

# UK: The Radical Carnival in Brexit's Shadow

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**When Holly Rigby got back to school last week, she received a special reception from her colleagues. They had seen her on the news, and wanted to congratulate her. A grassroots campaign committed to abolishing private schools, one she helped create just months ago, was officially endorsed by Labour – Britain's main opposition party, the same that took the U.K. to war in Iraq alongside George W. Bush. Moreover, the party conference endorsed the most radical version of the proposal that her group, "Labour Against Private Schools," put forward: The motion stipulates that all the endowments and property from elite schools like Eton (which educated Princes William and Harry, as well as a huge portion of the political class – like the current prime minister, Boris Johnson) be taken and "redistributed democratically and fairly across the country's educational institutions."**

Then Rigby, 30, got back to work, teaching *Romeo and Juliet* to teenage students at a cash-strapped public school in Newham, East London. On her lunch break, she checked Twitter, and got another surprise. A campaign that her partner, William Stronge, created also got the approval of Party delegates and union members meeting in Brighton: The Labour Party officially committed to moving the United Kingdom to a four-day work week within a decade, and mentioned approvingly Stronge's [small think tank](#), which is inspired by an Italian anti-authoritarian Marxist tradition.

It was a lot for one day. "It's all surreal," said Rigby, who joined Labour to vote for Corbyn as party leader in 2015. This was all reverberating nationally as she taught in a school that uses a hallway as a makeshift classroom, in a neighborhood perhaps best known for a [grime duo](#). The commentariat was already attacking the moves as lunacy, or maybe, somehow or another, [comparable to fascism](#). But the activists had expected that, maybe even hoped for it. "If you take on the establishment, you expect to see the full force of the establishment fighting back against you."

If conservatives in Britain didn't already have enough reasons to believe that Labour had walked off the deep end of Brighton Pier, radical policy kept coming. The Party approved a plan for an ambitious, socialist "Green New Deal" that would make the U.K. carbon-neutral by 2030. Party leader Jeremy Corbyn committed to a state-owned drugs manufacturer to undercut Big Pharma, and declared that under a Labour government, workers would own 10 percent of large companies, all to raucous applause and the "Oh, Jeremy Corbyn" chant (set to the guitar line from the White Stripes' extraordinarily popular jock jam, "Seven Nation Army").

But everyone knows these moments of left-wing euphoria are to be short-lived. U.K. politics is a mess at the moment, largely because of the never-ending and endlessly confusing death spiral caused by Brexit (technically scheduled for Halloween next month), and Corbyn is very unpopular, even more so than Boris Johnson, despite an impressive record of failures the new prime minister has racked up in just a few weeks. In a likely election later this year, the left has a steep uphill battle if they want to come anywhere close to being able to implement these policies. But, ironically, some of the most dispiriting aspects of their current moment may have created the space for radical policy innovation.

The Labour Party approved a set of very radical policies last week for two reasons. First, leftist activists like Rigby around the country, supported by the pro-Corbyn [Momentum](#) campaign group, made a concerted effort to get a number of motions onto the Conference floor, where regional party delegates and unions (not elected politicians) vote on policy. Each year, around 10,000 or more people attend the Labour Party Annual Conference, which is technically the supreme, democratic decision-making body for Labour. Under Corbyn, the body of delegates and unions voting on motions has become much more radical than it was in the “New Labour” days of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. And secondly, party strategists believe that the more an upcoming election is fought over social policy, rather than Brexit, the better chance they have. Labour campaigned to remain in the European Union, and therefore lost the Brexit vote three years ago; even worse, the issue split their traditional working-class base. In an apparent attempt to keep together a shaky coalition of Leave and Remain voters, Corbyn has taken positions which many people find weak or confusing, contributing to his unpopularity.

“An election which is fought about public services and social policy would be vastly more advantageous to the Labour Party,” said Anthony Wells, director of political and social opinion polling at the YouGov agency. “But as it stands, it looks like it will take place entirely under the shadow of Brexit.”

