

RACE, ETHNICITY, IMMIGRATION AND THE BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION

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The 2005 election in Britain saw Labour under Tony Blair lose 47 seats, yet still comfortably retain Government. This article explores the influence of immigration issues and ethnic communities', voting patterns on the election outcomes. It concludes that Labour was able to neutralise public concern about the management of immigration by introducing a series of control measures prior to the election.

The recent revelation that the London bombers were British-born from Leeds and Dewsbury has focussed attention on the ideology, politics and social situation of British Muslims, especially in the northern mill towns. This article is based on my visits during the May 2005 British general election to a range of constituencies in London, Birmingham, Lancashire and Yorkshire as well as passing through others on the way, mainly in the Midlands. It is backed by an intensive use of the internet and especially the excellent coverage provided by the *Guardian*. The visits involved a return to a number of mill towns in Lancashire and Yorkshire (Bradford, Keighley, Oldham, Burnley, Nelson, Blackburn and Rochdale) where I had researched race relations in 1983.¹ My focus was centrally upon ethnicity and related issues. It was fairly obvious that Labour would win quite easily for a third term — the only time this has happened in British history.

The major parties contesting the 2005 election, aside from Labour, were as follows: Conservatives are the oldest UK party arising from the Tories in the 1830s; Liberals are the second oldest, arising from the Whigs by the 1860s but adding the word 'Democrat' when absorbing the Labour breakaway Social Democrats in the 1980s; Respect is a new party led by a former Scottish Labor MP. It draws much

of its support from young British Muslims in East London and Birmingham and is a strange alliance of the neo- Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party and some Muslims. The British National Party has largely replaced the National Front as the main racist party, with a following in industrial Lancashire and Yorkshire, outer East London and the Midlands Black Country. There are many other parties but they made little impact at this election, the two strongest being the UK Independence Party (anti-European Union) and the Greens. Respect, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens opposed the Iraq War but many Labour members also did so and the Conservatives used anti-war sentiment to attack Blair even though they supported the British involvement. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: The final result

Labour	356 seats	-47	35.5% votes	-5.5%
Conservative*	197 seats	+33	32.3% votes	+0.6%
Liberal Democrat	62 seats	+11	22.0% votes	+3.7%
Scottish National	6 seats	+2		
Plaid Cymru	3 seats	-1	10.2% votes	+1.4%
Others	21 seats	+2		

*One Conservative result delayed by the death of a candidate
 Note: see also Parliament of Australia Research Note, *United Kingdom Election 2005*, Canberra, 2005. www.aph.gov.au/library. Full results and details will appear in the forthcoming *Times Guide to the House of Commons and The British General Election of 2005*.

THE ETHNIC SCENE

The United Kingdom is multicultural in several senses. The politics of Northern

Ireland, Scotland and Wales are all different from those of England and each has its own political institutions as well as sending MPs to Westminster. The best indications of these differences is that none of the British parties run candidates in Northern Ireland, and that the Conservatives' only hold one seat out of 59 in Scotland, and three seats out of forty in Wales. These three areas all have nationalist parties returned to Westminster and account for 18 per cent of the total representation. The Conservatives are scarcely present at all, underlining their current nature as an 'English' party. Even more important is the Conservative's complete lack of representation in almost all major towns and cities other than some outer suburbs of London and two large seaside resorts (Bournemouth and Southend). They have become the party of the 'shires and the squires', whereas England is one of the most urbanised countries in the world. Even in rural districts they have lost major areas in the Southwest, including the whole of Cornwall and many seats in Devon, Somerset and Dorset, to the Liberal Democrats. Conservatives have now lost most of these seats in three consecutive elections but started to win back seats from Labour in the affluent southeast.

In the sense in which it is understood in Australia, Britain is also multicultural as a result of post-War immigration. Until 1991 this was obscured in Census figures. But questions are now asked, as in Australia, on birthplace, religion, and 'ethnic group'. The latter is a racial classification which picks out 'non-White' people whether immigrants or not, lumping

together 'White' although distinguishing the large number of 'White Irish'. A language question is missing except for Welsh and Scottish Gaelic, asked only in Wales and Scotland respectively and only relevant to the following: Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party. 'Ethnic Group' and Religious figures for England and Wales in 2001 are set out in Table 2.

Table 2: The population of England and Wales by race and religion

Indian	1,036,807	2.0%	Muslim	1,546,626	3%
Pakistani	714,826	1.4%	Hindu	552,421	1%
Black Caribbean	563,843	1.1%	Jewish	259,927	0.5%
All 'non-white'	4,521,050	8.7%	Sikh	329,358	0.6%

Source: Census of England and Wales (2001) website <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/727.asp>. The statistics in UK are specifically 'racial' (which is rather old fashioned of them but mirrors US Census usage). Thus there is a large number who do not fall within the three biggest categories given here.

UK Muslims are Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians, Arabs, and a few Somalis and Turkish Cypriots. Only the Pakistanis (and Bangladeshis in East London) are strongly represented in local government.

The 'ethnic vote' in Britain (as in the US and Canada) has been more extensively surveyed than in Australia. Voting intentions before the 2005 election are set out in Table 3.

