

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax, UK

English for Life in the UK

Season 2 - Episode 23 - Elections in the UK

May 2021

Mark Hello, and welcome to the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. This podcast is for those people who want to improve their English and learn more about life in this country by listening to native English speakers talking in a natural way about a range of subjects. I should apologise for this episode that the sound quality is not as good as we would like. Because of the Covid restrictions, we are having to record these podcasts remotely, over the internet, and the quality of the sound, today, is not as good as it has been, in all other episodes, but I hope you will still find it useful.

I'm joined today by Christine. Hello, Christine - how are you?

Christine Hi, Mark - I'm quite well - actually I'm quite tired today, because yesterday, I had the second of my Covid vaccinations and I think I'm having a very slight reaction to that. So, I've been doing a lot of sitting around¹, today. How are you?

MARK Er ... I'm not bad - I've had a cold this week, but I'm almost over it now, so I'm feeling absolutely fine. And ... of course, I had my second vaccination a few weeks back, now, and I had no after-effects from it, so I'm sorry to hear that, but it doesn't sound as if it's too bad.

Christine No - not too bad.

Mark So today, we're going to talk about elections, and particularly, local elections that have been happening in the UK. So - last week on Thursday, 6th May, there were a whole lot of elections happening in different parts of the United Kingdom. So, we thought we'd explain a little bit about what they were, why they matter and a little bit about what happened, as well. So, I think Christine, you're going to start and just give us a general overview, of what those elections were.

Christine Yes - well - almost every year there are local elections, once a year, and they elect people to the local Council. They - the local Council - is the organisation ... the local organisation that deals with lots and lots of everyday important things, like schools, libraries, and parks and play parks for children. They're the people who organise your bins being emptied and often they deal with housing, and also they look after and care for old people, as well. So - although they're not as important as national government, I suppose, they are, nonetheless, very important to our everyday lives.

¹sitting around = not being very busy or active, sitting around the home.

And these - the councillors who sit on the local council - are up for election - some of the posts on each council are up for election every few years and so, this year, there were quite a lot of posts up for election, because of the Covid lockdown last May, meant that many local elections were postponed, so it was a particularly large one this year. So, as well as the local Council elections, the Scottish Parliament was elected and the Welsh National Assembly. The Mayors - I think, Mark, you're going to tell us a bit about the Mayors, aren't you? - several local Mayors were elected, and the Police and Crime Commissioners, in several areas.

(4 minutes:05 seconds)

And there was also, on the same day, there was one by-election and that means it was an **election to Parliament - an election to Westminster** - and that's because somebody who was an MP stood down - so there were lots of things going on, last Thursday.

Mark So - tell us a little bit about - an overview of what happened last Thursday, then, Christine.

Christine Well, it's interesting - because ... there are different ways that people can vote. You can vote by post or, if you want, you can arrange for somebody else to vote on your behalf, but most people go in person, to a **polling station**, in their local area. They are given a piece of paper with the names of all the candidates and they'll put a cross besides the ones they want to vote for and they'll put that in **the ballot box**. Now these polling stations are usually in a local school or perhaps a library or a community centre, but there are some funny places to have polling booths. I know that there's one in a museum, one in a pub, there's more than one in a laundrette, you know, where you wash your clothes. There's one in a swimming pool, and not this year, but last election, there was one in someone's living room, in Cumbria, but they've had to take them to a larger venue this year, because of Covid social distancing.

Mark And of course, the other place that was a polling station this year was the St Augustine's Centre, where we volunteer, so that was interesting. I went along, on the day - I wasn't voting there - because I voted by post, as you were explaining, you can do - but I did see the way they'd set it up there, which was very interesting. Talk about ... what about the results of those elections, Christine?

Christine Well, it was quite surprising in a way. Quite often the [political] party that is in Government, often when there's a by-election happening, they do badly - it's like people's chance to say: "Oy², we don't like what you're doing ..."
That didn't happen this time. The Conservative Party are in Government and they won the by-election quite easily, quite easily - with a large majority - and, in the local council elections, there were also Conservatives did quite well in some areas. But they lost

² "Oy" - not a real word, but a way of attracting a person's attention - generally, not very respectful.

some seats so they lost control of some councils³, elsewhere. The way that the local elections ... the system of election is called "first past the post"⁴ - just the same as the Westminster, the main government, the main Parliament, elections - so that means whoever gets you [the voter] just get one vote - and whoever gets the most votes wins. So, what happens is, that the larger parties tend to win the seats⁵.

