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London's youth swells Labour ranks

Number of full party members has doubled in half a year

Jim Pickard and Michael Lindsay

In Hackney North, the seat of left-winger Diane Abbott, the number of people signed up to the Labour party has quintupled in only six months.

Once a byword for deprivation, the east London constituency is rapidly gentrifying and attracting large numbers of the young and trendy. They also like Jeremy Corbyn's brand of radical left-wing politics: on one recent visit to a Hackney café, the Labour leader spent nearly an hour posing for "selfies" with the locals.

The constituency had only 981 members in the spring, when Labour lost the general election. Now it has 2,963 full members, according to local officials. There are a further 501 "registered supporters" and 1,234 "associate members" — new categories introduced by Ed Miliband to allow non-members to take part in leadership elections.

The pattern is the same elsewhere in the capital. Holborn & St Pancras, the seat of Keir Starmer, has seen party membership triple to more than 3,000.

In Ealing Central, there were just 680 members in the spring; now there are 1,800 across the three categories. Vauxhall has jumped from 966 to 2,618, including 1,738 full members. The average full Labour membership in a London constituency has gone up by 548 since the spring to reach 1,109.

"My constituency party is literally unrecognisable. There are thousands of new people, I don't recognise many of them," says one London Labour MP. "There are some familiar faces who left the party 20 years ago and have come back. But I'd say most are younger, the kind of people who would have voted Green or Lib Dem in the past."

Cosmic justice for Labour

The party mainstream now finds itself engulfed by the politics in which it happily connived, says Janan Ganesh.

In other parts of the country, it is a different story. Take Burnley, for example, which Labour seized back from the Lib Dems in May with a narrow majority. There the membership has risen from 319 to just 484 full members. Or the Rhondda, a deprived constituency in the Welsh valleys, where full membership has risen from 355 to 485.

In marginal seats, meanwhile, membership is still typically in the hundreds rather than the thousands seen in London constituencies.

In Scotland the figures provide no comfort for the new leadership. The typical Scottish constituency has seen a rise of only 68 members since May to an average of 322 — lower than Wales or the north east of England.

Mr Corbyn won the Labour leadership thanks to groundswell of support from activists, including vast numbers who joined during the summer leadership campaign. No one would doubt that this deluge of new members marks a historic shift, coming as it does despite waning public enthusiasm for political parties in the UK.

Across the country the number of full Labour members has doubled to 370,658 in half a year. On top of that there are another 148,000 “associate members” and 112,000 “registered supporters”, all of whom had the opportunity to vote in the leadership race for as little as £3.

Over the summer alone the average age of a Labour member is believed to have fallen by 11 years from 53 to 42. That is in contrast to the Conservatives, where the average member is thought to be in his or her 60s.

Bolivian inspiration?

Jeremy Corbyn has said that one of the countries he most admires is Bolivia. One of Latin America’s less wealthy nations, the charms of this coca- and gas-producing land may not be immediately obvious. So The FT’s Andres Schipani, explains why Mr Corbyn might be willing to swap Islington for a new life in the landlocked heart of South America.

Until now there has been little analysis of where Labour is attracting new members because the party does not share details of its membership data. But by talking to MPs, senior party figures and dozens of councillors and officials in certain constituencies, the Financial Times has been able to piece together a snapshot of membership trends.

Many big increases in membership have been in conurbations with large student populations, reflecting Mr Corbyn’s appeal to left-wing young adults. There has also been a surge in the south west, albeit from a low base.

Yet the biggest rises have been in London, where he has struck a chord with his stance on issues such as housing, immigration and welfare.

Mr Corbyn himself represents Islington North, a London constituency with high levels of social housing and a large migrant population. In this seat, membership levels have soared since May.

But in most of the shires, marginal seats and northern non-university towns, the increases have generally been more subdued. “We have probably had about 100 new members on a total of 600,” says Simon Danczuk, MP for Rochdale and a fierce critic of Mr Corbyn. “I wouldn’t say it’s a massive change.”

The FT has collated data from eight Labour seats that are among the richest 50 constituencies in the country, and eight Labour seats in the poorest 50.

The membership, including “affiliates” and “registered supporters”, has grown on average by 1,690 in each of the more affluent areas, which are mostly based in London. For the poorer areas the increase was significantly less, at an average of 684 newcomers. That figure would be even lower were it not for Manchester Gorton, a constituency with large numbers of students.

“The new members tend to be younger, more educated urbanites, the kind of people who used to vote Green,” says **Tim Bale**, professor of politics at Queen Mary university of London. “I think there is a good chance that the increased membership will help Labour’s chances in London, but it is very unlikely to do so elsewhere.”

The last attempt to analyse the geographic distribution of Labour membership was in 2013 by Hugh Pemberton, a historian at Bristol University, who studied the voting forms sent out in the 2010 leadership election.

Even then, Mr Pemberton found that London had the biggest constituency parties. Outside the capital most of the seats with large memberships were in cities or towns with “traditional established universities”, as is the case today.

Scottish constituencies were already withering. “It was dire in Scotland; it was clear they had a major problem back then,” said Mr Pemberton.

Academic research suggests larger constituency parties are associated with a higher vote share at election time, although a large membership does not always guarantee success. In 2012 Labour lost Bradford West to Respect despite the seat having the 15th-largest Labour party membership outside the capital.

Having a younger, more London-centric membership will have implications for the party’s policymaking machine in the coming months. “If members are getting more involved in our policies and our members are becoming younger and more left-wing, you can see how that will change our next manifesto,” said one official.

For now the new members are providing Labour with millions of pounds of annual subscriptions at a time when the party is facing the loss of other sources of income.

But Mr Pemberton says the party cannot rely on those newcomers sticking around for the long-term. “The lesson of history is that parties can ramp up membership like [Tony] Blair did in 1994 or [Ed] Miliband did in 2010, but it’s another thing to hang on to them.

“It will be interesting to see whether those who join through social media are more difficult to hang on to than members who signed up at the traditional constituency level.”

Prof **Bale** says the newcomers may turn out to be “click-tivists” rather than the type of people who will canvas or leaflet the public. “The fact is that social media isn’t where elections are won or lost.”