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The soft underbelly of British politics

A by-election in northern England has just provided proof of concept for one of the most effective campaigns to degrade and destabilise UK democracy

Last week's by-election in Batley & Spen, an old Yorkshire manufacturing town with a Labour tradition and a large postwar south-Asian Muslim population, has opened up a new chapter in post-Brexit politics.

With Labour trailing badly behind a Conservative government, seemingly untouchable despite its lies and corruption, the script seemed clear. The party would lose in a straight fight with the Tories, Keir Starmer would face a challenge to his leadership of Labour and the disintegration of British social democracy would accelerate.

It didn't quite turn out that way. Labour won — just — by 323 votes. Starmer emerged rejuvenated and all talk of a leadership challenge evaporated. And the government remains mired in personal and financial scandals.

But the intervention of a populist candidate, George Galloway — once a Scottish Labour MP and now the main British voice on the Russian government propaganda channel RT — appealing primarily to the Muslim vote, disrupted the whole process. Indeed it cast a shadow over the future of British democracy, further complicating the post-Brexit upheaval.

'Anti-woke' campaigner

Galloway arrived in Batley & Spen fresh from a prior intervention in the elections to the devolved Scottish parliament in May. He had stood as an opponent of independence for Scotland, waving the Union flag and attacking the ruling Scottish National Party — which supports independence and an associated reapplication to the European Union — advising his supporters elsewhere in Scotland to cast tactical votes for the Conservatives. The SNP won and he received a derisory 5,521 in the

South Scotland constituency — targeted for the strength of its support for UK unionism — or just 1.5 per cent of the vote.

Galloway had been sacked by the right-leaning, London-based radio station TalkRadio in 2019 after making anti-Semitic remarks about Tottenham Hotspur football club, a team strongly associated with north London's Jewish community. Galloway pledged that there would be 'No #Israël flags' on the Champions League cup (the diaeresis over the 'e' apparently signalling his refusal to acknowledge the country's English title).

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In the past Galloway had painted himself as a left-wing 'anti-imperialist', famously leading the Respect Party — which he had joined after his expulsion from the Labour Party — to victory over Labour in a largely Asian seat in Bradford in 2012. In his latest apparition, however, Galloway has become an 'anti-woke' campaigner, railing against transgender rights, lesbian and gay education in schools, and 'the endless obsession with race'. So when Labour was forced to call a by-election in Batley, because the sitting MP had become the region's mayor, Galloway's anti-woke machine descended eagerly on the town — where he had a residual network from the days of Respect.

Tensions already high

Thus began one of the dirtiest campaigns in modern British politics. Tensions were already high after a teacher at Batley Grammar School was forced into hiding, having mistakenly shown images of the prophet Mohammed to pupils. The area's previous MP, Jo Cox, was murdered in 2016 by a far-right terrorist, and the far right had an established local presence.

Galloway's modus operandi is to 'canvass' — knock on doors — with a large group of followers, which has been perceived by his opponents as intimidating. He made inflammatory speeches, telling an outdoor meeting: 'I don't want my children taught about sex; I don't want them taught how to masturbate; I don't want them taught about anal sex … this liberal identity politics is anathema to me.'

But as with other right-wing populist challengers, from Jair Bolsanaro in Brazil to Narendra Modi in India, it was through WhatsApp that his

supporters are alleged to have stoked the most tension. Labour activists reported stories circulating among Galloway's followers claiming (correctly) that Labour's candidate — Kim Leadbeater, sister of Cox — was a lesbian and lived with another woman. They also claimed Starmer was a 'Zionist', being (this part also correct) married to a Jewish woman and his children being raised in the faith.

Soon Labour-supporting Muslim women, in an anonymous letter circulated to the press, were claiming they faced 'harassment and intimidation, both online and in the streets'. Galloway's supporters were alleged to have torn down rival posters and verbally harassed Labour councillors who tried to re-erect their own.

When the Jewish Chronicle conducted interviews with pro-Galloway Muslim voters, it recorded a disturbing mixture of prejudice and conspiracy theory — such as that Leadbeater wanted gay sex taught in schools and had 'spoken against Palestine', whereas Jo had been covertly killed by the British state because of her support for the cause.

Video reverberated

Days before the vote, tensions escalated. Leadbeater was harassed on the street by a Muslim anti-gay activist. Video showed that, as she retreated, her (male) opponents shouted: 'You are the colour of blood.' Though Galloway was present at a distance, claimed not to know the activist who led the harassment, and condemned it, the video reverberated through the community.

