

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 128. Local Elections: Who's the real winner?

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Welcome on Friday for a special Emergency Rest is Politics podcast with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart. And rather weirdly, we pushed the emergency podcast button, but the state had been in the diary for quite a long time hadn't it? We did sort of know the local elections were coming. It wasn't quite like one of our resignation emergency podcasts.

No, but I think the reason why a lot of our listeners started to say we'd like to hear what you think is because what always happens in the wake of any election, but particularly local elections, I think, is that the parties nationally have their narrative and they try to, dare I say, spin it in a way that is most conducive to their morale and their effectiveness, etc. And so I think it is one of those days where there's actually quite a lot of crap to cut through. And actually, it's surprisingly difficult making sense of the whole thing, isn't it?

So local elections, just a quick explainer on local elections, people, these are elections happening for district councils or county councils or sometimes unified councils up and down the country. Some of those council seats traditionally were independent, but increasingly almost all the seats are contested between the different parties. And there's often quite a strong relationship between the way that people perform in the local council elections and the run-up to a general election, general election. So that's one thing they worry about. But the second thing, of course, is local councils really matter in and of themselves. So we shouldn't just be reading it in terms of national elections. Absolutely. It is infuriating how that always happens straight away. And infuriating for the local councils, because obviously they have very, very different visions on how they want to run their local council. In one party, you might be pushing to be tighter on the finances, another one might be pushing ahead with green climate initiatives, etc, etc, etc. So what's your sense of it so far? I think it's been worse than the Tories expected for the Tories. We said in the podcast last week, or earlier this week, that we thought Oliver Down was talking about

a thousand losses, which would have been a third of every seat they were fighting or defending, a thousand losses. And we thought that was him playing a game that they were thinking maybe a lot less than that. And they'd be able to sort of say it was better than they expected.

I don't know what the final tally is going to be, but it's going to be not far off that.

I'm actually sitting in the offices of the new European Rory, where I've just signed a thousand books, because that's their next gift to new subscribers. And they did a thing asking people how many books they thought were there. And I just gave a hint saying it's a little bit more than the number of seats the Tories are going to lose. So that's a free plug for the new European. We'll give them a better sponsorship plug later. But I think that that expectation game has backfired a little bit for the Tories. There's no way they can say this is anything other than bad.

And as you said on the main podcast, they're coming from that place where Theresa May was leader, where they were said at the time to be catastrophically bad anyway. The overall project, the BBC is saying the overall projected share at the moment was Labour on 35, Conservatives 26, Lib Dems 20, which is interesting, and others 19. And it's worth just focusing on the others for a minute, because the other big difference, the Greens have done pretty well. But the other thing that happens in local elections that happens a lot less in national elections is the independents do pick up an awful lot of votes and do sometimes control councils. But I think it's been very,

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very bad for the Tories, good for Labour, good for the Lib Dems, and to some extent for the Greens. Labour seemed to me to be doing well in the places that they've been targeting and the Lib Dems have

been doing well in the places they've been targeting. So just in case anybody thought you might be spinning a little bit for Labour there, let's try to give the counter narrative here.

And the counter narrative is... All I said was that Labour did well. You can't dispute that.

The counter narrative is that for Labour to be in the kind of positions you were in in 97.

In 97, Labour at this stage were coming out of a 95 local council election, which you'll remember very well. And do you remember what share of the vote you got in 95?

Higher than 35. Yeah, you got 46. So you came from 46 and held that pretty much.

What were the Lib Dems then?

The result was Labour 46, Conservative 25, Lib Dem 24. And this time, as you say, it looks like it's 35, 26, 20. So the big question is, is this quite enough? And I think Keir Starmer will be a little bit disappointed for people who really want to feel that we're moving, that after years of Conservative government, particularly after a very, very torrid year. Remember, this is the year where they had Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, the catastrophic quasi-courting budget, all this economic damage. And they've been in the polls up near 50%. So they would have been looking for a very strong showing to try to demonstrate they could get a landslide. This is a result that suggests they should be able to get a majority, but it's not a very big majority. So there will be people in Labour quite disappointed by this.

