

February's by-elections

Emma Kilheaney considers the results of the two February by-elections



In two important by-elections on 23 February Labour lost the constituency of Copeland to the Conservatives for the first time in over 80 years but held on to Stoke, defeating UKIP candidate and party leader Paul Nuttall.

Conservatives conquer Copeland

In Copeland the Conservatives celebrated becoming the first governing party since 1982 to gain a seat in a by-election. Conservative candidate Trudy Harrison defeated Labour, which had held the Copeland seat since 1983 and its predecessor constituency Whitehaven since 1935. Jeremy Corbyn fought off calls for his resignation after his party lost this seat in its heartland.

Professor John Curtice, of Strathclyde University, told the BBC that the Copeland result was the best by-election performance by a governing party — in terms of the increase in its share of the vote — since January 1966.

Table 1 shows how the parties fared in Copeland.

Table 1 The Copeland result

Party	Party vote (%)	Change (%)
Conservative (Trudy Harrison)	44.25	+ 8.46
Labour (Gillian Troughton)	37.34	- 4.92
Lib Dem (Rebecca Hanson)	7.25	+ 3.80
UKIP (Fiona Mills)	6.52	- 9.00
Independent (Michael Guest)	2.61	N/A
Green (Jack Lenox)	1.66	- 1.32

UKIP fails to steal Stoke

When Tristram Hunt MP decided to end his political career, and resign from his Stoke-on-Trent seat to become the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Labour knew it would have a hard fight against UKIP. As 69% of the electorate in the Stoke constituency voted to leave the EU last June, UKIP hoped to capitalise on the Brexit issue, and ran its party leader, Paul Nuttall, as candidate. In fact UKIP failed to make significant gains on its performance here in the 2015 general election.

The Labour candidate, and winner of the by-election, Gareth Snell was helped by the fact that Paul Nuttall made a series of political gaffs including:

- being unable to name the six towns that make up Stoke
- falsely claiming to have lost close personal friends in the Hillsborough disaster
- falsely claiming to have played professional football for Tranmere Rovers FC
- never having been to the address in Stoke listed on his nomination form

Table 2 shows how the parties fared in Stoke.

Turnout affected by Storm Doris

The difficult weather conditions on election day undoubtedly played a part in the turnout in Copeland, which was only 51.35%, down from the 63.8% turnout in the 2015 general election. The turnout was even

By-elections since the 2015 general election

December 2015 Oldham West and Royton, triggered by the death of Michael Meacher. Jim McMahon held the seat for Labour.

May 2016 Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, triggered by the death of Harry Harpham. Gill Furniss held the seat for Labour.

May 2016 Ogmore, triggered by the resignation of Huw Irranca-Davies. Chris Elmore held the seat for Labour

June 2016 Tooting, triggered by the resignation of Sadiq Khan when he became mayor of London. Rosena Allin-Khan held the seat for Labour.

October 2016 Batley and Spen, triggered by the death of Jo Cox, who was murdered in her constituency. Her friend Tracy Brabin held the seat for Labour.

October 2016 Witney, triggered by David Cameron's resignation. Robert Courts held the seat for the Conservatives.

December 2016 Richmond Park, triggered by the resignation of Zac Goldsmith over the government's plans to build a third runway at Heathrow airport. Goldsmith stood as an independent candidate but was defeated by Liberal Democrat Sarah Olney with a majority of nearly 2,000 votes. This loss by the Conservatives is the second biggest by-election upset this term.

December 2016 Sleaford and North Hykeham, triggered by the resignation of Stephen Phillips over the government's handling of Brexit. Caroline Johnson held the seat for the Conservatives.

Table 2 The Stoke-on-Trent result

Party	Party vote (%)	Change (%)
Labour (Gareth Snell)	37.09	- 2.22
UKIP (Paul Nuttall)	24.72	+ 2.07
Conservative (Jack Brereton)	24.35	+ 1.08
Lib Dem (Zulfiqar Ali)	9.84	+ 5.67
Green (Adam Colclough)	1.39	- 2.22
Independent (Barbara Fielding)	0.65	N/A

lower in Stoke-on-Trent at just 38.2%, down from 49.9% in 2015. Although Labour won comfortably in Stoke, its majority was nearly halved in terms of votes received.

Record number of women in the Commons

In the 2015 general election 191 women were elected to the House of Commons. The number has since gone up, through a number of by-elections (see box), and Trudy Harrison's win in Copeland took the number of female MPs to a record 196. This puts female representation in the House of Commons at 30.15%.

Questions

- 1 Why is it usual for governing parties to lose by-elections?
- 2 What do the recent by-elections tell us about the state of the current governing and opposition parties?

Web links to follow up

BBC News, 'Memorable by-elections'

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7415501.stm

Guardian: 'Corbyn says he is not to blame for Copeland loss and will not resign',

<http://tinyurl.com/jzrokxb>

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