UK Local Elections: Green Gains Explained

An interview with Natalie Bennett
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> Greens achieved record-breaking results at the May 2021 local and national elections in England, Scotland, and Wales. The status of the Greens in the UK as a significant force in the country's political landscape is now beyond debate, according to Natalie Bennett, former leader of the party in England and Wales. But at a time when the lines of political division are being redrawn and previous party loyalties seem up in the air, how can Greens carve out their own space and keep going from strength to strength?

This interview is the first text in a <u>series</u> that we published in partnership with <u>Le Grand Continent</u> on the evolution of green parties in Europe. The series will be the basis for a report to be published by the <u>Groupe d'études géopolitiques</u> in autumn 2021.

Green European Journal: In early May 2021, there were elections across much of the United Kingdom: English council and mayoral races, Scottish parliamentary elections, and local and parliamentary elections in Wales. What are the main trends from the results?

Natalie Bennett*: What the results show, above all, is that the tectonic plates are shifting, both geographically and demographically. The elections are being sold as a disastrous election for Labour and a good showing for the Tories [Conservatives] but it's not that simple. Labour is losing votes in northern England and poor coastal towns, and the Tories are picking them up. But the Tories are losing votes in, broadly speaking, the wealthier parts of the UK, particularly in southern and south-western England. Meanwhile, Labour performed strongly in Wales and the Scottish National Party (SNP) is almost totally dominant in Scotland, despite having a fair, proportional election system. The SNP was only one seat short of a majority in the Scottish parliament and, together with the pro-independence Greens, hold the balance of power. It's a real fracturing of British politics: Labour strong in Wales; the SNP dominant with Green support in Scotland; and England split with the north-south divide being turned on its head.

The Green made gains right across England too, north and south.

The <u>Greens had a very good election</u>, gaining 99 extra seats. Many are large county council seats and the Greens also gained an extra seat in the London Assembly. The Greens came a clear third in the London mayoral election – with double the vote of the Liberal Democrats – and finished second in the Bristol mayoral race. It's a huge step forward. In Bristol, there are now 24 Green councillors, equal with Labour. It's the largest group of Green councillors ever.

The local elections in 2018 and 2019, as well as the final European election, were also very successful for the Greens. What does this indicate, and where is this

support coming from?

First, it demonstrates that there is a base level of around 11 or 12 per cent support for the Green Party. In any proportional system, that would give you quite a decent result. In these last local elections, Professor John Curtis, a very well-regarded commentator, calculated that we won about 11 per cent. Second, it shows the party has reached a new level of professionalism and organisation. In 2019, we more than doubled our number of councillors in a single election. This time around, the Greens made 99 gains and a net of 93 gains. We now have the skills, professionalism, and organisation to win very nearly every seat we target. What is striking is that the gains were almost equally balanced from the Conservatives and the Labour Party. They reflect everything from mid-Suffolk County Council, which is a rural farming area, to Bristol, which is a very young and educated city. There are now county councillors in all corners: from Cornwall to Cumbria and Northumberland to East Sussex. We now have five councillors in Burnley, one of the red wall seats near Manchester, where UKIP was particularly strong a few years back. The Greens were the largest of the small parties but we can now put a claim down to be one of the big parties.

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How important were climate and classic green issues to the result? Did the party's broader vision play a greater role?

There are three elements and the importance of each varies in different places. First, there is a rising cohort of people voting purely on issues of climate and biodiversity. In Bristol, one of our new councillors is an <u>18-year-old</u> who was one of the key organisers of the huge 10,000 strong climate march that Greta Thunberg came to in 2019. Climate is helping build that base-level support. Second, we also find that Green councillors have shown themselves to be effective. The Greens have had councillors in mid-Suffolk for quite some time and they have built their reputation on taking the future of farming seriously and working for small, independent farming and other businesses. Third, the profound dissatisfaction with local government in the UK is an opportunity for green politics. In Sheffield, we took the council into no overall control. This was a Labour heartland but there has been a huge row over the felling of street trees in the city. Many voters were dissatisfied with what had been seen as a one-party state council with massive Labour dominance over decades. Many people just want something different and the Greens have managed to channel that.