The only thing I'd say about that, if I can counter that, I've said to you before that for Labour to get from where they were in 2019 to get a majority of one requires a bigger swing than we had in 1997. So I don't think the comparison, I get why you're saying it's not 1997, I get why you make that comparison. But I think a fairer comparison for Labour is what's happened since Keir Starmer became leader. And listen, you've heard me say, I'm not pretending that there aren't still huge problems that Labour have in terms of winning over all the people that are there to be won over. I actually think on the back of these results, Labour should be setting themselves the objective of winning big. Not because, and I agree with you, these results on their own do not suggest the 1997 type landslide. But what they indicate to me is that the big driving narrative that it seems to me to be pointing us towards the next election are people saying, we've just got to get rid of the Tories. There's been a lot of tactical voting going on. That point about the Lib Dems doing well where they need to do well, Labour doing well where they need to, not everywhere, for both of them, not everywhere. But I suspect on that, it's because the Liberal Democrats are really putting their resources into some pretty strategically targeted areas, Labour doing the same, and people are buying into it much more than the other problem that you've got, of course, is, and this slightly depends on what happens with the SMP, but that the other big change is that Labour is facing a big challenge to take back seats in Scotland. Now, it may be able to do so, maybe the change from Nicola Sturgeon to Hamza Yusuf opens up that opportunity, but that's another reason why this is much trickier than it was in the mid-90s for Labour. I agree with that. However, two things to push back on that. The two big changes that I always believe had to happen for Labour to start to get some sort of claw back in Scotland. The most important was Scottish people believing that Labour could beat the Tories nationally, and I think these results will make people think that's possible. And the second thing would be that the SMP lose their vice-like grip on politics in Scotland, and that has happened.

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So that Scotland is open for Labour to do a lot better. This is showing to me as well. The other thing that I think is really important on this. As you know, you keep saying you're a fan of Rishi Sunak. I don't think Rishi Sunak is that good as a Prime Minister or as a leader or as a campaigner. I think he's being judged by the right-wing press in particular as being very, very good because he's much better than his two predecessors, but it's such a low bar. And for the country, things feel totally stuck. And I wondered, I tweeted this morning a picture that somebody sent me of a queue in Norfolk, and the queue was huge. And it was because a dentist had announced that he was going to take on a few extra NHS patients. Now, I think issues like that. So when you hear Sunak come on the radio this morning and say, and I'm honest to these politicians, when are they going to grow up? When are they going to understand that the him coming on this morning

or Greg Hans coming on saying what people were saying on the doorstep is how much they like Rishi Sunak? And Rishi Sunak saying, just repeating his five pledges and talking about stopping the boats, I just think that they're sent, them constantly saying to the people, these are your priorities, when they're actually not necessarily the people's priorities. The people's priorities are to get a GP service, are to get their teeth fixed, are to sort of get the litter cleared off their streets. They're much more prosaic in a way. And that's maybe why in these local elections, people have felt that the country's just not working as it should.

Conservatives, obviously, just to run through the figures again and remind people what happened. So 2019 was the catastrophic election. They went from about 5,000 seats down to about three and a half thousand. And now looks like they may lose another thousand. But in between, there were the elections in 2021, when the Conservatives actually advanced in the red wall, consolidated their position. So it's a very, very interesting thing that's happened. Because in a sense, and this is the very unfortunate situation that Rishi Sunak has put himself in, and my friend who I admire enormously, David Gork, has written a very good piece in the new statesman about this, which we'll put in the newsletter. But essentially, Rishi Sunak is facing a real challenge. And the problem is, is he going to fall between two stalls? Because the right of the party is going to be saying, you didn't do as well as Boris Johnson did, because you're not being right wing enough. Because in 2021, you know, they did well in the red wall, and they've been knocked back in the red wall by Labour. These are the seats up in the northeast. But of course, people like me, on the center, sort of left of the party, are going to be saying, you haven't done enough to modernize. You haven't got rid of Suvala Brahman. You haven't demonstrated that you're a party that

can really win back the Lib Dem voters, because the story that we haven't really talked about is extraordinary Lib Dem successes, particularly in these remain commuter zones around London, places like Hertfordshire. So you're seeing Birkensted going yellow, Hemel Hempstead going yellow, Hartzmuir going yellow, Windsor made in head. So that's the Lib Dems making huge advances. And I guess that the challenge for both conservatives and Labour is as they fight over these red wall seats, they are at risk of losing educated, remain voting people around London who are going to be tempted towards the Lib Dems, because they're certainly not hearing from Rishi Sunak what they want. They seem as a Brexit ear, but they're not really hearing from Keir Starmer what they want on things like single market and the customs union. No, I would argue they're not really hearing it from the Liberal Democrats either. I mean, the Liberal Democrats have not been campaigning on Brexit. Now, I actually wonder whether these results will make certainly the Lib Dems because

you're

right that they're targeting areas that probably were predominantly remain. I'm not suggesting that this is all about Brexit at all. But I think the Lib Dems can afford to be much, much more aggressive against the government on Brexit. I think they can be much more like the SMP.

