

# THE BRADFORD EARTHQUAKE

The lessons from Bradford West for election campaigning and political engagement in Britain > Lewis Baston



## > Why Bradford?

Following the March 2012 by-election in Bradford West, which resulted in a dramatic gain for George Galloway of Respect, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust commissioned a report from Lewis Baston (of Democratic Audit) to analyse what happened. The task was to explain the result and its implications for political parties and campaigners of all parties.

The full report is divided into four sections – the context of the election, the campaign, the local elections of May 2012 and the overall meaning of the political changes in Bradford.

## > Key findings

### *The corrosion of the established political parties in Bradford West*

1. The recent political history of Bradford West has been marred by patronage, neglect, bad organisation and even electoral fraud. Both Labour and the Conservatives are implicated in this state of affairs. Local politics in Bradford has been about mutual accommodation between elites of each community ('Asians', city whites and suburbanites) rather than real diversity, and voters have found this alienating.

2. 'Biraderi' (clan-based loyalty) has in the past offered parties an apparently easy mechanism to amass block votes, but the price that parties (Labour and Conservative) have paid has been higher than they anticipated and ultimately led to disaster, particularly when combined with a lack of local political organisation and discussion.
3. Bradford Labour in particular needs to absorb the lessons of the election and change itself radically; the same may apply in other apparently 'safe' seats where local politics is weak.



Bradford Town Hall illuminated by Patrice Warrenner. Photograph by Joanna Stratton

There is a danger of a political vacuum developing in the city and elsewhere which may be filled by fringe politics, despair or violence.

4. As with some other by-elections in which huge shifts of votes have taken place, voters in Bradford West do not feel they have deserted their usual party but that Labour has failed them and that there has been an option available that better reflects the real values of the party.

### ***The local roots of Respect***

5. Galloway could not have won without a locally-generated upsurge of political activity; the energy of the Respect campaign came largely from local soil and was not a product of a centrally-driven party strategy.
6. That upsurge would probably not have happened had the local Labour Party succeeded over the years in first serving as a suitable channel for political activity in Bradford West, and second in running a selection process that commanded the confidence and support of party members and the broader community.
7. The Bradford Respect campaign itself compares with other protest movements such as Occupy in its self-conception and in its free-form organisational style.

### ***Campaign techniques***

8. In terms of campaigning methods there was no revolution, merely a positive rational 'reboot' conducted by Respect of traditional techniques in a modern setting. Bradford's political parties have been held back in their development as campaigning entities by non-ideological clan politics, and Respect's innovations came as more of a shock than they would have in more engaged politics. The standard set of by-election campaign techniques brought to Bradford by the main parties failed.
9. The interaction of social and traditional media can have a stronger effect than either alone; the effect of the television debate in the last weekend of the campaign in Bradford

West is a fascinating example of how messages can be propagated.

10. National messages and campaigning language failed to connect with Bradford West electors' bad experiences of mainstream politics.
11. Bradford itself suffers from a pervasive sense of neglect and decline, hence the power of the symbolic issues of the Westfield Hole and the Odeon during the by-election campaign.
12. International affairs, particularly as they affect Muslims, did play an unusually large part in the by-election. This raises further questions about identity politics and celebrity in an age of plural media, and the way in which feelings of victimhood and resentment are cultivated, not only among young people and Muslims but across the political spectrum.

### ***Overall observations***

13. While the circumstances were unique it would be inappropriate to dismiss Bradford West as an unimportant aberration. It indicates the vulnerability of apparent strongholds when a number of factors come together, and should give both major parties pause for thought about their relationship with the core voters they take for granted.
14. The result should not be dismissed as an emotional spasm or a mistake by the electors of Bradford, but as a very clear repudiation of the local power structure and the way that national politics is conducted.

## **» Summary**

### ***Setting the scene***

The Bradford West by-election of March 2012, in which George Galloway of the Respect party triumphantly won a long-established Labour seat, was one of the most surprising and notable by-election outcomes in recent British history. Few observers among Westminster politicians and the media had a clue that Bradford West would be anything other than a routine Labour hold, and even among Bradford Labour campaigners there was little idea of what was to hit them until

the ballot boxes were opened on the night.

The shock by-election result changed the political climate for the Bradford city council elections in May 2012. Respect gained five seats in Bradford, and deprived Labour of the chance of taking overall control of the council. Despite the problems that Respect encountered in the summer and autumn of 2012, something new had clearly taken place in local politics, and that change might well have national significance.

