

It is democracy that lost in Hamilton

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It's Saturday, some good bird watching awaits if and when the rain stops, and because I was busy all day yesterday, I did not talk about the Hamilton by-election result.

This [was the full result](#):

Electorate	61,485
Total votes cast (per verification sheet)	27,155
Percentage poll	42.2%

The total number of votes polled for each candidate at the by-election was as follows:-

Name of Candidate (Description)	Votes
Bradley, Collette - Scottish Socialist Party	278
Brady, Andy - Scottish Family Party	219
Lambie, Ross Alexander - Reform UK	7,088
Loudon, Katy - Scottish National Party (SNP)	7,957
MacKay, Janice Elizabeth - UK Independence Party (UKIP)	50
McGuinness, Ann - Scottish Green Party	695
Mir, Aisha Jawaid - Scottish Liberal Democrats	533
Nelson, Richard - Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	1,621
Russell, Davy - Scottish Labour Party	8,559
Wilkinson, Marc - Independent	109
Ballot papers rejected	46
Total votes	27,155

There are seven initial things to note.

The first, and most obvious, is that this did not approximate to a democratic outcome. 42% of the electorate voted. The winning candidate was supported by just 31.5% of those who actually voted. They have the support of just 13.9% of people in the constituency. The point has to be made, time and again, that we have a rotten electoral

system.

The second and third points are that the LibDems and Greens came nowhere. Either a lot of tactical voting was going on, or they are not UK-wide challengers (and yes, I know the Scottish Greens are a separate party). This was a miserable night for both.

Fourth, the Tories look like they will be joining them in the political wilderness, very soon, if they have not already reached that destination. With less than 6% of the vote, they have ceased to be relevant. Reform might be in total disarray, and a bunch of outright neo-fascists, but Badenoch and her motley crew have no answer to them. They were effectively wiped out here. It is very hard to imagine them becoming electorally relevant again, which is quite extraordinary when they held power from 2010 to 2024.

Fifth, Reform took votes from the Tories because, well, why not? With the Tories beyond hope, if you want to vote neo-fascist, then Reform were the obvious choice. Hamilton is a constituency equivalent to the English red wall. It is suffering a fair degree of industrial blight. It has quite a high proportion of working-class votes, many of them inclined to quite strong forms of Unionism. This is a political grouping well suited to vote for Reform, even if Farage is seemingly incapable of getting on with anyone, and it is apparent that some of that party's recently elected councils are already in disarray. No one, after all, votes for Reform because they want something. The only reason to vote for Reform is to be opposed to the prevailing political agenda, and at present it seems that this is sufficient for them to pick up votes.

To contextualise this, I am old enough to remember when the SDP, or Social Democratic Party, picked up votes in the same way in 1981 and 1982. In the 1983 general election, they faded into oblivion, eventually merging with the Liberals. These things happen in politics when people are fed up with the status quo.

Now, I admit that in 1983 Thatcher did, almost to her own surprise, succeed in presenting a policy agenda that appealed to the electorate despite, rather than because of, her economic policy to that point in time, with the Falklands war playing a large part in her appeal. There is, however, little that Farage can do that will be equivalent because none of his local politicians are likely to be that competent, and nor is his motley Parliamentary crew. So, whilst Reform picked up votes in Hamilton from the Tories, in particular, and Labour, a little bit, and from the SNP as the party in power in Scotland (and for those not familiar with Scottish politics, it is Holyrood and not Westminster that dominates debate) then, right now, Farage has everything going for him. But, with continuing mayhem in the USA, and the failure of his own councils likely to become clear over the next year or so, I think you should enjoy his moment. I might be wrong, but I think we are seeing peak Reform.

This then brings me to points six and seven, which are, as were points two and three, linked to each other. I admit that I did not expect Labour to win this election. Nor did anyone else. This was meant to be an SNP safe seat. It wasn't. Labour won it.

Why? In large part because the SNP ran a poor campaign with a candidate with a track record of losing, who the leadership keep endorsing, and with a party leadership that does not inspire much confidence. Rumour has it that the on-the-ground campaign paid little attention to the messages from doorsteps. I have said it before, and I will say it again, no doubt, that the people of Scotland want independence, but that does not mean that they necessarily support the SNP. To acquaint the two is mistaken, most especially when the SNP leadership continues to ignore what its members have to say. The message to the SNP from this by-election is that they need to get their act together, and they have not.

Labour has a little more to get excited about. First, this seat is not typical of Scotland second, they could not replicate this campaign at a general election because they managed to put forward a candidate who never did media interviews and who would not take part in any hustings precisely because he had too many questions to answer about his career in neighbouring constituencies which he did not wish to face. That might work in a by-election, but such denial of accountability cannot translate into something broader, and I do not think that Labour should take comfort from that.

What is more, there is no way in which Labour can extrapolate this result to suggest that they will win the 2026 Holyrood elections. They might succeed in forcing the SNP into being a quite difficult minority government, but that is the best that this outcome might suggest for them. And, by then, who knows where Reform will be?

Overall, this was a night when no one could take much comfort, and the obvious failings of both our electoral system and the politicians who thrive within it were apparent. Little can be extrapolated from the result. Labour can, temporarily, feel pleased with themselves, but they would be profoundly unwise to think that this suggests that they are on the cusp of some great renaissance in Scotland, because I very much doubt that they are. The SNP really does need to listen to the people who want to succeed, who it continually ignores. And Farage remains a one-man wrecking ball.

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