



PROJECT ROME

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Editorial

The United Kingdom will go back to the polls on Thursday 12 December. The first general election to be held in December since 1923 and the third general election in a little over four years, it represents an enormous gamble for the major political parties.

In truth, there is little appetite for it amongst MPs and activists from either party across the north. Labour MPs are said to be furious that the party has effectively handed the Prime Minister an election on his terms. Veteran Labour MP, Barry Sheerman went public with his criticism of the decision, calling it “sheer madness.” Despite public expressions of confidence, many Conservative MPs are equally dismayed.

Fears expressed by MPs and senior activists we have spoken to include voter apathy caused by Brexit-fatigue, the logistical difficulties of door-to-door campaigning in the depths of winter, and serious concerns about the tone of the campaign and the possibility of further threats and even violence against candidates. One MP we spoke to said, “Imagine how much more the voters are going to hate us when we’re knocking on

their doors on a cold, dark winter's night. And imagine how much more our members are going to hate us for asking them to do it."


But the overriding concern is one of uncertainty of outcome. Brexit has ripped up the political playbook and the historic party loyalties that made election forecasting relatively straightforward. "The truth is, no one has any real sense of how this election is going to play out. It's like we're playing a different game with different rules. Opinion polling can't be trusted, nor can our voter ID work. We're all whistling in the dark", according to one senior party staffer we spoke to.

But the election is happening, and the north will be one of the key battlegrounds, with Conservative strategists convinced that Brexit has opened up previously unwinnable Labour seats across the north. However, not all are so optimistic. One senior Conservative told Northern Agenda, "Labour voters might not be enamoured by Corbyn, but we still aren't trusted in many areas in the north. Are we

really going to take thousands of votes from Labour in their heartlands? It's a risky strategy dreamt up in head office, but the troops on the ground aren't so convinced."

Meanwhile, Labour appears to be turning away from their historic strategy of targeting resources at key seats in the north – both those they are hoping to gain from the Conservatives, and those they are hoping to defend. Strategists at Labour head office and within Jeremy Corbyn's private office are said to be advocating a "99% strategy".

They believe that Labour was too defensive in 2017 and intend to run a non-targeted campaign, splitting resources in every part of every region. Like the Conservative activist we spoke to, local Labour activists and MPs in the north are less than enamoured by this new approach. "It's utter madness," one told Northern Agenda, "Are we really going to throw resources at Tory strongholds in North



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The north is preparing itself to be love-bombed by all of the main political parties during the campaign as they seek to gain ground in their target seats. The Conservatives top target seats across the north include five seats that require a swing of less than 1% to change hands. Crewe and Nantwich (majority 48), Barrow and Furness (209), Keighley (249) and Colne Valley (978) are all currently held by Labour, and the Conservatives are heavily targeting Westmoreland and Lonsdale in Cumbria, where former Lib-Dem leader Tim Farron is defending a majority of 777.

Labour's top targets include the Conservative-held seats of Pudsey (Majority 331), Calder Valley (609) and Bolton West (936). The Lib-Dems to target in the north is Sheffield Hallam, where former Labour MP Jared O'Mara won by 2,125 on 2017.

In addition to these ultra-marginals there are a raft of seats where a swing of less than 5% could dramatically alter the political map in the north. Across Yorkshire and the North West regions, Labour are defending 18 seats that fall into this category, with the Conservatives defending 14

such seats. Current Conservative ministers Jake Berry, Robert Goodwill and Stuart Andrew are all under threat if voters choose to punish the government for failing to deliver Brexit.

The one unknown factor is what effect the Brexit party will have on the outcome of the election. In May's European elections, the nascent Brexit Party won 6 of the 14 seats up for grabs across Yorkshire and North West, winning nearly 40% of the popular vote in the process. Of the 32 constituencies across the two regions with the smallest majorities, 22 of them voted Leave in 2016 and there is little reliable intelligence about how the Brexit vote will break.

The twin fears of the two main parties in the key northern battlegrounds are largely based on this uncertainty. For Labour, there is a fear that their vote could be squeezed between Labour Leave voters siding with Boris Johnson or Nigel Farage, and Remain voters switching to the Lib-Dems or Greens. One Labour MP we spoke to is convinced he will lose his seat because of the party's ambiguity on Brexit. "There are two Leave parties standing, two Remain parties standing. If it becomes an election solely about Brexit, why would people vote Labour? They don't know what our policy is."

The snap election has disrupted the parties candidate selection process, and this is particularly true of the Labour party. Hull North MP, Diana Johnson, was the first Labour MP forced to go through a full reselection contest, which she won easily. A number of other Labour MPs across the north, deemed to be critical of Jeremy Corbyn, were under threat of deselection, a threat that has proved to be rather empty, with the likes of Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) and Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) successfully reselected without a challenge.

The left of the Labour party have been successful in getting their candidates selected in seats vacated by defecting Labour MPs – Penistone and Stocksbridge, Rother Valley, Bury South, Birkenhead, Stockport and Liverpool Wavertree. However, they have been less successful in other seats which have selected candidates on the more Corbynsceptic wing of the party.

The reconfiguration of the Parliamentary Labour Party, much hoped for by supporters of the Labour leader, has not transpired in the way they had hoped.

Facing the most unpredictable general election in living memory, the political map of the north could be about to undergo a fundamental shift, with the old political certainties swept away on a tide of voter frustration and re-drawn political allegiances. That is the hope of party strategists in both Labour and Conservative campaign centres.

However, such political hyperbole was not shared by some of the wise old heads we have spoken to in the past few days. One veteran of northern politics told Northern Agenda, “My prediction is that there will be no political earthquake in the north, we’ll be back to square one with another hung parliament. Spring general election anyone?”



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