labour in the former type of race; the fact that some local contests are multi-seat, multi-vote affairs in which a proportion of voters split their ballots or use less than their full entitlement of votes and in which even the major parties (let alone the minor ones) sometimes fail to put forward a full slate of candidates. Recent ward-boundary and associated ward-name changes in numerous local Districts frustrate the aggregation of some ward-level results to the level of the respective parliamentary constituency and, in addition, there were in May 1980 no local elections in the GLC area to permit an examination of voting trends in the metropolis.

Despite the inconvenience of these constraints it is still possible to make some reasonably valid comparisons between the general election results of May 1979 and those in corresponding local elections a year later. Is there, one asks, any indication of a pattern? In fact, one can discern some sort of pattern from which Labour can perhaps derive some partial comfort; even so, the Tories are doubtless justified in feeling that the results as a whole are far less bad for them than they might have been, and for Labour there are some disconcerting exceptions to any overall picture of errant one-time Labour voters returning eagerly if bashfully to the fold.

In the West Midlands, where the Labour Party suffered some of its largest reverses in May 1979, there are indications of some recovery. In Birmingham as a whole the inter-two-party swing to Labour almost restores the position of the party in October 1974. In the Northfield constituency, for example, which contains Longbridge and in May 1979 was the locus of dramatic Labour losses among skilled manual workers, the party held one seat and won back the two others, increasing its percentage of the two-party position with a swing of almost 10 percent — a not unreasonable recovery for a local election contest. However, returns to Labour in Dudley and in Sandwell (containing Warley and West Bromwich) were far less spectacular and in no way managed to restore the *status quo ante* of October 1974. Moreover, the results from Wolverhampton are profoundly troubling for Labour. Here Labour gained two seats from the Conservatives, while the latter won one from a Ratepayers' group, and the Labour success in securing a somewhat precarious majority control of the Council was widely interpreted, both by the national commentators in the media and also by the local

Labour leadership of the city, as a vindication of the Council's introduction of a 56% rate increase as a response to the Government's cuts and as evidence that most voters were prepared to pay such increases in return for guarantees of continuing levels of municipal service. In fact, some remarkable pro-Tory swings in the Wolverhampton constituencies in May 1979 continued a similar trajectory in the elections on May 1, particularly in Renee Short's North-east constituency, where Labour's two-party percentage of nearly 70% in October 1974 had been reduced to barely 50% by 1980. Nationwide publicity given shortly before this year's local elections to clashes between police and strikers outside the printing offices of the town's newspaper, the *Express & Star*, may not have helped Labour's cause locally, but it remains likely that the rates issue contributed most to this electoral outcome. Labour was able to win its two seats in Wolverhampton (and barely at that) only because it had lost these in the really grim 1976 year of the last government's period of office.

Unfortunately for Labour councils, the party often seems particularly vulnerable to negative reactions from its rate-paying voters when large rate increases are used in an attempt to circumvent the withholding of funds by central government. In early March of this year a council by-election in the Knight's Hill ward of the London Borough of Lambeth, where Labour had confidently expected to gain seats since it needed a two-party swing of less than 3% from the 1978 result, in fact produced a small rise in proportionate Tory support in response to a threatened local rate increase that was subsequently fixed at 49.5% but had been provisionally announced as nearly 60%. Clearly, a part of Labour's electorate needs education on the current dilemmas faced by Labour-controlled local authorities wanting to avoid drastic reductions of municipal service.

Elsewhere in the country any disillusion with the present Government among first-time Tory voters of 1979 has been relatively muted, even if such disillusion exists. In Basildon, where Eric Moonman suffered such dramatic desertions by former Labour voters who were clearly attracted both by the possibility of purchasing their council houses and also by the implied cornucopia of Mrs Thatcher's version of free collective wage bargaining, there has been some return to Labour by voters, though the party's October 1974 position has not really been re-established. In neighbouring Southend, however, doubtless assisted by the knock-on effects of the recent Southend East parliamentary by-election, Labour's proportion of

the two-party vote returned to the level of five and six years ago. At the opposite end of the country, in Newcastle upon Tyne and in Sheffield, the evidence for a Labour recovery since 1979 is mixed. However, in Manchester, assisted by the party's solid record of municipal achievement despite some notorious and highly publicised errors over the years in housing and transport policy, Labour not only won but won handsomely; a respectable swing back to the party more than cancelled out what was in any case only a small pro-Tory swing in 1979.

What then is the verdict for the future, especially for that of the Labour Party? Certainly, the experience of one year of Mrs Thatcher's policies has scarcely produced the dramatic counter-reaction that all on the Left had hoped for and that some had firmly expected to see. Labour has regained some lost ground, but one suspects that its support — particularly among the returning skilled manual voters who are so important for any electoral success — remains volatile and susceptible to such contrary influences as large rate increases. The only comfort that Labour can possibly draw from this is that such increases are a local issue and any reaction against them would not necessarily affect the party's performance in a general election. This smacks too much of pious optimism, however.

Although politicians and intellectuals on the Left may wonder why the Thatcher government is not by now more unpopular than it appears, some of the answers are perhaps not hard to seek, especially bearing in mind the proven pragmatic nature and low political sophistication of at least a large minority of the British electorate. The political culture of this country works in favour of the Conservatives and it is no accident that over the years since the last war the depths of their unpopularity when in government have seldom equalled the corresponding Labour ones. Symptomatic of the general difficulty on this score faced by the Labour Party and by the Left as a whole is the widespread and longstanding hostility to trade unions, even among Labour voters; one recent poll has shown that a substantial majority of the electorate believe trade unions to have negative effects on the well-being of the country and there is a high level of stated approval among voters for the Thatcher government's recent proposals on trade-union reform.

Other factors — apparently ephemeral but nonetheless significant — prevented any real Labour benefit in the case of the recent local elections, for they coincided with some slight recovery since the start of the year in the popularity of the Government and of Mrs

Thatcher personally and they were held barely a month after Geoffrey Howe's announcement of a budget that so succeeded in avoiding public hostility that well over a half of the public were subsequently found to regard it as 'fair'. Shortly after any budget is announced both the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the government that he represents can invariably gain a few percentage points of implied support and popularity merely on the basis of public appearance and visibility. Only budgets containing proposals having very obvious short-term negative consequences such as a dramatic and immediate rise in the rate of income tax would be exempt from this political principle. In the local elections Labour merely paid once again the continuing historical price of the pragmatism and low political consciousness of a substantial part of the British electorate. One can only guess whether the probable economic reverses of the near future will be sufficient to break down such a longstanding political disposition. However, the fact that after a full year of crude monetarism and of its increasingly obvious economic and social costs Labour has made what amounts to a fairly modest electoral comeback does not encourage optimism on this score.

Finally, a postscript on a very different aspect of the local elections: the National Front, which in past years has sought to maximise its candidate coverage in local-election contests, presented few candidates, almost all of whom gained well under 5% of votes cast in their contests. The NF ran barely twenty candidates in all the twenty-two Districts of Greater Manchester, West Midlands, and West Yorkshire, areas where its coverage in the past has been heaviest. Even so, there were one or two disconcerting aspects about the performance of the far right: two (albeit very unsuccessful) NF candidates in Oldham, where the Front in the past has not presented any candidates at all; and the presence of British Movement candidates in three of Birmingham's forty-two wards. True, only one of these three exceeded 100 votes (139, in fact, and 2.4% of those cast in the ward concerned), but merely the readiness and ability of the BM to present three candidates are troubling.

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Error

The title of the contribution in the Focus section of the June issue of Marxism Today should have read: Talbot — A New Name in Anti-unionism.