

The results of the Bradford West by-election indicate that something clearly went wrong with the Labour campaign, and that there is a political space for populists like Galloway

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Lewis Baston looks at the results of the by-election in Bradford West and explains how the particularities of the constituency enabled George Galloway's victory. He argues that the results confirm that there is a big political space for populists and celebrities, and that the Labour party's vote is clearly soft and vulnerable.



The by-election campaign in Bradford West went nearly unnoticed by politicians and the media. The outcome has been a different matter. From nearly out of nowhere, Bradford West has produced one of the most astonishing by-election results in British history, bearing comparison with Bermondsey (1983), Lincoln (1973) or Orpington (1962). The mere fact of the victory of a fringe party previously written off as a spent force would be enough on its own, but the scale of Galloway's triumph was staggering. A freakish and bizarre week in British politics was capped with this strange election.

Bradford West had one of the most peculiar recent electoral histories of any British constituency even before George Galloway arrived in town. Any seat that swings towards the Conservatives in 1997 and then for Labour in 2010 (having also done so in 1979) is obviously marching to the beat of a different drummer, and most people who follow elections would put it in the top 10 seats capable of doing something weird in a given general election. But even so...

Party	Candidate	Votes	% vote	Change on 2010 %	Vote retention rate %
Respect	Galloway, George	18,341	55.9	+52.8	1473.2
Labour	Hussain, Imran	8,201	25.0	-20.4	44.6
Conservative	Whiteley, Jackie	2,746	8.4	-22.8	21.7
Lib Dem	Sunderland, Jeannette	1,505	4.6	-7.1	31.8
UKIP	McNally, Sonja	1,085	3.3	+1.3	133.6
Green	Islam, Dawud	481	1.5	-0.9	51.2

Dem Nat	Craig, Neil	344	1.0	-0.0	78.5
Loony	Hope, Howling Laud	111	0.3	-	-

Turnout in the by-election was a healthy 50.8 per cent, a modest 14.8 percentage point drop since 2010 which compares favourably with most of the other by-elections so far this parliament.

A couple of columns on the table may need explanation. 'Change on 2010 %' is the straightforward percentage-point loss or gain from the 2010 general election. 'Vote retention rate %' is a less standard measure. It is the by-election numerical vote expressed as a percentage of that party's vote in the 2010 election. Below 100 per cent means the party's actual vote has fallen, which often happens in by-elections because turnout is lower.

Bradford West has existed in more or less its current form since 1974 (a predecessor seat contained less of the inner city than this one) and has been a safe-ish Labour seat of a strange sort. Labour has not won huge majorities here, but seldom has the seat seemed in any serious danger either. It comprises six wards, that fall into two groups. The City ward covers the city centre, and Manningham is an inner city area to the north of the city centre which has long been a centre for the Pakistani Muslim community in Bradford.

These wards have tended to be Labour, although Manningham has sometimes done its own thing and had a post-Iraq flirtation with the Liberal Democrats. As well as these two, Bradford West extends well to the west to include the most favoured residential areas of the core city of Bradford (the metropolitan borough extends far out to Haworth and Ilkley). One of these suburban wards, Thornton & Allerton, is the only one in the core city to have voted Conservative in every local election since 2004, and in their best local election years like 2008 the Conservatives can win four out of the six Bradford West wards. They still have councillors in Clayton & Fairweather Green, Heaton and Toller, although their chances of holding these seats in the May local elections appear vanishingly small.

Bradford West's political scene is strongly influenced by its demographics. It has the largest concentration of Pakistanis (34.6 per cent) of any constituency, and one of the youngest populations of any seat (25.7 per cent under the age of 15 at the time of the 2001 Census). It has the 13th highest share of non-whites, being 47.4 per cent non-white in 2001 and certainly 'majority-minority' now. It also has the second-highest proportion of Muslims of any seat – 38.0 per cent – exceeded only by Galloway's previous seat at Bethnal Green & Bow. It now shares with that constituency the double, perhaps dubious, distinction of having swung towards the Tories in 1997 but having elected Galloway at a subsequent poll.

