

Bradford West By-Election

George Galloway's election last week in the Bradford by-election shocked the political establishment to its core. Labour saw a 37% swing against them as 10,000 of their supporters switched to the Respect party. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats also did badly despite a relatively high turnout (51%).

Galloway is a controversial figure. He previously represented seats in Glasgow between 1987 and 2005 and was a Chair of the Scottish Labour Party. He was openly friendly with Saddam Hussein and was thrown out of the Labour Party in 2003 for comments about British military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2005 he successfully stood as the Respect candidate for Bethnal Green and Bow but stood down in 2010.

The Bradford West constituency has some special characteristics. Like the Bethnal Green constituency it has a high percentage of Muslim citizens. 34.6% of the constituency are of Pakistani origin, second only to Bethnal Green in this respect. There are also high levels of poverty and unemployment. There were race riots in Bradford West in 2001. The constituency also has one of the youngest populations, 25.7% were under 15 in 2001. Young Muslims are thought to have turned out in large numbers to vote for Galloway.

The by-election result sends a wake-up call to each of the major parties. It does not follow that the Respect party will repeat this result across the country in the 2015 General Election. Its vote in 2010 was half what it won in 2005. Nevertheless, the Coalition partners would be wise to do more to increase the rate of economic growth and bring down the unemployment figures. The Labour Opposition has to work out why it lost this relatively safe seat despite the current economic climate and unpopular Government policies.

Bradford West is an atypical constituency but there are clues in the by-election result for all three parties. There is a lack of a clear, intelligible vision for the nation that excites voters, especially the younger ones who will have the vote for the first time in 2015. The 'big society' was David Cameron's vision in 2010 but little is heard of it today and his party never really warmed to it. His right wing are obsessed with taking Britain out of Europe and his more liberal wing are hooked on the equality agenda and legalising same-sex marriage. Neither of these issues constitute a positive election winning vision.

The Labour Party has issues with its leader who lacks charisma and is widely seen to have been a mistake. They have still not re-established economic credibility after the mess they left the country in under Gordon Brown's leadership. They have some gifted younger MPs moving onto the front bench but no-one is offering a convincing message about the new direction in which they would lead Britain.

The Bradford result was a protest about poverty and unemployment and the lack of policies to eradicate them soon. Young Muslim voters gave the result a particular religious flavour. There is a challenge in this for other faith groups to be as concerned about jobs and social

justice as they are about abortion, sexual orientation and euthanasia. The Muslims probably share those concerns but do not see the rest of us concerned about their unemployment and poverty. The party that listens to these various concerns and offers a vision for Britain that reflects this will win a lot of votes in 2015. Bradford West tells us that casting this vision is a pressing matter now.

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