

UKIP exceeds expectations but what do the results tell us?

Dr Karin Bottom

It is now clear that UKIP exceeded most expectations in the local elections on May the 2nd, garnering around 26 per cent of the vote. Yet as the dust settles, we must now ask what these results mean? Of course, at this stage it is hard to be sure and a certain amount speculation is involved but one thing is clear, the mainstream has a fight on its hands.

To label UKIP's support as mere articulation of protest is naive, simplistic and lazy. More to the point, the 'protest label' implies that any vote for parties outside the mainstream – whatever their hue – is pathologically wrong and requires correction: this is not healthy analysis. While a number of voters may well be sending a message to their usual party of choice or just the 'big three' in general, a proportion of the population does appear to support UKIP and what it stands for. The sentiments which underpin much of the party's support are also hard for the mainstream to swallow, particularly on the left and though all three are beginning to see the bigger picture and respond, they can't escape from the fact that they are all linked with the problems the country faces right now: Labour is seen as responsible while the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are denigrated for not reversing the situation. UKIP on the other hand claims to offer the electorate solutions and has no track record of failure, a very attractive quality which – given the right circumstances – can facilitate substantial success.

Yet, perhaps the most interesting questions concerning UKIP ask what it is exactly? Is it a pressure group or is it a party? Hitherto labelled as a single issue organisation it has never shied away from its long-term key objective which is a retreat from the European Union. Recently though, it has expanded its arguments, rhetoric and goals. Initially marketing itself as a force for change, it now seems to hold a somewhat longer term view of its future. Before the count was in, Farage's discussion with Evan Davis on Radio 4's Today Programme was particularly revealing when he equated UKIP's potential for bringing about change with that generated by the SDP's success in the early 1980s. He argued that UKIP now has the capacity to be part of the political solution and this suggests that the party is developing in a new direction: indeed, the BBC's Nick Robinson now argues that UKIP has made the transition from pressure group to political party. Only time will tell if this is the case but one thing is for sure, speculation and judgment of UKIP will only intensify. Next year's elections to the European Parliament and the 2015 General Election will certainly go some way in establishing the nature of UKIP and the type of organisation it really is but in the meantime, its message is resonating with a sizable proportion of the electorate and the mainstream is not sure what to do.

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