And I actually do think I've been saying this consistently when I see people from the Labour Party. As you know, I think it was a mistake to back the deal. I think that the Labour Party has to start to speak to these millions of people, particularly young people, who do still feel very, very strongly, even if they don't think about going back into the European Union, though many do, but who feel strongly that they were completely lied to, sold up and their future has been stolen from them. Now, Labour has to speak to those people. I would like just a line in a manifesto that said, we accept the referendum outcome, the country wants to come together rather than remain

divided and polarized. But the reality is Brexit as implemented by the government has not done the economy or our culture or our strength in the world any good. We will have to review its workings, something like that. In a way, what these local council elections are doing is revealing a longer story that we've been exploring through the podcast over a number of months, which is that Rishi Sunak

finds himself between a rock and a hard place. In order to win back those more remain, more London commuter belt voters, voters in the Southeast, he has to modernize. But the problem is that if he tried to do what people like myself or David Gork would want to do with the party, he would find that the Conservative Party members would kick up, the right of the party would kick up, members would hate it, and he therefore finds it very, very difficult to make the transition he needs to make. Essentially, I think the problem is that if people like myself or David Gork were running the Conservative Party, we probably wouldn't last very long.

But Rory, what was it Tony Blair said in our interview with him for this week's leading?

The real test is leadership is when you're prepared to stand up to your party.

This, again, I think is a big opportunity for Labour. We've agreed, I think, that Labour has been very good at differentiating from Corbyn, very good at showing that the Tories have not been not done a very good job of governing, but we want to see more of the kind of positive agenda. And for me, that is not about this little policy here, that little policy, or even big policy here and there. It's about what we think this country can be in a few years' time. What is our big message about that? I think we must finish by reminding people that these local council elections are about local democracy. And one of the things that we have to go on and talk more about is the huge gap between the way that Britain does local democracy and the way that countries like France do local democracy. We still haven't managed to develop fully autonomous mayors with properly devolved budgets. I very struck every French town, people know who their mayor is, they can go up to them in the supermarket, they can challenge them, they can get a response. We are still in a situation which I felt as a member of parliament that too often people know their members of parliament's name but don't know the names of their local councillors. And although a lot of governments have talked about devolution and local democracy, we still have not given enough proper autonomy to these local councils so they can be fully responsible. Let's take London as a classic example. You end up a situation where the local government feels a little bit ceremonial because nobody's quite sure is this guy really responsible

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for the police? Is he really responsible for the way the tubes run? Is he really responsible for the way the housing is done or not? And we have to sort that out. But the other thing that I think is happening here under the surface which may eventually lead to electoral reform, realignment, I don't know where it's going to lead but I really genuinely think that a lot of tactical voting went on. And I think the other point we should make clear to people is that the Liberal Democrats can genuinely pat themselves on the back for having done very, very well in this campaign. But of course it's easier for them to target seats because there are fewer places where

they are the main challenges of the Tories. And I think what's happening, I do believe that the Labour Party whilst letting local parties get on and do their thing, they basically are pooling their resources pretty strategically and quite cleverly. And I think even on that, I think Labour would do a lot of good. Keir was very, very firm recently about no prospect of electoral reform. I think even, again, another idea for a vague line in the manifesto, there is a lot of discontent with our politics and with our voting system. And we are going to have to look at the workings of our democracy because it's not functioning well. We should probably have a little word worry about this whole voter ID thing. It does seem to have created some problems for most polling stations. There have been pretty consistent reports of people turning up unable to vote and being quite angry about it. The FT had a story this morning saying that the ministers accepted that and were going to look at reviewing it. But if ever there was a sledgehammer to crack a nut that didn't even exist, I'm afraid this was it. This is bad government. This was the sum we've discussed in the past, isn't it? It's about the demands for IDs and the IDs being easier for old people than younger voters. Okay, Roy, let's take a quick break.

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And I'm actually in their offices because I have been busy this afternoon

signing a thousand books, my new book, but what can I do? How do we fix politics?

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Do you think it's changed your views on what will happen in the next general election, reinforced them, subtly altered them, made you think a little bit differently about strategy?

I think it's reinforced them to the extent that I honestly do think it's there to be one big.

I think there's a real sense that the Tories have got to go. And Labour, we've talked about

this so much, the Ming Vars or the big bold strategy, the Ming Vars is fine, it will get you so far.

And the chances are based on this, that it means that Keir Starmer should be Prime Minister after the next election. But I think Labour has got to think bigger and bolder than that. And that is

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I'll take the thing that will happen out of this though, the Labour Party will get and the Liberal Democrats will get an incredible boost in confidence and morale. And that is really important, particularly at this stage of the parliament. And just to remind people finally on the hill that needs to be climbed, the provisional results suggest Labour on 35, Conservatives 26, Lib Dems 20, put that in context. In 97, Labour got 43% of the vote as opposed to 35.