In 2017, Corbyn started his general-election campaign far behind then-Prime Minister Theresa May, but after a radical policy manifesto featuring things like [nationalizing energy, water, and railway infrastructure](#) and putting workers on company boards, he caught up enough to deny May an outright parliamentary majority. These proposals, which are now [popular](#) with the electorate, remain party policy, and the addition of bold, even provocative socialist ideas this year, Labour members think, could be their best chance at repeating that modest success.

A snap YouGov poll after Rigby’s successful campaign showed that 50 percent of the country now opposes “banning private schools,” with only 22 percent supporting. But the campaigners say that over the next few months, they’ll be able to explain that they want to gradually “integrate” private schools into the public system, not just delete them off the face of the Earth, and they relish the opportunity to have that conversation — rather than talk about Brexit. The first step in the plan is to remove the special tax status granted to private schools, and that one is already popular. If it’s framed right, Labour’s new education policy won’t necessarily hurt them with voters at all, said Wells at YouGov.

Brexit was never supposed to happen, at least as far as its creator was concerned. Before former Prime Minister David Cameron ran for office in 2015, he promised anti-E.U. forces in his Conservative Party (also known as the Tories) a referendum on the European Union. It was a political calculation: a perfunctory vote that would pacify E.U. skeptics and rid him of the issue forever. Instead, Tories like Boris Johnson campaigned to Leave by painting a rosy picture of Brexit that many experts [consider very misleading](#) — and then won.

Whether Brexit as presented to the public in 2016 is even possible, the attempt to implement it has claimed two prime ministers so far, and may even take a third. David Cameron resigned, giving his successor, Theresa May, a few years to negotiate an exit deal with the European Union, which Parliament then rejected. More voices on the right began calling for a “no-deal” Brexit, the take-no-prisoners position that could mean [unpredictable disruptions all across the country](#), from chaos at ports to shortages of some foods [and medicine](#). Theresa May resigned in May after a vote of no-confidence in her government, and the confidently sloppy Johnson took over, walking into a stunning set of losses in Parliament, which [entirely rejected](#) his Brexit strategy. Johnson lost his first six votes in the House of Commons, and his casually patrician new House leader, Jacob Rees-Mogg, went viral for lying down on the front bench. Rees-Mogg, who also attended Eton and campaigned in his 20s

with his nanny alongside him, later said taking that particular position was a mistake. Johnson no longer has a coalition majority in Parliament, meaning he's lost the power to actually govern, and on Tuesday the Supreme Court ruled he broke the law by asking the Queen to "prorogue," or temporarily suspend, Parliament. Another election looks likely soon, maybe later this year.

"The Johnson camp are currently laying the groundwork for an election campaign framed chiefly around 'the people' on one side, and Parliament, or 'the Establishment' on the other," said Matthew Goodwin, professor of politics at Kent University, who noted polls indicate there are plenty of people who seem comfortable with this approach. "That [campaign strategy] is aimed at unifying the Leave electorate," split between the Tories and the Brexit Party created by Nigel Farage — until a few years ago, a fringe right-wing figure, but now a major player in U.K. politics.

One might expect that the main opposition party, which governed the U.K. successfully from 1997-2010, would benefit so much from years of Conservative flailing that they'd be way ahead in the polls. But it has not been so with Labour under Corbyn. In the 1970s, he was against joining the European Union in the first place, and while officially pro-Remain in 2016, he was not a very enthusiastic campaigner. Many suspected his heart wasn't in it. Remain campaigners said he didn't show up nearly enough to speak for their cause, and he told the BBC in 2016 he was "seven out of ten" on staying in the bloc. His current position is that if he is elected prime minister, Labour will negotiate a better deal with the E.U., then put that agreement to the electorate, which could also vote at that point just to stay in Europe. It's a position critics call a fudge; one that leaves some hardcore Remainers unsatisfied and a swathe of the general public unsure of what it means.

