

# Brexit tears through UK's political landscape

LONDON — The perpetual Brexit revolution rolls on.

After yet another night of unexpected electoral drama, each and every side of the never-ending Brexit debate — leave now, leave somehow or leave never — was quick out of the blocks to claim validation for their position Friday.

What is needed, everyone declared, is the bravery to do exactly as they said before.

Voters could be forgiven for spontaneously self-combusting.

The Conservatives, unable to assemble a majority in parliament for any form of Brexit, suffered significant losses in the elections to town councils across the country. With almost all of the ballots declared, the party has lost control of almost 40 councils and over 1,000 seats: A bad night.

“The results carry a “simple message” for both parties, said Prime Minister Theresa May”

Labour, meanwhile, having hedged its bets on Brexit in an attempt to appeal to Leave and Remain voters, also suffered, though not as badly, losing four councils and more than 100 seats. This was, undeniably, also a bad night.

The results were, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt declared, “a slap in the face for both the main parties.” Few Labour MPs felt confident enough to demure much from this analysis.

Easy conclusions as to why were, however, illusive.

In Sunderland — the caricature Leave city in Northern England — Labour suffered heavy losses, but almost half were to Remain parties. In Swindon, a key town Jeremy Corbyn needs to win at a general election, Labour failed to make any significant gains — yet saw its vote share jump to neck-and-neck with the Tories.

Even the surge of Lib Dem councillors offered no easy answer, the polling guru

John Curtice said. “We cannot find much of a relationship between whether the area was particularly pro-Remain or particularly pro-Leave and how much the Liberal Democrat vote has gone up,” he told the BBC. The party was, it seemed, just a “useful vehicle of protest.”

With no obvious conclusions to fall back on, both parties offered soundbites. The results carry a “simple message” for both parties, said Prime Minister Theresa May: “Just get on and deliver Brexit.” But she did not give any indication of how they might deliver it.

Promoted by

“The strongest possible message from voters today is that we need to come together and get on with it and do it,” the Conservative Party’s Deputy Chair Helen Whately said Friday. Labour Chairman Ian Lavery agreed. “The two parties need to get on and get Brexit sorted,” he said. The reaction is understandable.

With the margins of defeat and victory so small — the two parties controlled more than 80 percent of the vote at the last general election — no block of voters within each side’s coalition of support can be ignored.

The leaders of both main parties have little choice but to try to hold their support together by appealing to both Remain and Leave voters. The alternative strategy is too risky for either leader — to redraw the electoral map entirely.

May and Corbyn now have until June 30 to vote through the Withdrawal Agreement to stop new British MEPs taking their seats in the next European Parliament, potentially delaying Brexit until October 31. This would push Brexit beyond both sides’ party conferences, giving their members the opportunity to kill the prospect of compromise, further radicalizing the electorate along Brexit lines.

The hope of those around both leaders is that if Brexit can be dealt with, politics might be able to return to “normal.”

In Swindon, where Labour failed to make any gains, the party’s council leader, Jim Grant, said ordinary politics is impossible while Brexit dominates. “The Tories campaigned on local issues, we campaigned on local issues, but it was drowned out by Brexit,” he said.

“The fear expressed by MPs from both sides throughout Friday morning was that

Brexit may simply be too powerful.”

Over in Essex, another key region for both parties, the Tories suffered heavy losses to the Lib Dems. Tory voters were “staying at home frustrated at the uncertainty over Brexit,” the Conservative MP Vicky Ford said.

Yet can Brexit be “sorted?”

Labour and Tory MPs appeared no more willing to compromise Friday than they did 24 hours earlier.

Sunderland MP Bridget Phillipson rejected claims Labour was losing votes because it was blocking Brexit. “Too often, places that voted for Brexit back in 2016 like Sunderland get caricatured by the media as if everyone voted Leave,” she said. “The majority of Labour voters now want a people’s vote on Brexit and would vote to stay in the EU given the chance.”

Wes Streeting, the Labour MP for Ilford North, East London, said he would not vote for a compromise deal until “hell freezes over” adding: “And I’m not alone in that.”

On the Tory side, there seems to be little evidence of a softening of mood. Brexiteer former Cabinet minister Priti Patel was quick out of the traps to call for May to go and a new “direction of travel.”

“We need a change of leadership, perhaps the time has now come for that,” she said.

The fear expressed by MPs from both sides throughout Friday morning was that Brexit may simply be too powerful. It may have changed British politics permanently, it’s just the two main parties have not been able to accept it yet.

The Labour MP Lisa Nandy detected the trend, citing two councils in the North West that changed hands in ways that would appear to be counterintuitive.

“What does Labour losing control of Bolton, but gaining control of Trafford tell us?” she asked. Bolton is a working-class town on the outer edges of Manchester, while Trafford is a more prosperous neighborhood much closer into the city center.

It was, Nandy said, proof that “the same trends we saw in 2017 and 2018 are holding — we’re gaining amongst graduates, often in cities, and losing our core vote elsewhere.”

The same trend was at work during the 2016 Brexit referendum. Graduates voted Remain and now, increasingly, back Labour. The working classes and old outside the big cities voted Leave and are now backing the Tories.

The electoral map is changing, but the parties are not.

This article has been updated to reflect new electoral information.

---

Source:

<https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-local-elections-brexit-tories-labour-political-landscape/>

[Disclaimer]