Table 3: Voting intention by ethnic background, 2005, per cent

Caribbean	Labour 46	Conservative 11	Liberal Dem. 9
African	Labour 43	Liberal Dem. 18	Conservative 11
Indian	Labour 45	Liberal Dem. 13	Conservative 10
Pakistani	Labour 40	Liberal Dem. 21	Conservative 5
Bangladeshi	Labour 13	Liberal Dem. 29	Conservative 14
Other Asian	Labour 48	Liberal Dem. 12	Conservative 11

Source: Quoted by T. Templeton, 'The ethnic minority vote', *The Observer*, Sunday April 24, 2005.

Clearly there are many undecided in these totals, but non-registration and non-voting is normally higher among these

groups. The collapse in Bangladeshi support for Labour misses Respect. It might have been a warning of its victory in the largest Bangladeshi settlement in the country, now officially called 'Banglatown' by Tower Hamlets Council. In all other cases Labour support was well above the eventual national level of 36 per cent and in all cases Conservative support was far below.

'ETHNIC' REPRESENTATION

As in Australia and most other democracies, members of ethnic minority groups are not present in the legislature in the proportions that they form in the electorate.² As most South Asians, West Indians and many Africans are British subjects and entitled to vote this is not due to being disfranchised. Africans are a relatively new major element, being strongly represented in the London Boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth, Haringey and Lewisham but not outside London. Only thirteen 'ethnic minority' candidates were elected, or 2.1 per cent of the Commons. Of these, eleven were Labour and two Conservative. While Respect relied largely on Muslim votes, its only elected candidate was a Scotsman. This level of 'underrepresentation' contrasts with at least 4.5 per cent of MPs being Jewish, including the Conservative leader, and at least 10 per cent being Scottish, including the Liberal Democrat leader.

A better indication of 'ethnic' political strength is obtained by looking at local government results, which are invariably fought on party lines in urban areas. Many local governments held elections at the same time as the general election. The larger councils have many functions which in Australia belong to State governments, including education, health and police. Some examples of especially heavy immigrant settlement include the following

(results for 2005, Census for 2001) shown in Table 4. Those listed in Table 4 range in size from 200,000 to one million inhabitants.

<p>Tower Hamlets:* (London) (48.6% non-White; 36.4% Muslim) Labour 31 Liberal Democrat 16 Conservative 1 Independent 2 Respect 1 (Of these: Muslim 28)</p>
<p>Birmingham: (Midlands) (30.3% Non-white; 14.3% Muslim) Labour 47 Liberal Democrat 28 Conservative 39 (Of these: South Asian 14)</p>
<p>Bradford: (Yorkshire) (21.7% non-White; 16.1% Muslim) Labour 29 Liberal Democrat 15 Conservative 38 British National 4 Green 4 (Of these: South Asian 20)</p>
<p>Hackney: (London) (40.6% non-White; 13.8% Muslim) (Of councilors: Muslim 5, Indian 3, African 6,</p>
<p>Hounslow: (London) (35.1% non-White; 9.1% Muslim) Labour 36 Conservative 14 Liberal Democrat 5 Independent 5 (Of these: South Asian 19)</p>
<p>Kirklees: (Yorkshire) (14.4% non-White; 10.1% Muslim) Labour 18 British National 1 Liberal Democrat 24 Green 1 Conservative 19 Independent 1 (Of these :12 South Asian)</p>
<p>Newham: (London) (60.6% non-White, 24.3% Muslim) Labour 59 Christian Peoples 1 (Of these: South Asian 15, Caribbean 6, African 2)</p>

Source: Based on the websites of the Councils and the 2001 Census of England and Wales.

*The area historically known as Spitalfields is now officially the Spitalfields and Banglatown ward of Tower Hamlets council, to mark its predominantly Bangladeshi population centred on Brick Lane. It is not called that on most street directories yet.

These areas were predominantly represented by Labour in Parliament (23 Labour MPs and one each for Respect and Liberal Democrats, both won from Labour). What emerges more clearly from local government results than for Parliament is that all three major parties will nominate 'ethnic' candidates, especially in 'ethnic' seats. But Labour is best able to elect them, often on the basis of already having a strong local government presence and high recruitment into party branches. This is very similar to the Australian situation. However 'ethnic groups' in England are more highly concentrated than in Australia, especially in London where they can have a 'critical mass' in local politics.³ Outside of London 'non-whites' are always outnumbered, except in particular local government wards. South Asians, and especially Muslims, have had the most success in winning local government positions and the small number of Parliamentary seats which go to 'ethnic groups'.

CONCLUSION

Election results in Britain do not mirror the actual votes cast. First-past-the post, voluntary voting and registration, and the intervention of lesser parties between Labour and the Conservatives, all make comparisons between the British and Australian outcomes highly suspect. In the areas surveyed above, however, some clear conclusions can be drawn. The Conservatives are currently the party of the English shires and squires and the affluent south. This is reflected in their parliamentary party. Labour is currently the 'national' party in all areas except rural England and Northern Ireland. The Liberal Democrats suffer from under-representation but have several bases, most of them once Conservative. These include rural seats which were Liberal

many years ago, suburban seats, especially in southwest London, and a handful of former Labour strongholds such as Bermondsey and Chesterfield. They undoubtedly attracted some Muslim voters by opposing the war in Iraq and some students by opposing fee rises. But they did not make real inroads in many Labour 'heartlands', including those with a high 'ethnic' component. Their once dominant position in rural Wales and Scotland was reasserted.