Yet, in the Scottish Parliament - the election isn't "first past the post" - it's quite a complicated system - where you vote for your local councillor ... sorry, your local Scottish Member, and that is, "first past the post" - but they also have what they call a list system, where you vote for parties. It's quite complicated and I'm not going to try to explain it, in detail, but ... - anyway, the outcome was that the Scottish National Party won the largest vote and took the largest number of seats, by a long way - in fact they were just one seat short of having an overall majority so they will work with the Green Party to govern. That's what will happen.

In Wales - likewise - the party that was in control before, in Wales, was Labour and they stayed in power and in fact they got an increased majority and people were surprised.

Mark Yes, it's interesting, as you say - normally, very often, in local elections - there's a reaction against the Government of the day - but it does seem this time - and in Scotland, it was the same - it's the Scottish government that there was before. In England - the Government did well - and in Wales - Labour did well and some of the commentators are suggesting: this is partly because of the crisis around the virus and the fact that people have supported the Government of the day, during a difficult period, particularly as the vaccination side of things has been going very well recently, so that maybe ...maybe an explanation.

(9:54)

Christine It may be. What surprises me is that some people - so few people - vote.

Mark Tell us about that, Christine.

Christine Well, generally speaking, for local elections only about a third of the electorate⁶ turn up to vote and a third ... that's not a third of the adults in the country, because not everybody is on the electorate [electoral roll] - because to be eligible to vote, you need

³ control of councils = the Party in control of the Council will be the one that holds the most seats - that has the most Councillors - that can outvote all the other parties, and control the way votes go, to decide policies etc

⁴ first past the post = is a horse-racing reference - the first past the winning post is the winner

⁵ To make that more explicit, or to spell it out:

"So, what happens is, that the larger parties tend to win the most votes, so win the most seats".

⁶ electorate - all the people who are entitled to apply for a vote - this varies between England and Scotland.

to register and not everybody registers. In fact, I think it's 17% of people are not registered, but there are much larger proportions in different communities. So, in the minority ethnic communities, it's more than a quarter of the people are not registered to vote.

Mark Why would you say its important, Christine, that people should **exercise their vote**?

Christine Well, I know my vote only makes a tiny difference. But everybody brought together can change the whole way that our country works. You know, that's what democracy is. It's about changing, it's about having somebody to represent your views in Parliament and to govern them. And I care about that. Interesting, Mark - refugees are not allowed to vote in this country - this country being England. Refugees are allowed to vote in Scotland.

Mark Yes - I think that's important - and I always reflect on, as we work a lot with refugees, and asylum seekers, that many of them are coming from countries where there is no democratic system and their vote - they either don't have a vote - or, their vote is not one that will make any difference at all. And I think those of us in a country where votes do matter, often take that for granted and, in my view, it's a really important part of being an active citizen, is to **exercise your vote** - to vote when you get the chance.

Christine So - I've talked about the local elections, and the Scottish Parliament elections and the Welsh Assembly. But Mark - another important lot of elections last week were the Mayoral elections. Would you tell us a bit about that please?

(12:35)

Mark Yes - well it's quite a complicated story really, because for quite a long time - although many towns and cities had a Mayor - the role of the mayor was just a ceremonial one - that meant that they didn't really have any significant powers to do anything but they would appear at certain events - and they would be the person who would sit in the chair when there was a debate going on in the council. But since 2000, we have had what are called directly-elected mayors in a number of areas of the UK. I think only England, actually.

The first one was in London - so in the year 2000, there was a directly-elected mayor for London - and the winner of that first one was a person called Ken Livingstone. He was mayor for quite a while, and after him, one of the other mayors of London was Boris Johnson, who, of course, is now the Prime Minister of this country. Currently, the Mayor in London - and he was re-elected last week - is a person called Sadiq Khan, whose family's originally from Pakistan.

