

Labour activists in the North may have cause to celebrate. But localism and local democracy seem to be in a dangerous and parlous state

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Local election results in the North of England have heavily favoured Labour. But as [Ed Cox](#) argues, there has also been an evident decline in the public passion for local democracy which does not bode well for future political debate.



Labour have taken seats in local elections across the country, not just in Northern towns and cities and in Wales, where the Liberal Democrat vote has collapsed, but in places such as Birmingham and Harlow too. Labour activists may celebrate, but the picture is not all rosy.

The starkest political North-South divide for decades has emerged, with the map painted red from The Wash right up to Hadrian's Wall. At the local level, Labour's domination of local affairs is widespread: Labour councillors now hold 63 of 63 seats in Knowsley which has effectively become a one-party-state with Rotherham, Tameside, Manchester, Halton and South Tyneside all very close behind. But with activists from other political parties more likely to give up the ghost, this does not bode well for local political debate.

At a national level there are dangers too. Ed Miliband must guard against the temptation of thinking northern votes are in the bag and thus decide to focus attention solely on manifesto pledges to win southern and Scottish votes. Meanwhile some in the Conservative Party may be tempted to write the North off, but they should remember that to win an overall majority in the future, they will need to take seats in the North and so will have to come up with a more convincing offer for jobs and growth.

As Policy Exchange highlighted in their [Northern Lights](#) report published earlier this week, there is a deep anti-political mood across the country and this has been reflected in very low turn-out, which was as low as 24 per cent in Manchester. While the media attention will necessarily focus on the winners and losers of the political race, the steady demise of public passion for local democracy should not go unmentioned.

This fact is reinforced by what appears to be another rejection of democratic innovation: last year AV, this time city mayors. It is too easy and obvious to claim that the no vote in mayoral referendums is simply a rejection of a London-hatched plot to take power away from local councillors and the public rejection of a new breed of politicians. Whilst there is some truth in this, people are not daft, what has been rejected is actually a pale reflection of London's mayor with few powers and a very local mandate. Offer the public metro mayors with genuine power, finance and influence and it may be a different story.

So where does this leave localism and local democracy in the North? The answer would seem to be in a dangerous and parlous state. Both major parties have now been snubbed over their pitiful plans for more devolution in England (Labour with elected regional assemblies back in 2004, and now the Conservatives with elected mayors). Yet we need to crack this nut or else all power and influence in this country continues to be sucked to the south (and increasingly to Scotland). It will be up to Northern leaders to rise above their local political cabals and join together to create a strong Northern voice. If ever Joe Anderson, Liverpool's first elected mayor, needed his moment and promised place in the Cabinet of mayors, this is it.

This article first appeared on the [IPPR North website](#).

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