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Financial Times (London, England)

**May 7, 2005 Saturday**  
London Edition 3

**SECTION:** ELECTION 2005; Pg. 8

**LENGTH:** 1125 words

**HEADLINE:** Everyone leaves with a balloon from the party with few losers

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**BODY:**

The most dramatic fact to emerge from the election was the fall in the Labour vote, which plummeted from 42 per cent to 36 per cent. The decline was spread across all regions, in a pattern evident from the toe of St Ives to the tip of the Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

The worst region for Labour was Greater London, where its vote fell by 8.4 per cent. The best was the south-west, where the Labour votes dipped by just 3.5 per cent. The fall in popular support produced a net loss of 47 Labour MPs.

Yet the result of the election, with the return of 356 Labour MPs, was far from a disaster for Tony Blair. He could claim that "I/we/the government" had been entrusted with a historic third consecutive Labour administration, on a slightly boosted turnout, and a reduced but comfortable working majority in parliament.

The second most striking observation from this election was that no single party benefited from the anti-Labour swing. Instead, like at a toddler's party, all the other main British parties went home claiming a prize.

Each party could argue that, somehow, they were the real winners of the contest. Early in the night it appeared the seat gains were scattered fairly randomly among opposition parties in the key marginals. But an underlying pattern soon emerged: voters switched to whichever party was best placed to give Labour a bloody nose in their local constituency.

The Conservative share of the national vote in Great Britain flat-lined at 33 per cent, registering no progress from the 2001 general election. In half the main regions in Britain, the average Conservative vote actually fell. This should have been disastrous for the party. But despite this failure to gain votes, the Conservatives enjoyed multiple victories in seats, mainly in Labour marginals where the party started in second. They ended the night with 33 net seat gains: a respectable advance from their 1997 and 2001 results, albeit far from sufficient for anything like an effective recovery.

Conservative gains were strongest in their areas of greatest strength during their Thatcherite heyday, including seats such as Braintree and Harwich in Essex, as well as Hornchurch, Ilford North, and Enfield Southgate in north London. The Tories even established an important foothold for recovery outside England, by taking Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale in Scotland and Monmouth, Clwyd West, and Preseli Pembrokeshire in Wales. But other parties were also beneficiaries of the anti-Labour mood. The Liberal Democrats enjoyed the greatest surge in popular support. Their share of the vote rose from 18.8 per cent to 22.7 per cent.

Their vote rose most strongly in the north-east and Scotland. They made inroads into urban Labour heartlands in seats such as Dunbartonshire East, Birmingham Yardley, Hornsey and Wood Green, Manchester Withington, and Cardiff Central.

Party policies on issues of public spending, taxation, student fees, and Iraq probably proved attractive to anti-Labour leftwing voters, especially among students.

But although their share of the vote rose significantly, and the Lib Dems ended the night with

63 MPs, their largest parliamentary representation for 80 years, they were limited to 11 net seat gains, far fewer than the Conservatives.

And again, the Lib Dems piled up their greatest victories in Labour marginals, while failing to "decapitate" shadow ministers and attack Conservative target seats.

Elsewhere, the SNP share of the Scottish vote fell but they still made two gains in former Labour seats, in Dundee East and Na h-Eileanan an Iar. In Bethnal Green and Bow, George Galloway's Respect tapped the anti-war Muslim sentiment. Running as an Independent, Peter Law overturned a 19,000 Labour majority in Blaenau Gwent, one of their safest Welsh seats.

The BNP fielded a record number of candidates, got a few thousand votes in many seats, with their best result in Barking in east London, where Richard Barnbrook in third place won 16.9 per cent of the vote. Elsewhere, anti-Labour protest votes went to the UK Independence party, the Greens, and fringe candidates.

The final Populus poll reported that the majority of the public expected the election would produce a Labour government with a smaller parliamentary majority, more constrained by the opposition, and that is exactly what they got.

So what explains the outcome? The most common reasons given for the anti-Labour swing are that a large sector of the public, who had backed Tony Blair in 2001, were disillusioned by Labour's performance in office. It remains to be seen whether the source of dissatisfaction represented a specific backlash over the Iraqi war, or a more diffuse sense of ennui after eight years of Labour government, or even a deeper disenchantment with Mr Blair's leadership and record.

These explanations seem plausible. But why were the anti-Labour gains scattered among diverse winners rather than, for example, generating a solid surge during the campaign towards either the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats? There are a number of possible explanations.

Voters have changed. Grassroots supporters were once anchored to parties through long-standing tribal identities, shared among their family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours. These traditional social cues and party loyalties have frayed and weakened in recent decades. Without such links, it is far easier for voters to shift support between parties on a temporary basis.

Campaigns have changed, too. Tactical electioneering, where parties increasingly concentrate their resources and activists in their target marginals, contributes towards more diverse party swings across the country. Parties have also changed. Electoral switching is also easier where the ideological distance among the main parties has closed. Much of the campaign revolved around which party would be most effective at managing government and delivering public services rather than offering distinctive visions and goals.

Lastly, the context has changed. In particular, the greater frequency of elections for Europe and for devolved bodies has encouraged competition among multiple parties who succeed in sub-national contests.

The result of the general election was that different parties could each claim that they were the winners, whether gauged by the greatest increase in votes (the Lib Dems), the highest rise in seats (the Conservatives), the most dramatic and unexpected gains (some of the independents and fringe parties). And Labour could also claim that they remained the party returned to power in government, for the third consecutive time, with the largest number of seats at Westminster. In short, every party got a balloon.

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**LOAD-DATE:** May 6, 2005