We've had an elected Mayor in Manchester since 2017 - that person's name is Andy Burnham - but, where we are here, in West Yorkshire, that's the part of Yorkshire where we are - we've not had a directly-elected Mayor until this year - so this was the first time, 2021. So West Yorkshire covers the big cities of Leeds and Bradford; it also

covers the area called Kirklees, which includes Huddersfield, which is where I live. There's also Wakefield and then importantly there is Calderdale, which includes Halifax where the St Augustine Centre is. So we come under West Yorkshire and the election for the very first elected mayor of West Yorkshire was won by a woman called Tracy Brabin. She was standing for the Labour Party - so she was the candidate for the Labour Party, in that election, and she won the election. And so she will now be the elected Mayor. She's an interesting person - she has - she came from a working class part of a small town called Batley, but she went on to be an actress and she's quite well known, in this country, for playing television roles, particularly in something called "Coronation Street" which is what we call a 'soap opera' - that means it's a drama about every day life and, in fact, we're going to do an episode about soap operas, in the future. So - Tracy was an actress and then she decided she wanted to go into politics, and she became the MP for an area called Batley and Spen, after a very tragic event in which the previous MP was actually murdered. She was killed by a right-wing extremist - her name was Jo Cox - and Tracy Brabin became the MP, after that. So, she decided she wanted to stand to be the Mayor of West Yorkshire and she won the election. The Mayor of West Yorkshire is responsible for a number of things - police in the area, so that role that you mentioned, Christine, called Police and Crime Commissioners, that comes under the Mayor in West Yorkshire; they're responsible for transport across the area, planning and housing and adult education. And also it's possible for a local mayor to bring money from national government, to be used on projects in the local area. So it will be interesting for us to see what difference that makes.

(16:55)

Christine How did ... how did Tracy become the candidate? How did the Labour Party decide that she would be the one? I bet a lot of people wanted to be Mayor.

Mark Well - all the main political parties will have a system for choosing their candidate for the elections - that's usually called the "selection process". So they will select the person by voting of members of that party. They will select the person they want to become the candidate and then that person stands for that political party, in the election - and if they're successful - then they are elected, either to the council or, in this case, to become the Mayor. And I'm pleased to say I was able to get an interview with one of the people who was a candidate in last week's local election and she's called Charlotte - she works for the St Augustine's Centre - and I was able to talk to her a little bit about what it meant to be a candidate.

(Music)

Mark Well, I'm delighted to say, that joining me now, is Charlotte. Charlotte works for the St Augustine's Centre - she joined us fairly recently, but Charlotte also was a candidate in the local elections here, in Calderdale, last week, so we thought we'd talk to Charlotte about what that experience was like. So first of all - hello, Charlotte, how are you?

Charlotte Hello, I'm good, thanks - I'm catching up on sleep - recovering from an intense campaign. Yes, I'm good.

- Mark That's great - that's great. So start off, Charlotte - just tell us - what does it mean if I say you were a candidate in the local elections, what does that mean?
- Charlotte You are the party's chosen representative that will fight the elections and then go on to be the local councillor or whatever election it is - you will go on to represent the Party in that role. So - yes - there's a lot of things you do as a candidate. That was all a very new experience for me and it's mainly just kind of putting yourself out there - whether it's going out and talking and engaging to [with] voters to try and understand and listen to what kind of issues are coming up - especially the area where I was the candidate, in Brighouse, there weren't any Labour councillors, in that area and there haven't been for quite a long time. So, Labour is the party that I was standing for. So we had a big, big job to do, in trying to like really gauge and listen to pick up a sense of what kind of issues were going on in the town, because they hadn't had representatives there listening, for a while, so it was firstly about listening, engaging and trying to just establish a connection with votes. And that's what .. to me that's what this is all about - listening, connecting and engaging and I think the more that happens the better these things can be - and obviously with Covid, that very much limited how we ... the methods in which we engaged with people. We've had to use lots of different alternative ways so we've lots of digital engagement via social media networks - apps, like "Next Door App" - and Face book, Twitter - face to face things I think, when the restrictions eased - and I can't remember when that was - like mid-April - so this is only a month before the elections. And normally in these periods your'e building up your presence throughout the year and we try and avoid the criticism that a lot of politicians get - "Oh, you only come round here, during election times" because that's not true for a lot of local areas - they are out there in the local communities: canvassing or just doing other visible things, like litter-picks, or - we do a lot of that normally, in Brighouse but we weren't allowed. We couldn't go canvassing, I think, until ... about the Easter weekend, I think, that was when we were first allowed to go out. Speaking to people for the first time - we had to be strictly in groups of six - you had to wear masks and it was - it's a little bit strange because people hadn't had people coming round to their houses in a very long time but actually the reception on the doorstep was really, really warm.
- Mark Tell me about this idea of canvassing then - so that's going round to people's houses. Are you trying to persuade them to vote for you? Are you finding out what the issues are for them? What's the main ...purpose of canvassing?
- Charlotte This is my favourite part of politics, really - it's the most exciting part - you collect different experiences from talking to people on the doorsteps. So, I guess it's got multiple purposes - the key thing for me is about listening - it's like you harvest all this information, you collect ideas and data and - but to me - it's how you use that data - so, do you listen - and then do you inform and consult, your strategy based on what you hear on the doorsteps and a lot of like anecdotal stories of people's experiences - like problems with the roads, or potholes, that kind of thing or problems with the town centre - or really good things - you pick that up, on the doorsteps - but then also it is to