This leaves Labour with followings among the immigrant and 'ethnic' populations of the major cities, especially London, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Manchester, Bradford, Leicester, Leeds, most of the mill towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire and a few isolated industrial centres such as Luton and Slough. Labour has also returned all but two of the 'ethnic' MPs, including all of the Muslims. Evidence of a 'white backlash' against Labour is very slight and arguably less so than a 'Muslim backlash' against the war in Iraq. The major area for which a 'white backlash' might exist extends from East London (Barking and Dagenham) through south Essex towards Southend.⁴

The British National Party (BNP) tried to capitalise on this 'backlash'. It is specifically anti-immigrant (send them back and keep them out) but a TV undercover documentary last year (shown in Australia) makes it clear that they are generally racist and also violent. They were a breakaway from the openly racist National Front (NF) and include an old NF leader John Tyndall. The main disagreement between the BNP and the NF (which still exists) was on their relationship with European neonazi groups. The Conservatives were NOT racist and now have one African and one Indian MP. Their leader Michael Howard is

Jewish (but will not be leader after Christmas).

The BNP recorded its strongest support in areas where an 'anti-Muslim backlash' may have occurred. Several seats were lost to the Conservatives or held by them (Hornchurch, Romford, Upminster, Castle Point) which might have remained Labour elsewhere in England. Whether this is evidence of an anti-immigrant surge or of emerging aspirational workers is unprovable on available evidence. But it did not happen anywhere else. The expected rise of the BNP in Lancashire and Yorkshire did not really happen, despite a few local government gains in recent years in Burnley, Bradford and Kirklees. The highest BNP vote in this area, at 13.3 per cent, was recorded in Dewsbury where the Labour MP is a Muslim. With a Sikh woman winning for Labour and with Muslims running for the Conservatives and Liberals, the BNP scored only seven per cent of the vote in nearby Bradford West.

Specifically racist candidates, then, made only a slight impact, despite the BNP running over one hundred of them and getting 192,850 votes. Specifically 'ethnic' candidates, mainly standing for Respect, took one Labour seat, Bethnal Green and Bow (which had been Labour for a century). They did well in neighbouring East End Muslim areas in Poplar, East Ham and West Ham, and in the main Birmingham Muslim area of Sparkbrook, all Labour held. But they made little impression in the northern mill towns or in Leicester. Labour candidates lost votes to Liberal Democrats, but except in Rochdale this was not enough to lose the seat. The loss of Muslim votes is a problem for Labour and may show up in local government elections. But it is very localised and uneven, being more noticeable in the

south than in the north. Whether the 'white backlash' would have been stronger if the London bombings had occurred before the election is, of course, speculative but worth worrying about. There are estimated to be 500,000 illegal residents in Britain and 750,000 asylum seekers awaiting clearance. But immigration, race, religion and ethnicity did not run in the British election as strongly as many feared.⁵

The Conservative 'dog whistle' — 'are you thinking what we are thinking?' and their blatant appeals on immigration and (quite dishonestly) on the Iraq war, hardly shifted their vote at all from its 2001 level of 32 per cent. The Conservative vote rose by less than one per cent, the Labour vote dropped by six per cent which was the same level as the Liberal increase. The Conservatives won many marginal seats because the Labour vote went down just as much as because their vote went up in particular places. All the seats won by the Conservatives from Labour and Liberal had been Conservative up to the 1980s for many years. The Liberal Democrats were the only major party opposing the Iraq war and there were large swings to them from Labour in many Muslim areas, especially in the North of England where Respect does not feature.

One reason why the Conservative anti-migrant campaign did not have a major impact is that the anti-immigration impact was fairly slight because Labour had made a big issue of controlling immigration and asylum seekers under its two Home Secretaries, David Blunkett and Charles Clarke. The Conservatives had argued for 'more controls' and the Liberals for 'less' but basically Labour did all the running between 2001 and 2005.

References

- ¹ J. Jupp, *Community Relations in Lancashire and Yorkshire*, Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1984
- ² J. Jupp, *How well does Australian Democracy serve Immigrant Australians?*, Democratic Audit of Australia, Australian National University, 2002
- ³ There were effectively non-White majorities in three London Boroughs in 2001: Newham (60.6 per cent), Brent (54.7 per cent) and Tower Hamlets (48.6 per cent) but in no other local authority in the United Kingdom. There were, however, similar concentrations in a much larger number of local authority wards, especially in London and Birmingham.
- ⁴ The BNP vote in Barking (16.9 per cent) was the highest in the country in an area which was 85 per cent White but with a growing African and refugee population.
- ⁵ J. Jupp, 'An election that ran very much to plan', *Canberra Times*, May 10 2005