Then one of Galloway's organisers, Shammy Cheema, was outed as a Holocaust denier by the Daily Mail, triggering widespread concern among local mosque leaders who had made genuine efforts at intercultural dialogue (Cheema was immediately axed from Galloway's team). And in the final weekend of campaigning, there were at least three incidents where young men purporting to support Galloway harassed and threw eggs at Labour campaigners and shouted homophobic abuse. In one incident, a Labour supporter was allegedly kicked in the head.

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Labour organisers told me that, after this, Galloway's support tangibly deflated. Yet when the votes were counted he had scored 21.9 per cent — 8,264 votes — the majority assumed to be from former Labour supporters in the Asian community.

Though the public, and to an extent the media, regarded the Galloway

campaign as a circus, his success has shocked the political establishment. Since the collapse of the United Kingdom Independence Party once led by Nigel Farage and the self-immolation of his Brexit Party, there has been no serious right-wing populist leader in the UK. Instead, Boris Johnson's Conservatives have soaked up the votes of the populist right.

But here is a man, out of nowhere, capable of garnering 21 per cent with a socially conservative message aimed at Muslim voters while, because of his strong support for Brexit, attracting some white working-class voters previously attached to UKIP.

Galloway has not only used anti-Semitic language in the past and attracted a Holocaust denier into his campaign. He dismisses the 2013 chemical attack on eastern Ghouta by the Syrian regime as a hoax and likewise presents the repression of Muslims in Xinjiang by the Chinese dictatorship as an imperialist fiction.

Labour's leadership

Much of the responsibility for handing Galloway this political opportunity has to be assumed by the Labour leadership. It permitted an unnecessary election. And though its formal position was critical of Israel's most recent attack on Gaza, no Labour frontbencher attended the two massive, pro-Palestinian demonstrations stemming from it in London. Attendance was left to the former leader, Jeremy Corbyn — suspended from membership of the parliamentary group — and his backbench allies.

After a report on Islamophobia inside the party was delivered to Labour's headquarters last December, campaigners claim little action was taken. And HQ has suspended numerous branches and officials which challenged Corbyn's suspension. It was thus easy for Galloway to portray Labour as indifferent to the suffering of Palestinians and to mobilise Muslim voters on that issue.

Not only did Labour find itself ill-equipped to deal with this new, amorphous, right-wing but 'anti-imperialist' populism; it found its local support networks very weak in the

According to those charged with leading the Labour fightback, however, the pervasive trope within the online campaigns backing Galloway was social conservatism — opposition to sex education, LGBT+ rights and 'transmania'. Responding to the flurry of violent intimidation, the Muslim women's group wrote 'to the Muslim men involved', saying 'you do not represent the Islam we practice, you may be the loudest voices but you are not the majority'.

By mobilising women, and by getting out the vote using the formidable machine built during the five years of Corbynism, Labour managed to win, despite the desertion of at least a quarter of its traditional vote to Galloway. An unnamed Labour official told the Times that in six weeks the party had basically built a new electoral coalition: 'Lost the conservative Muslim vote over gay rights and Palestine, and won back a lot of 2019 Tory voters.'

Scant comfort

If correct, this assessment can be of scant comfort to anyone concerned about the state of British democracy. Out of nowhere, Galloway was able to descend on an area with a history of division and far-right violence, stoke polarisation and garner 21 per cent of the vote. He used UK electoral law, which requires the BBC and others to give candidates equal prominence, to appear on UK-wide television. He has pledged to stand in every upcoming by-election where there are significant Muslim votes — and his current vehicle, the Workers Party GB, may decide to stand more widely in the 2024 general election.

Not only did Labour find itself ill-equipped to deal with this new, amorphous, right-wing but 'anti-imperialist' populism; it found its local support networks very weak in the face of it. Meanwhile both the London-based media and the local police struggled to formulate a response, as a flurry of incidents were captured mainly by alternative media, with law enforcement struggling to catch up.

Galloway makes no secret — and is indeed proud — of the support he gets from RT (formerly Russia Today) on which he appears. Yet the Conservative government has refused to investigate Russian interference in the 2016 Brexit referendum, before and after which there were multiple meetings between officials of one of the Leave campaigns and high-ranking Russian officials. Johnson suppressed an official intelligence report on Russia's involvement and there remains no demonstrable surveillance of its interference in UK democracy.

In this context, Galloway has just provided proof of concept for one of the most effective campaigns to degrade and destabilise UK democracy in living memory. Neither his anti-Semitic language in the past nor the open support of the Russian state broadcaster — nor the clear evidence that his tension-inducing strategy had tainted his supporters — deterred 8,000 people from backing him.

If replicated elsewhere in Britain, bringing racial and religious tension to communities situated on its cultural faultlines, Galloway's intervention could have a negative impact on the quality of democracy across the whole UK.

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