There is considerable variation between West's wards. White people comprise 94 per cent of the population of Thornton & Allerton and 84 per cent in Clayton & Fairweather Green, but only 24 per cent in Manningham and 26 per cent in Toller. The majority in Toller and Manningham were of Pakistani origin (64 per cent and 59 per cent) and City also had an Asian-origin majority. Heaton sits in the middle, with 65 per cent white, 26 per cent Pakistani and 6 per cent other Asian. All these figures date from the 2001 Census, and one can expect the ethnic minority population to have grown since then across the constituency. While ethnically mixed, Bradford West is not a particularly deprived constituency; its indices for unemployment, poor health and lack of qualifications are worse than average but not disastrously so. Bradford, though, is a city with its share of economic and social problems, symbolised by 'the hole' in the city centre, demolished for a never-constructed shopping centre, and even during the 2000s renaissance of urban England it was overshadowed by booming Leeds.

There is much, therefore, that is specific about Bradford West, and this by-election was a freak

result that could have happened in only a handful of seats in the land. But even freaks and blips can illuminate some more general and deeper trends.

First, the parties: Unsurprisingly, Labour's performance in Bradford West was easily the party's worst in this parliament and the vote drop was on a similar scale to those at the unpopular tail end of the party's spell in government.

		Lab vote share change %	Lab vote retention rate %
Oldham East and Saddleworth	January 2011	+10.2	103.8
Barnsley Central	March 2011	+13.4	84.2
Leicester South	May 2011	+11.4	92.0
Inverclyde	June 2011	-2.3	72.0
Feltham and Heston	December 2011	+10.8	59.6
Bradford West	March 2012	-20.4	44.6
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Something clearly went badly wrong with the Labour campaign. The party is capable of

campaigning well in safe seats, as it did in Barnsley a year ago (although in that case with an enormous organisational effort to get out the vote), and in marginals like Oldham, but could not connect with Bradford West. The candidate, Imran Hussain, was a known local figure as deputy leader of the council, but running council leaders as by-election candidates can be risky. While they gain from being authentically local and knowing the territory, they can lose out because councils are often associated with unpopular decisions, particularly under the current funding squeeze. Local figures can also be divisive among the local party activists, and Bradford West has had more than its share of internal tensions for both Labour and Conservative. Labour strategy seems to have been to get the election out of the way quickly and quietly, with a safe pair of hands candidate and a minimum of fuss. It obviously failed badly; Galloway succeeded in heating up the temperature of the by-election and stimulating political interest among the voters.

There are a few more strategic issues as well, some of them reminiscent of the other recent electoral fiasco for Labour, the Scottish Parliament election in 2011. Aiming for a quiet election with a respectable, establishment candidate when you are against a showman like Galloway or Salmond is profoundly mistaken. Labour focused its campaign on attacking the Conservatives, on the prima facie reasonable assumption that there was a hard-core Tory vote in Bradford West and – until recent slippage – in the national polls, but also out of pure habit. In Scotland in 2011 Labour were crushed, except in the handful of seats where the Tories were the main competition. It is worth noting that the other by-election where the Labour share fell, Inverclyde, was the only other one where Labour faced a credible challenger (and before this week Galloway would hardly have seemed to fall into that category) for the left of centre vote. Just making the case against the coalition is fine if Labour dominates the opposition, but the party's vote is clearly soft and vulnerable to being swiped by populists like Galloway.

There may be particular problems in the way Labour campaigns amongst Muslim voters, and the reliance on traditional 'community leaders' and hierarchies, but I did not see enough of the Bradford campaign to judge whether that is a fair criticism in this case (and Respect do the same thing). But there is clearly a sense that young Muslim voters are disaffected and disconnected from politics, to a greater degree even than the average voter. There may be a point of comparison with the other great neglected and demonised group, the white working class, some of whom also protest against mainstream politics by voting for candidates that mainstream politicians and the media deem unacceptable. Beating the BNP requires organisation, but even more so dialogue with disaffected voters whose way of expressing themselves may not be palatable, and so it seems with the persistent appeal of Respect to young Muslims. The task may be easier, that both in the Tower Hamlets mayoral election and in Bradford (and indeed in a very different context in Blaenau Gwent a few years ago) the winning insurgent candidate tried to portray themselves as basically being part of the broad labour movement – a claim less sustainable in Bradford than the others just cited.

