

## **UK General Elections: The Green Alternative to Starmer's Uninspiring Labour**

**Article by Ros Taylor**  
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In the general elections this year, the Green Party of England and Wales hopes to win four seats by appealing to voters who are uninspired by Labour. Ros Taylor talks to party activists about the growing differences between the two parties and how increasing numbers of Green councillors put their policies into practice at the local level.

When I speak to Green deputy leader Zack Polanski, he is buzzing from a by-election victory in the Highgate ward of Camden, north London. On the face of it, this was a small win. Highgate has three councillors and two of them are from the Labour party. But as Polanski was keen to point out, Highgate is part of Labour leader Keir Starmer's seat. The new councillor had defected from Labour two years earlier.

Polanski hopes others will do the same. He is dismissive about Labour and its Green Prosperity Plan, a scheme to invest 28 billion pounds (or very possibly less, depending on the state of the public finances) in the green transformation. "No one is really talking to me about it, and it's not enough anyway." He believes the Labour party, which is 15-20 points ahead in polling, has "lost their way".

Like the new councillor, 41-year-old Polanski, a former actor and hypnotherapist who sits on the London Assembly, has not always been a Green. He stood for the Liberal Democrats until he joined the Greens six years ago, after missing out on the parliamentary selection for a coveted seat in south-west London. Polanski – urbane, articulate, sometimes described by detractors as a "careerist" – represents a vision of Green politics that regards social justice and issues like housing as a key way for the party to appeal to younger voters.

There is no doubt about his ability to inspire some members. When I asked two Green councillors about the highlight of the party's autumn conference, both spontaneously mentioned Polanski's "fantastic" speech, "literally one of the best I've ever seen, no notes."

"There's a recognition that we're doing really well locally," he says – the party won control of the normally Conservative council of Mid-Suffolk in 2023 – "and we're winning seats from both of the old parties" (Tories and Labour). The party now thinks it has a strong chance of holding on to its seat in Brighton, where the previous Green councillor in Highgate, Sian Berry, is standing at the next general election. It is also targeting Labour-held Bristol West, the new seat of Waveney Valley in East Anglia, and Conservative stronghold North Herefordshire. The party has announced that it will stand candidates in every seat in England and Wales, so that every voter has a chance to back them.

### **Greens are wary of tactical voting**

This does not mean that a Green might not stand down in favour of a like-minded, anti-Conservative candidate if the latter had a better chance of winning, thereby encouraging people to vote tactically. But they would only do so if the Greens benefited from the same arrangement in another constituency. "We

have been taken advantage of in the past,” says Heather Mack, a Green party councillor in Bristol. “This is necessary for us to have any power.” Unlike other parties, the national Green party can impose a candidate if the local party fails to select one.

“I’ve steadily become more and more disillusioned with tactical voting,” says Jack Lenox, a councillor in the north west. “All that second guessing by other people isn’t helpful.” Many Greens feel that the increasing frequency of floods, heatwaves, and wildfires in Britain is making people understand the urgency of the climate emergency, and that they will be more reluctant to swap their vote in a general election.

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None of these three target seats will be easy. The Green party has struggled recently in Brighton after long-running problems with refuse collection, and lost control of the local council. Nationally, the party is hobbled by the first-past-the-post voting system, which means voters who are keen to be rid of the exhausted Conservative government may decide it is safer to choose Labour. On the other hand, if the polls continue to show big Labour leads as the election approaches, they may feel confident enough to cast a Green vote so as to try to hold Labour to account on its green promises.

## **Drawing lines**

Brexit is still a live issue among these wavering voters. A majority (59 per cent) of Britons now want to rejoin, but the only non-nationalist party calling for that is the Greens. Even the Lib Dems no longer think the UK can find a way back to the EU. “I went to the Rejoin EU march recently and spoke on the stage,” says Polanski. “People there were noticeably disillusioned with parties they’d voted for in the past. It’s really important that there’s a party that represents that.” Unlike Labour, the party has also been calling since October for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and the suspension of arms sales to Israel. This position chimes with Labour party supporters who felt comfortable under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership and are dismayed by Keir Starmer’s shift to the centre.