persuade people - because you have that sort of pitch⁷ - you're standing in front of someone that you don't know and you ask them how they're going to vote. So, it's really really interesting if somebody says they're undecided then, so there's like "Oh! I've got a thirty second pitch here where I can change somebody's mind" and that's actually really exciting and you can have a really engaging conversation with somebody and kind of pitch why you think you would be the best representative for that place.

(23:40)

It is very different doing it as a candidate as well - because you've kind of got to sell yourself. I'd always done it from the other side - on behalf of someone else before - but this time, it was, like, "oh! my face is on the leaflet" that you give them.

Mark My understanding is that, also, part of the purpose is to find out where your supporters are, so that when it comes down to the Election Day, you can try to make sure that people have voted and encourage those people who you know are your supporters to get to the polls. Is that right?

Charlotte That is a very very crucial bit - you can map out where all your supporters are, this is where your core vote is. So, yes - on Election Day going round to the people that you know that are going to support you and making sure that they have gone out to vote - reminding people why it's important to vote.

Mark That's great. So tell me about Election Day itself. What happened for you that day and then - I think actually it was probably the day after was it, that the votes were counted. Tell me about more of that.

Charlotte Yes - it was two days after - so it was all different this year because of the Covid restrictions. So on polling day, that was Thursday 6th May, we went to the best places of our support would be, to go - and spent the whole day with a little team and going around just talking to people - we'd pop into the polling stations, as candidates we're allowed to do that. It's all about your presence and visibility - especially where we were - Brighouse - is like a little town, it has a town centre, so yes - we just made sure that we were seen.

Mark Tell us about the results side of it - what happens.

(25:26)

Charlotte Yes - in normal times, the polls close at 10.00 p.m. So the count - the count is where - it's all of the local areas brought to the one place that is in the centre of the borough - where they count all the votes - this year that didn't happen because they had to limit and control who was coming in to the building, when and what. So, we had the long and painful wait of two days - so our count wasn't until Saturday morning. The ballots come in these big black boxes and they pour them all over the table and they count

⁷ pitch - this is a recent meaning of the word, here, to suggest a proposal, or convince someone to agree to something; pitch can often mean a sports ground, as in a "football pitch".

them all out and you can see all the ballots and you can see that cross next to your name - so that was quite an odd experience to me as a first time candidate - seeing all these people had voted for you - watching the counts come in, behind the big glass screen, that was about an hour and we got the results about lunch time. We weren't to win - unfortunately, but we increased our vote share and we reduced the opposition's vote share, as well, so in a very limited amount of time, given the national picture, that was quite a good result which is something to build on. Overall, Labour won in Calderdale so we still have control of the Council here.

Mark Just to explain that - so you were standing in what we call a ward - yes - of an area of Calderdale - you were not successful unfortunately, in that ward - but across Calderdale as a whole - Labour did win more seats than all the other parties put together, so they will now be the majority party in Calderdale and will make decisions in Calderdale, over the next period until the next election.

What are your reflections on local democracy? And you know - the role of local councils? Is that an important part of our democracy and if so, why?

