One interpretation of the Bradford West by-election is that George Galloway secured his extraordinary 10,000 majority over Labour by his openly Islamist specifying, which appealed to the high proportion of Muslims in the constituency. That was undoubtedly part of the story, but it is not a complete explanation.

Galloway's Respect party took almost 56 per cent of a 50 per cent turnout, but at the last census Muslims were only 38 per cent of the population. Given that many Muslims supported the other parties, a substantial proportion of Galloway's vote must have come from non-Muslims and most of these would have been Christian. By implication, a big chunk of the Respect vote was not for Galloway the man or Islam the religion, but against Labour, which has been the traditionally dominant political force in this part of Yorkshire.

That emphasises the importance of finding out why such a large number of UK-born voters, of vaguely Christian allegiance in recent decades, should have voted so differently in the by-election of 2012 from the general elections of 2010, 2005, 2001 and before. We need to go back to the New Labour landslide in the 1997 general election. Within a few months a number of major administrative changes to the UK's immigration procedures were being implemented.

No new legislation was passed, and no big debate took place either in Parliament or the media. Nevertheless, the sequel to the new immigration rules was a demographic transformation. Whereas the UK had historically been a nation of net emigration, from 1998 it became a nation of substantial net immigration. The New Labour agenda was corrupt and cynical. The party's top strategists—including such luminaries as Peter Mandelson—reasoned that, because people from the ethnic and religious minorities tended to vote Labour, an influx of people from such minorities would boost Labour's electoral fortunes.

But this overlooked a serious potential problem. The immigrants—many of whom were Muslim—had either to find work or to become dependent on social security. To the extent that they participated actively in the labour market, they were competing for jobs with the UK-born. This competition was likely to be most severe in low-paid employment. Since people on low incomes have always been the bedrock of the left-wing vote, New Labour's high immigration, import votes strategy was liable to backfire. That is what happened at Bradford West.

New Labour's metropolitan top brass doesn't live on council estates, and believes in a tolerant, leafy-suburb, Guardian-reading multiculturalism. Fine, but it might have the decency to check the impact its policies have had on the UK labour market. A curious feature of the Great Recession is that total employment has fallen surprisingly little relative to the sharpness of the declines in output recorded in the data. But we need to split total employment into UK-born and foreign-born employment.

The numbers tell a disturbing tale. In the early years of New Labour, before the increase in taxes and a plethora of new regulations undermined incentives, the economy delivered strong employment growth. Given that the existing labour force was predominantly UK-born, it was logical that for almost a decade the number of extra jobs for the UK-born was much larger than those going to the foreign-born. In the third quarter of 2005 the number of UK-born people at work in our country topped out at just over 26 million, while the number of foreign-born people was slightly above 2.9 million.

The subsequent pattern has been unprecedented and astonishing. When the downturn started at the end of 2007 UK-born employment was less than at the peak, if only marginally so. But foreign-born employment had soared. In little more than two years, it had jumped by about a quarter to 3.6 million.

The Great Recession then knocked UK-born employment. It slumped from 25.9 million in the fourth quarter 2007 to 25.1 million in the second quarter 2009 and remains at about the same figure today. By contrast, foreign-born employment continued to rise, with hardly any interruption, throughout the Great Recession and now exceeds 4.1 million.

The discrepancy has almost certainly been more extreme in places like Bradford West, with its high proportion of immigrants. According to a report in the Guardian (no less), many people in places like Bradford say they could not vote Labour, but also loathe Galloway. As he boarded his victory bus, "one young white man pelted him with eggs". Yes, the West Bradford by-election could be seen as protest-vote politics taken to its extreme. But, above all, it was a cry for help by people who feel abandoned by an aloof and distant political class.