

Bye-election blues for Jeremy's Labour Party

By [Joseph Silke](#), Editor

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Image: Harriet Cheshire

BY-ELECTIONS ARE typically fertile ground for electoral progress by the opposition and other smaller parties. The government is typically faced with lagging mid-term poll ratings, and by-elections are an opportunity for the public to voice their discontent through voting against the ruling party, dealing a clear blow to the government's programme.

The recent by-elections in Copeland and Stoke-on-Trent on 23 January, however, will be remembered as distinctly atypical affairs. The events in the two previously thoroughly safe Labour constituencies could signify existential crisis for the British Labour Party; the rejection of a potentially redundant UKIP; hints of a Liberal Democrat revival and the triumph of the Conservatives as the natural party of government.

There are multiple elements to these historic by-elections that warrant exploration. Firstly, the defeat of UKIP leader Paul Nuttall in Stoke-on-Trent was a crushing blow to the once insurgent band. Labour candidate Gareth Snell managed to retain the seat for the party, albeit with a reduced majority, after former Shadow Minister and historian Tristram Hunt resigned to head the V&A museum in London.

From the beginning, Mr Nuttall's campaign had been dogged by an effective character assassination by his opponents. Questions regarding the UKIP leader's residence during the campaign quickly arose as allegations were made that he had falsely listed his address to be a property in Stoke on his campaign application, claiming to reside in a property which remained unoccupied.

More damaging were allegations that Liverpoolian Mr Nuttall had lied about witnessing and losing friends at the Hillsborough Disaster in 1989, allegations he vehemently denied citing mistakes made by his staff on his official website. This latest failure by UKIP to send more MPs to the House of Commons begs the question of the relevance of UKIP when the Conservatives in government have embraced leaving the European Union.

Labour met a much more damaging result in Copeland, a constituency which has returned Labour MPs since its conception in 1983 and its predecessor Whitehaven had returned Labour MPs since 1935, which was taken by the Conservative candidate Judy Harrison. To find a comparable two-horse-race victory for the government in a safe opposition seat one must go as far back as 1878. The humiliating defeat of the Labour Party has resurfaced the discontent with leader Jeremy Corbyn.

The Labour Party may have won the Stoke-on-Trent by-election but the party may have been more advantaged had it lost both contests. A loss in both would have likely forced an open challenge to the leadership and perhaps finally a new direction for the party. A victory in Stoke, despite how safe the seat should have been and despite the vote share swing to the government, gives Corbynistas a victory to cling to.

When asked by ITV News journalist Chris Ship whether he considered himself to be the problem, the Labour leader responded emphatically: "no." It didn't take long, moreover, for Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell to claim in an article for Labour Briefing that "dark arts" were involved in an underway "soft coup" to depose Mr Corbyn, reflecting the deep divisions within the party.

The Huffington Post revealed in a recent article that former Shadow Defence Secretary Clive Lewis, a popular figure also on the left of the party, registered website addresses indicative of a future campaign to lead the faltering Labour Party titled 'cliveforleader' and 'cliveforlabour'. Perhaps this suggests that Mr Corbyn has real reason to fear a second coup attempt.

There is one other party, though, which has reason to be optimistic: the Liberal Democrats. As UKIP and Labour crashed and burned it was not only the Conservatives who secured a favourable swing in the vote share. The party was still far from gaining both seats in these by-elections but, on more favourable terrain, the swing could potentially see some success in the future much like the victory in Richmond Park.

This could be interpreted as the beginning of the much-discussed lasting realignment in British politics along the fault lines of the European Union referendum.

For now, the Conservatives seem dominant and the opposition as an institution seems in crisis under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. UKIP risk falling into obscurity and the return of the Liberal Democrats as a national force presently seems a relatively distant prospect.

The Prime Minister was beaming in Copeland the day following the election, with victorious Ms Harrison. Theresa May has real reason to feel validated right now. Whether or not this new state of affairs can survive the heat of the impending EU exit negotiations, though, remains to be seen



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