Obscured by the Labour disaster, Bradford West was also a pasting for the coalition parties, particularly the Conservatives. The drop in the combined coalition parties vote share was very large – 29.9 per cent. In most by-elections so far this parliament the drop has been between 11 and 15 percentage points, with Bradford beating Barnsley Central (22.2 per cent) as the by-election showing the biggest fall in coalition support. While the Liberal Democrats have always been weak in Bradford West, other than a post-Iraq flicker in Manningham, there has been a substantial and stable Conservative vote in Bradford West for decades, which suddenly disappeared in the by-election. Since 1974 the Conservative vote has varied between 31 and 39 per cent, but it has now collapsed to 8 per cent. Some of the Conservative vote in recent general elections will have been from Muslims who until now supported Muslim Conservatives against the (Sikh) Labour MP Marsha Singh, but what on earth happened to the stubborn Tories of Clayton, Thornton and Allerton? While there must have been mid-term disaffection, a chunk of this hitherto resistant Tory vote must have voted for the far-left Galloway as the best hope of defeating Labour.

		Con vote share change %	Con vote retention rate %

Oldham East and Saddleworth	January 2011	-13.6	38.1
Barnsley Central	March 2011	-9.1	31.3
Leicester South	May 2011	-6.5	51.4
Inverclyde	June 2011	-2.1	61.8
Feltham and Heston	December 2011	-6.3	39.0
Bradford West	March 2012	-22.8	21.7
		Lib Dem vote share change %	Lib Dem vote retention rate %
Oldham East and Saddleworth	January 2011	+0.3	79.2
Barnsley Central	March 2011	-13.1	15.8
Leicester South	May 2011	-4.7	60.7
Inverclyde	June 2011	-11.2	12.5
Feltham and Heston	December 2011	-7.9	20.5
Bradford West	March 2012	-7.1	31.8

Galloway's victory confirms that there is a big political space for populists and celebrities, despite the failure of such candidates in the 2010 general election. To his enemies Galloway is an unscrupulous demagogue, but to many others he is a charismatic orator who is demonised mostly because he 'tells the truth' (as they see it). Everyone knows about the embarrassing Big Brother appearance or the various allegations against him, but his supporters clearly either did not care or did not believe the allegations against him. Perhaps Labour should have made more of their argument that Galloway is a poor attender in Parliament and not a good constituency MP. His particular pitch concentrating on the Arab world would have little traction in a seat that was not heavily Muslim, but there was a sense that he was talking about big issues in a way that connected with people.

What the Bradford result emphatically does not mean is that Respect is now a serious challenger in

a swathe of urban northern England. It lacks the organisational resources to do much in local elections in May, and its brand identity is not strong enough to give it credibility without a strong personal candidate like Galloway or Birmingham's Salma Yaqoob. Respect was only the label under which he stood – Galloway would have won as an Independent or a Monster Raving Loony. Hardly anywhere is as strongly Muslim as Bradford West, or as youthful. It indicates the fragility of mainstream politics to challenges that emerge out of particular local circumstances. Different sorts of lightning may strike in different areas, as with Wyre Forest in 2001 or the initial win for Stuart Drummond in monkey suit as Hartlepool mayor in 2002. The fact that most politicians and commentators regard Galloway with hatred, ridicule and contempt simply did not bother the electorate of Bradford West, and may indeed have been part of his appeal.

While Labour has the biggest headache, the Conservatives cannot be smug about it. What had been an unusually stubborn and loyal Tory vote in Bradford simply vanished. And they may suffer in turn from electoral volatility and the rise of populism. Given UKIP's slow rise in the national polls to a solid-looking 5 per cent, it would be interesting to see how UKIP, and particularly Nigel Farage, perform in the next by-election in a Conservative seat. One can see Europe, fuel and rail prices, coalition, pasties, 'private dinners' and taxed grannies coming together to deliver another shock to the political system.

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