And even in 2001, 40% of the vote as opposed to 35. So Labour's still got some way to go, not just to get to the 97 levels, but to get to the 2001 levels.

Yeah. But I think the thing that's going on, the dance that's going on between Labour and the Liberal Democrats will happen more than it did back then. I feel that that is going to getting through to the public that, you know, that may be the way, because the driving narrative I think will be... But by which you mean tactical voting?

Yeah, absolutely. Which we're great supporters of.

We are. And I think a lot of it went on. I think a lot of it went on and people will work that out.

So yeah, and I think the other thing I'd say is I think if the Tories have got any sense whatsoever, they will understand they cannot keep talking to the country as though we're all a bunch of idiots. I mean, for Greg Hans to go out this morning and say the message we were getting on the doorstep is people think Rishi Sunak is doing a marvellous job. I mean, it's just, you sound ridiculous when you say things like that. And I think they've got to get serious about being a serious government that makes this country work because at the moment it's not working.

Okay. So just back finally on the figures, most experts now think that Labour need a seven point lead to get a majority because distribution of vote has changed a lot since 2005. Nine points, which is yesterday's result, will get them a majority. And if their vote to become more becomes more efficiently allocated, in other words, they get stuff in Scotland, SNP, Implode, that can be a healthy majority. But, and this is the problem, if the Tories make a bit of a recovery and governments often outperform local election results and general election results, it can still be quite tight for later. So no room for complacency. And I just once more praise my friend David Gork who has taught me everything I know about this election.

Now, Rory, where are you? I need to know where you are because you're back in my country.

I have just landed, just got off an airplane. And I am, I'd like to make a little shout out to Angels, which is a theatrical costume shop. And why am I in a theatrical costume shop?

It's because having just landed from Jordan, I realized that I wanted to wear my privy counsellors uniform to the coronation. And I realized that, of course, I couldn't get one.

And to a miracle, these very, very extraordinary families, the seventh generation of this family.

So somebody called Jeremy Angel, and they've done everything. This is, I'm in a warehouse in Hendon, surrounded by all the costumes used on every film you've ever heard of from manfall seasons right the way through to films out this year. How do you, how do you, how do you know that they're not selling you some sort of something out of the three busketeers and say, this is the privy counsellors uniform? Because, because they're incredibly serious. They've got a man with a book

from 1923, looking at every detail of a privy counsellors uniform and making sure they've got the right gloves and the right frogging on the front. By the way, this is the first time you've actually confirmed what I, you refused to confirm in the made podcast that you have been invited to the coronation. My invitation has obviously got lost. You've probably been, I see you've got your

costume on there. I've got my, my remover of the year hoodie. Yeah, exactly. But so what does it say about dress code though? Do you, can you wear what you want? It says uniform or lounge suit. But why don't you wear a military, could you wear a military uniform? No, I'm too long out of the army to wear a military uniform. So you've got to wear a privy counsellor. Does every privy counsellor have to wear a privy counsellor uniform? No, I think, I think some are going to, some won't. I think many of them are just going to turn up and many of them will turn up in a suit. Somebody just said to me, will I watch it? And I said, yeah, I'm sort of thinking about, I'm definitely watching it now. Well, what you want to see is my, my ostrich feather hat. That's what you really want to see. You're not really wearing a ostrich feather hat. No, I'm going to carry an ostrich feather hat. Yeah. And what's your son going to wear? What does it, what does a Mrs. privy counsellor wear? She wears her own clothes. She's not wearing a uniform. Will look, will our credibility be enhanced or diminished by what they see tomorrow? I'm hoping that there will be so many extraordinary uniforms surrounding me that nobody will notice. I think you'll be noticed. I've just looked it up. It looks quite dramatic.

Well, I hope you have a lovely time. Thank you. And by the way, well done on the main podcast for being the, the kind of spear carrier for the establishment operation to tell the world that the Archbishop was the man who had this idea of universal swearing of allegiance. You've been followed through by the, the mass battalions of, of Jonathan Dimbleby on the today program, I'll be supporting, making clear that Prince Charles views the idea as abhorrent.

Well, there we are. Well, we've got to be spear carriers, isn't it? Right. On that note, this is the end of our emergency podcast. And I've got to go and put my ostrich feather hat on. Final point, Rory, if you fail, given all the people in that church tomorrow, if you fail to come back to me tomorrow evening with I fixed leading interviews with seven heads of state, 33, you know, amazing

global figures, then you'll have let me down. The vice chamberlain of the Royal household will not be enough for you. Have a lovely day. All right. Bye-bye. Thank you. Bye-bye.