Several explanations have been offered for the revolution in Bradford politics, which Respect supporters quickly and controversially called the 'Bradford Spring' by analogy with popular risings in the Arab world. After the election there was considerable attention on the apparently new and innovative techniques that the Respect campaign used in the by-election, including its superior command of IT and its ability to mobilise Muslim women and young people, who had previously seemed politically invisible in Bradford. More broadly, the result was seen as a repudiation by the electorate of party politics in general, and Labour in particular, by many commentators. The majority of Westminster insiders, who had written off Galloway as a busted flush, were appalled that he was elected. Many accused Galloway of running an unscrupulous campaign that exploited Muslim concerns and unfairly criticised his Labour opponent Imran Hussain.

However, a deeper look at by-elections, the Bradford political background and the politics of the Pakistani-British community in Bradford makes it clear that the Bradford West by-election was a complex phenomenon, which crystallised several things that were ready to happen in Bradford. Galloway was in the classic position of the rebel leader, summed up by words attributed to Ledru-Rollin in 1848: 'I am their leader. I must follow them'; his campaign was a catalyst for a popular movement against a particularly decrepit local political order in Bradford West. The culture of the campaign was participatory and perhaps chaotically democratic and inclusive, on the conscious model of the Occupy movement.

### ***The corrosion of the established political parties in Bradford West***

Any adequate account of the Bradford West by-election has to start by addressing the failure of the main political parties in the constituency. Without years of neglect, stemming from an accommodation with power brokers to exploit the clan voting solidarity of biraderi (a social system of kinship that derives from rural Pakistan and Kashmir), there would not have been fertile soil for Galloway in Bradford.

The constituency Labour Party was quiescent, even moribund, for years, with the MP neglectful and ill and hardly any political organisation, education or debate going on within the party. The Conservatives were no better. Politics and representation was dominated by the main biraderi clan. This history of neglect and manipulation resulted in a lot of dammed-up political energy in a constituency with a youthful population with unused campaigning skills and a lot of local (and, admittedly, international) problems to get angry and campaign about. It also led to a build-up of resentment among the smaller clans who were excluded from representation, as well as among Asians not part of the clan system and the local white population.

The decay of organised politics in Bradford West before 2012 may seem an isolated story, but it reflected in exaggerated caricature a common view of mainstream politics held well beyond Bradford. The normal political language of ‘fairness’ ‘opportunity’ ‘hard working families’ and so on deployed by all the main parties rang very hollow in Bradford West, where manipulated clan politics meant that there was little fairness or opportunity in political selection and well-connected mediocrity would always defeat the

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talented outsider. Party labels themselves seemed interchangeable to many of the power brokers. Politics in Bradford, to many, seemed to conform very closely to a far-left view of how mainstream party politics works, and if it was true of Bradford, people wondered, might it not be true also at a national level?

In the words of a voter to a Labour activist in Bradford ‘we gave you a big kick in the backside and we’re waiting to see how you respond to it.’ The main parties, particularly Labour, have been put on notice that the way politics has been practiced in Bradford West is unacceptable to the voters. While the party has been vigilant about far left infiltration, it has been slack about guarding against infiltration by others who have no commitment to Labour values. There may be other constituencies where an apparently ‘safe’ hold on parliamentary representation has masked serious problems. Given the decay in active political engagement in many places, the model of winning over block votes by dealing with local power brokers is not unique to Bradford and may be found in other northern and midland urban areas. It would be rational for Labour to deal with them before they reach the sort of crisis that developed in Bradford.

### ***The local energy of the Respect campaign***

The arrival of Galloway started to transform this potential for a challenge to traditional politics in Bradford West, but the Labour selection meeting was the key turning point. Although Imran Hussain was selected by a large majority of those present, there was a sense within Bradford that this merely reflected a good clan turnout and superior manipulative organisational skills rather than a genuine consensus. The selection resulted in the defection of several Labour members,

who had come up against the power of the machine before, to the Respect campaign. They took with them the ideas and energy that had been unwelcome in Bradford West Labour. There were some innovative aspects of the Respect campaign – particularly in the role of women and its use of social media – but most of it was a sensible adaptation of widely used methods to the Bradford context, and some – such as George Galloway’s bus tour in the final days – was evocative of old-time electioneering. Other than a strong emphasis on international Muslim issues, the campaign centred around local issues such as the Westfield Hole and the Odeon cinema and a broad left of centre prospectus.