To what extent are other parties developing their own "green politics" in response to public concerns?

It's really notable, particularly among the Conservatives. Since about 2019, they talk green. And I'm putting a very large asterisk on the word "talks" because it's not the same as acting green or having effective policies. The British government recently tried to throw 2 billion pounds at home energy efficiency as part of the economic recovery from Covid-19. The plan was a mess and they spent a tiny fraction of the money before throwing the

scheme out again. So the government talks green but doesn't deliver. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats have always talked green, but no one listens to them anymore – they don't have a story – and Labour talks the Green New Deal but then supports airport expansion and new roads. It just doesn't understand the transformation that needs to happen. So people are looking for new answers. It's been growing for a long time but, in the wake of the pandemic, there is a strong understanding that the current system is broken, and that it has to and will change.

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Which core green issues other than the climate are most pressing politically in the UK?

Some people – particularly young people – are very passionate and concerned about the climate crisis. But what people talk about on the doorstep and bring up unprompted are issues such as air pollution and its health impacts. Some effective campaigns are growing around water pollution – both linked to sewage and waste contamination of rivers and seas, as well as farming run-off. For both health and environmental reasons, there is real concern about food quality and how our food is produced. So it's those everyday things that relate to people's lives that grab attention.

Britain is one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth. A report ranked the UK 279th in the world as the worst country for nature. The countryside is a great source of pride for British people but people are starting to recognise how incredibly depleted it is.

You mentioned that the tectonic plates of British politics are moving. How important is Brexit to that shift?

Brexit has helped pull the nations of the United Kingdom apart. One has to start with Scotland and Northern Ireland and, to a lesser degree, Wales. Already before Brexit, Scotland held an independence referendum in 2014 that did not pass, but Brexit has enormously accelerated the push for independence. Wanting to be part of the EU is a significant part of the debate. In Northern Ireland, there are significant difficulties with the border "down the middle of the Irish sea" and violent conflict in Northern Ireland is increasing to a disturbing extent. Amongst the Unionist community, many feel that Brexit has dumped them right in it and that the reunification of Ireland is drifting closer. It's an unstable situation and, sadly, very concerning.

In England, we're also seeing a realignment as culture becomes at least as important as economics. The old rule that Labour equals working class and Conservative equals middle class and above has broken down significantly. Brexit didn't cause it but it has encouraged it. The Tories want to keep the voters they gained through Brexit and increasingly they are clearly bidding by saying to traditional Labour seats, "Vote for us and we'll give you some money." It's a very clientelist, transactional form of politics and it won them the Hartlepool by-election.

The Conservatives are running British politics to try and stay in power for a long time. They've been in power for 11 years and they're not prepared to give it up. In 2019, 44 per

cent of those who voted (24 per cent of the population) voted for the Conservatives and they wield 100 per cent of the power. Before the next election, they will further gerrymander the electoral system and they have also announced the introduction of voter ID. It's a direct import of voter suppression tactics from the USA.

What about the Green view on the future of the United Kingdom itself?

Self-determination is our philosophical position. The Scottish Greens went independent as a party in 1990 and the decision then was that, on purely Scottish issues, we would take our guidance from the Scottish Greens. The Greens elsewhere in the UK don't have a position on Scottish independence in a way. It's up to Scotland and the Scottish Greens to decide what to do, and we will back them up. Our Welsh Green Party also recently changed its position to a more strongly pro-independence stance. If there were to be a referendum in Wales, they would campaign for Welsh independence.

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Brexit has now happened and Britain is out of the EU. As a pro-Remain party, what's the Green view of Britain's future relationship with the EU?

We're seeking to prevent as much damage as possible. That means doing our best to defend the Erasmus+ scheme and the importance of re-establishing traditional twinning relationships between towns, through schools for example. Those links have been broken at the Westminster level, so we'll try to rebuild at the grassroots. In Parliament, we are trying to protect the service sector: everyone from musicians to accountants is now struggling to operate within the EU. The pandemic has masked these issues but they're going to be increasingly visible as borders open up. Many individuals are being left stuck from a citizens' rights point of view. As Greens, we're firefighting and trying to minimise the damage. In this regard, I'm pleased to say that we are, of course, still part of the European Green Party and, in some ways, the links are stronger now than they have ever been.