Charlotte Yes - definitely. It impacts and affects every part of your life from bin collection, to the roads that you drive if there's potholes, the councils, the streets that you live on, the local planning so that's a big, big thing in Brighouse and Calderdale - we have to build lots more houses and the council decides where these houses are built. And then - green spaces, parks, any kind of public space - that's local council - lots of ... just how they run your local town and I think we're in the process at the minute in the UK of devolution, and in particular, in West Yorkshire, We've got a new Mayor elected - power is moving away from London to kind of regions, so we can have a say in policing, transport ...

Mark You mentioned the West Yorkshire Mayor - you had a particular role I think in the selection of Tracy Brabin who was the Labour candidate and who is now the West Yorkshire Mayor.

Charlotte Yes - I ran Tracy Brabin's selection campaign - last September, when she said I'm going to put myself forward - and I'm all for brilliant, strong women, inspirational women in particular, just putting themselves in that - in those kind of leadership roles - so I worked with Tracy in that from last September onwards, until she was selected, as the Labour candidate in December - the Labour Party members had a vote in December about who they wanted to be the Labour Candidate - everybody could vote from a shortlist of three people and Tracy was selected from that.

She's just got a spirit and a good energy about her - a real .. I think she'll be brilliant in the job - an inspirational kind of woman, the only female **metro-elected mayor** in the country, which is pretty historic.

(Music) (29:57)

Mark **Language Support**

This is the part of the podcast where I choose some words or phrases from the episode and talk about them. Today I'm just going to choose a few of the technical words that we used that relate to elections. So we talked - ... we were talking mostly about local elections today, but we also referred to what are the national elections and we used a number of different phrases.

We talked about elections to Parliament, because **Parliament** is the national body where the government is formed, but we also talked about **Westminster** and Westminster is the part of London where the Parliament is and it is often referred to simply as Westminster. It's the **Parliament at Westminster**. Also when we talk about national elections, we have something called the **general election** and that's when all of the country votes for the national government. Today, we were talking mostly about local elections, but we also referred to a **by-election** - and that was where just one part of the country was choosing somebody to go to Parliament, to Westminster, to be one of the MPs there.

When it came to talking about how you vote, we referred to a **polling station**, that is where you go to vote. And then we talked about a **ballot box** - the ballot box is where you put your vote. So you mark your vote on a piece of paper known as **the ballot paper** and you put it in **the ballot box**. And it's those boxes that later get emptied and [the votes] counted to find out who has won.

I referred at one point **to exercising the right to vote or exercising your vote**. Obviously, 'to exercise' usually means something to do with physical exercise, that you do to keep yourself fit. But we can refer **to exercising your vote**, meaning to keep it going actually, deciding **to vote in an election** - to go along and doing the action of voting - that is known as exercising your vote.

And, finally, I was talking about the West Yorkshire Mayor and I talked about the directly-elected mayors; Charlotte talked about the **Metro Mayors** - that is the same thing - the word '**metro**' usually means **a large city or urban area** so metro mayors usually mean the mayors for the large cities.

That's it for this week - if you want to find out about how to get the transcript for this episode, and any further information about our work, including all the other episodes, then stay listening. Otherwise, we will be back, with you again, very soon.

(Music).

You can find the transcript - that's the written version of this episode - on our website:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

And that's where you can also find links to all the other episodes, and the transcripts, so you can listen and read along at the same time. That's also where you can find out how to donate, to help our work. We are a charity, supporting particularly, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants but also, all those in need in our local area and we would welcome your support, if you felt able to give it. If you follow on the website, the links to "**Get Involved**" and "**Donate**".

We also have an email address - that's [**englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com**](mailto:englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com)
And we would love to hear from you - your thoughts on our podcast and ideas for the future.

We also have a Twitter account : **@EsolSaint**
and there is additional material on that site.

I'll spell out all those addresses:

So, the website: w-w-w-.s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x.org.uk

So that's the website.

The email is: [**englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com**](mailto:englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com)

And that's "English for" spelt: f-o-r

And finally, the Twitter account: is : @ [at] [capital E] E-s-o-l- [capital S] -S-a-l-n-t.

(36:18) Ends