On the surface, the Bradford West campaign had seemed to be similar to most of the other by-elections in the 2010 parliament in safe Labour seats – a routine canter to victory for the Labour candidate, helped by the unpopularity of the coalition government (which deepened considerably during March 2012). There was nothing that one could point to in the Labour campaign (or the others) that the party had done particularly wrong; it was just that the procession of visiting dignitaries and press releases on national and local issues seemed irrelevant to the electorate, and this time there was an alternative. The nature of the choice was made very clear by the BBC *Sunday Politics* debate broadcast on the last weekend of the campaign – Galloway was clearly a much stronger orator than his competitors. It helped make Galloway’s argument that people would be better off sending a Parliamentarian to Westminster than a councillor. The video of the debate was widely circulated online in the final days of the campaign; the combination of traditional and social media proved a stronger influence on electors than either could alone.

### ***Bradford West, candidate selection and collective loyalty***

Putting the Bradford West result in context, it has some similarities to past by-elections and constituency contests where there have been huge swings to Independent or centre candidates such as Merthyr Tydfil (1970), Lincoln (1973), Bermondsey (1983), Tatton

(1997) and Blaenau Gwent (2005). A normally loyal partisan electorate felt that its allegiance had been tested past breaking point by the party failing in its obligations to run a fair selection procedure with a locally acceptable result. In many of these elections, as in Bradford, there was an unusual amount of discussion among the voters themselves, and a sense of a community coming to a collective decision rather than an individual exercise of consumer choice which is increasingly the model of national politics. Galloway's campaign made it easier for Labour supporters to switch over by claiming to be 'real Labour' as opposed to 'New Labour', and carrying on the left and anti-war traditions of the city and the previous West MP Marsha Singh. So while a startling result, it was not the same sort of transformative result as the most consequential by-elections such as Hamilton (1967) and Orpington (1962) which established the SNP and the Liberals as significant electoral forces and changed the whole of British politics.

**Identity politics, celebrity and Bradford**

There are several facets of the Bradford result that have wider ramifications. One is that we may be in an age of celebrity politics but that what we understand by celebrity and the media need to be rethought. Galloway was not familiar to the Bradford West electorate because of Big Brother, but because of his appearances on Iranian Press TV and his Talk Sport radio broadcasts, and his tour de force before a US Senate committee in 2005 which is a YouTube favourite to this day. Galloway's triumph emerged from a segmented, pluralistic and international media landscape. While he was a celebrity, it was celebrity

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that was earned mostly by political stands that a young politically minded audience liked. The contrast with Esther Rantzen's failure in Luton South in the 2010 general election is instructive, not only in terms of how celebrity translates into politics but also in how it is possible for local mainstream politics to revive itself in a way that Labour failed to do in Bradford West.

There was an element of identity politics in the by-election, without a doubt. At times, particularly during the less savoury interludes in the campaign, it seemed to be about Labour and Respect

both trying to claim support based on who was the better Muslim, and Galloway clearly targeted his appeal at Muslim interests and ways of looking at the world. This is hardly surprising, or even – as such – reprehensible. It is surely routine politics when a democratic politician tells the voters what they want to hear, in the sort of language that he thinks they would respond best to, and it is inconsistent – dare one say racist or Islamophobic – to object to pandering to Muslims but not to, say, pandering to other sorts of myths about nationalism, Europe or immigration. While the Respect campaign was to some extent about failing to challenge popular beliefs, and stimulating grievances without doing much to solve them, the same can be said about many other political campaigns.

Labour cannot afford to be complacent about the ructions which have taken place in Respect since the summer. The party should not, morally or practically, assume that Respect's problems will cause its strength in the majority-Asian wards of Bradford to wither away without Labour doing anything to put its own house in order. The prospect of a complete vacuum in

political engagement in this troubled section of a city with more than its fair share of problems should be much more terrifying than the emergence of Respect as a competitor. Bradford Labour probably does not have the resources to throw off the problems that have caused the decay, and the process of rebuilding a mass membership, vibrant and politically engaged local party will require considerable outside help.

**Conclusion: a rational use of the power of the vote**

Much commentary after the election was implicitly critical of the electors of Bradford West. But regardless of what they think about Galloway over the longer term, the voters of the constituency used their power in a rational way. It was an opportunity to strike a blow against a local power structure that was widely disliked. It was a cry for help for a constituency suffering not only from manifold social problems (including rapidly rising unemployment) but also a pervasive sense of having been neglected, forgotten and shabbily treated which gave Westfield and the Odeon such symbolic power. The problems of Bradford are much more widely known and discussed because of the by-election. Even if Galloway's populism outlives its usefulness, the by-election will have done the city a service. And having used the ballot to achieve an extraordinary result, the electors of Bradford – particularly women, the young and the marginalised – know that they have the power to do it again.



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