There's an ongoing debate across Europe about where it sits between the US and China. Where do you see Britain's place in the world after Brexit?

We will talk about Britain as a European state and focus on our ties to our neighbours, especially when it comes to personal and human relationships. If you look at geopolitical actors, from a Green perspective, Europe is closest to the values we want the UK to have: supporting human rights, speaking up for the rule of law, protecting the vulnerable, and promoting social rights. The Green vision of the United Kingdom is a country that operates the same way the Scandinavian countries operate in the world, both in terms of contributions to international development assistance and fostering peace, such as through the United Nations. I sometimes call it "Super Norway". Norway does much good in the world, and the UK, given its size, could potentially do even more.

Britain has a particular historic difficulty with China that arises from the colonial period. Britain is a signatory with China to the Joint Declaration, which is supposed to protect the rights of the people of Hong Kong. One of the few areas where the government deserve some credit is their relatively strong stance in defence of the rights of the people of Hong Kong. The treatment of the Uyghurs by the Chinese state is also grossly disturbing on a truly international scale. The world really cannot, again, stand by and allow a people to be treated in that manner.

Britain's relationship with China is in a difficult and finely balanced place. Former Prime Minister David Cameron was keen to forge close economic links with China but, over the last couple of years, the far right of the Tory party has become increasingly militarily concerned about China. The government is being pulled into a much less pro-China direction and just passed the National Security and Investment Bill, also known as the Huawei Bill, adopting a much less gung-ho approach to foreign money, whatever the source, than has traditionally been the case.

Speaking up for human rights and democracy around the world sometimes means that one finds themselves on a platform with some people you might not share much else with. Especially because human rights and the rule of law are principles that, traditionally, people have used as a stick to beat their rivals with, while quietly ignoring what their allies do. The obvious example is Saudi Arabia. Britain continues to sell them massive quantities of arms, despite their hideous human rights abuses, both within Saudi Arabia and throughout the war in Yemen. So the debate on China is also a real opportunity to emphasise that human rights and the rule of law are international standards. If they were to be applied equally around the world, it would be the foundation of a different kind of world.

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What are the Greens' priorities over the next two to three years?

We are now clearly thinking about all levels of politics. Scotland is an entirely different scale because the Scottish Greens will have the balance of power and will be able to, as they were in the last Scottish parliament, actually deliver through significant parts of their policy agenda. Looking more broadly at the United Kingdom, the Greens are now the third most popular party in England. We're aiming to build on that and elect more members of parliament to Westminster. We can shift the political window. Both the Labour and Conservative parties are very unstable, and if you look at what is happening in Germany – who have a different electoral system – the German Greens have essentially overtaken the equivalent of the Labour Party. Our long-term goal is to be one of the two largest parties in the UK. In an ideal world, the contradictions of our current far-right government will eventually come apart and they'll crash and burn. Maybe we could end up with Labour and the Greens contesting British politics at the top?

The first-past-the-post system casts a shadow on the steady growth of the Greens in the UK. In 1989, the Green Party gained almost 15 per cent of the vote

but the voting system has frustrated its progress for decades. How has the party managed to keep growing in the shade?

We campaign hard to make the UK a democracy as it is not a democracy right now. But the Greens are also demonstrating that we don't have to wait for proportional representation. Because of our electoral system, the UK Greens – in England, in particular – know what it's like to need 45 per cent of the vote to win a seat. Some councillors are getting 60-70 per cent of the vote. So we know about winning and have the skills to get very high vote shares. It's something that we can share with our friends across Europe.

Natalie Bennett is a Green member of the House of Lords in the UK. She was the leader of the Green Party of England and Wales from 2012 to 2016. Previously she spent 20 years working as a journalist, including on the Bangkok Post, The Times, and as editor of the Guardian Weekly.