Corbyn's election as party leader was itself a shock to the establishment, since he is far to the left of the Labour leaders who won elections in the 1990s and 2000s, and it's obvious many in the center and even center-left of institutions like Parliament and the media have never been excited about the idea of a radical Labour government. Even many of his ardent supporters admit, off the record or in bars at the spirited Labour Conference after-parties, that the aloof-seeming Corbyn hasn't been effective in rallying the country in opposition to the Tories. And the scandal of [anti-Semitism](#) within his party has further damaged his reputation. A recent poll indicated he is the least popular opposition leader [since the 1970s](#). In this rather bleak scenario, pushing good old-fashioned class warfare may be more likely to help than hurt.

"Corbyn himself is not popular," said Goodwin. "But Corbynomics is more popular than many of his critics realize."

In Brighton, much of the left-wing ebullience, as well as the pressure on the Party, came from "[The World Transformed](#)" (TWT), a radical festival backed by Momentum and several other organizations that takes place outside the main Conference. Founded in 2016, the year after Corbyn was elected party leader, the event now comprises hundreds of speeches, workshops on radical politics, and at least one event that could be called a rave.

For three years, the mostly younger attendees have literally surrounded official Party proceedings with leftist ideas. But there's also back-and-forth between Corbyn's Labour and the more radical elements. John McDonnell, Shadow Chancellor (the man who would run the economy), attended an event in a nightclub this year put on by [Novara Media](#). Taking the stage with Ash Sarkar, who last year gained popularity after telling Piers Morgan, "I'm literally a communist, you idiot," McDonnell was forced to play a tongue-in-cheek game of radical Wheel of Fortune, spinning for things like "Amazon," "Buckingham Palace," and "Grindr," then answering which ones he would nationalize. At Conference, McDonnell said the U.K. should share green technologies with developing countries for free, as reparations for Britain's colonial past.

While left-wing groups at TWT had discussed and dreamed about even more radical turns for the last three years, the Momentum campaign group decided this year to officially back policy motions, including the four-day week, banning private schools, the Green New Deal, and an end to immigration detention centers, which also passed. This meant working with activists to get motions up through the party bureaucracy and through the complicated negotiating process, gaining the backing of unions and party members from around the U.K.'s four countries (England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland).

“Our organization has been evolving for years, to the point where we could now put forward policies, and demonstrate we could have a bridge between the party and wider social movements,” said Laura Parker, Momentum’s national coordinator. She said radical policies are needed to win an upcoming election, especially because of international push for action on climate change. “We’re in a time of crisis — economic environmental crisis, and now, political crisis — and people have had enough.”

In Brighton, there was also a bridge to other countries, including the United States. Labour for a Green New Deal campaign co-director Clare Hyner said they chose the “New Deal” framing after seeing the success it had when pushed by the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the United States, even though the New Deal itself is a very American historical reference. Representatives from Justice Democrats, which endorsed candidates like AOC and Ilhan Omar, as well as the Bernie Sanders campaign, spoke at TWT. But most of the policies discussed here — and indeed, endorsed by Labour — are far to the left of anything in the Democratic Party.

Not everyone at The World Transformed was thinking primarily about electoral politics. Paddy Bettington, one of the organizers of the four-day-week campaign, got involved after experiences in his own life. Bettington, 33, works for a company that produces stage equipment. While preparing for the London 2012 Olympics, he felt badly overworked. So after the Games, he managed to cut down his working week by a day. By freeing up just a little time for other things — including political education and activism — he said his life improved immensely.

“We have a very narrow idea of what politics is, largely because we’re used to a form of politics that hasn’t really changed since Reagan and Thatcher. This campaign is about broadening that understanding, and discussing more long-term, ambitious goals,” Bettington said. Like many of the campaigners who won this year, he also joined Labour in 2015 in order to elect Corbyn leader. He didn’t have a ticket to the main Labour Conference event, so he watched in shock from a red and white circus tent with a beer as they approved his motion. “The five-day week is just one example of something that is very easy to assume is natural, or unchangeable. But we could do things in an entirely different way.”

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## **Vincent Bevins**

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