Rob Ford, a professor of political science at the University of Manchester and a high-profile commentator on British elections, predicted that the Greens would achieve their “best ever result” in a general election with around 4.5 per cent of the vote. But the nature of the first past the post system means that most of these votes would pile up in Labour constituencies, and Ford thinks they will only gain one seat. He also suspects the party will lose Brighton.

One of the ways in which the Greens are drawing lines between their party and Labour is by supporting the preservation of the 14 English green belts, land that surrounds major cities and is intended to stop urban sprawl. These cover about 13 per cent of England’s total land area. The real ecological value of green belt land is disputed, since much of it is intensively farmed, and Labour has indicated that it is willing to build on wasteland within it. Polanski is opposed. “There’s so much brownfield,” he says, referring to vacant urban land, and points to the importance of retrofitting former offices and bringing empty homes back into use.

“For most of the country the green belt isn’t the problem,” says Lenox. He describes a “housing crisis” in

his town of Lancaster, in which the homes that do get built are not those the community needs. “We have a local plan we aren’t meeting. It’s an impossible situation in which we’re building all the wrong houses because you don’t have the land supply. There’s a shortage of one- to three-beds because developers want to build big, detached houses. The city centre is dominated by student accommodation. The Greens are the only party that’s anti-Right to Buy” – the principle that people should be able to buy council-owned homes at a price lower than the market rate, and which has led to a steep drop in council housing since the 1980s. “No council can build if [the stock] is going to be sold off.”

Greens are also keen on a four-day working week, an idea pioneered by a Cambridgeshire council and which Conservatives loathe, and a ban on “high-carbon” advertising for products like petrol cars and flights.

Lenox added that the idea that local councils were waging a “war on motorists”, a notion that Rishi Sunak has been encouraging, had little traction in Lancaster. Mack disagreed. She explained that Bristol has been trying to create an East Bristol Liveable Neighbourhood to reduce traffic. Opponents of the Ultra-Low Emissions Zone in outer London had travelled to Bristol to organise a campaign against it, although there had been local opposition too, including from taxi drivers from the Somali community.

## **Green energy and conservation**

The HS2 railway line, which has divided Greens because of its impact on the countryside – others thought new rail infrastructure was important – is less salient now that the government has cut the scheme back to the core London-Birmingham route. Greens are grappling with similar dilemmas over planning applications for renewables infrastructure, including solar farms. Lenox, where Green councillors voted to support one, says a lot of nuance is missed in the debate over renewables infrastructure. “When you look at specific details, most people will oppose them. For example, the Hastings [proposal] was on a nature reserve.”

*The balance between preserving countryside and reducing Britain’s dependence on fossil fuels will not be an easy one.*

Where solar projects are granted planning permission, they are usually subject to a long list of conditions. This farm in Suffolk, which attracted powerful opposition from locals, must now fulfil 30 requirements including mitigations for skylarks and great crested newts, a biodiversity enhancement strategy, and a soil management plan. Green councillors argue that their close scrutiny of projects like these ensures that local people will support the developments. Others contend that the demands of councils are making the projects slow and uneconomic.

If Labour does win the general election this year, as most expect, they are unlikely to win many seats in the areas of eastern England that need new interconnectors and renewable energy infrastructure. If they are canny, Green candidates might argue that they are in the best position to ensure this development can be pushed through in a sustainable way and with minimal opposition from locals. But the balance between preserving countryside and reducing Britain’s dependence on fossil fuels will not be an easy one. New development is possible, says Polanski, “as long as you take your fundamental principles.” For jaded voters in an increasingly cynical political landscape, those principles may prove to be the Greens’ biggest attraction.

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