

Politics in Britain is entering a new phase

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Contents

- [Labour under Starmer failing](#)
- [The Dis-united Kingdom](#)
- [Covid pandemic](#)
- [Labour and social struggles](#)
- [Democratic rights under attack](#)
- [Climate mobilisation](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

The successful vaccine roll out by the NHS and Starmer's right wing gallop has given Johnson a shot in the arm. Polls put the Tories 7% ahead of Labour, and on the 6 March at 13% ahead. But the Brexit fall-out, the Covid "social murder", the dis-United Kingdom, and the economic crisis all point towards a period of intensifying political turmoil. The reheated deep centre of Blairism, now led by Starmer, will fail to dislodge the English nationalist Tories, and thus maintain the creeping authoritarianism and the far right in politics. The Covid pandemic is not about to disappear as mutations arise. As billionaires increase their wealth in this period, neoliberal governments will make the working class pay for the economic crisis. Measures are not being taken to stop the rise of temperature at 1.5°C by 2030. The multi-faceted crisis will continue and deepen. In this context, there will be greater opportunities to present a radical ecosocialist and revolutionary alternative.

Elections on Thursday 6 May take place almost everywhere in Britain (but not in the north of Ireland). The coincidence of multiple elections, due to 2020's being postponed, is unique in its comprehensiveness and means this will be the biggest test of public views since the General Election of 2019 and before the next one. The elections in Scotland for the devolved Parliament are likely to focus on the question of independence, while in Wales the Senedd election will likely reflect both the Tory UK government and Welsh Labour government's respective handling of the pandemic and the increasing sense that the UK is a failed state. The elections in England vary significantly, with some people electing local councils that empty the bins or the barely detectable Police and Crime Commissioners, while in other areas they are for potentially powerful opposition figures such as Mayor of London and Executive Mayors. Turnout is likely to be affected by the continuing caution over the pandemic, but nevertheless these elections will be an important landmark in the likely directions that emerge over the coming period, so we will need to revisit our prognosis in the light of their outcome in May.

Labour under Starmer failing

Starmer has pulled Labour to the right at a dizzying speed, returning to Blairite social liberalism. Blair himself has reappeared like a zombie. While we had no illusions in Starmer, his assault on any traces of Corbynism and socialists is unrelenting:

- Announcing that the party is under "new leadership", proudly displaying the UK flag, and

declaring that the values of Labour are no longer “For the many – Not the few” but “Family, Community & Security”.

- Backing the “spycops” bill, and declaring non-negotiable commitment to nuclear weapons and NATO.
- On Brexit, arguing that as the deal is history, the agreement with the EU will not be re-opened, and that Labour should not talk about the disastrous consequences for jobs and conditions. Banning other Labour MPs raising these issues
- Starmer’s so-called “constructive criticism” of Johnson’s handling of the pandemic let him off the hook when the Tories have scored so many own goals. The failure to defend the NHS against increasing privatisation through SERCO and other crony contracts as well as the appalling approach to the demands of the unions particularly in education and health
- In the budget, Labour failed to clearly support a rise in corporation tax now (now is not the time in a pandemic) or argue for a windfall tax.
- Ditching the Green New Deal even with COP 26 in Glasgow in November.
- The composition of the Antisemitism Advisory Board stuffed with right wingers and supporters of Israel shows that the conflation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism will continue. Meanwhile the Forde report has not been published and complaints about serious instances of anti-Black racism and Islamophobia are completely ignored.
- Continuing and stepping up the witch-hunt against individuals not only for supporting the Palestinians but for any criticism of the leadership. The removal of the Labour whip in Parliament from Corbyn after the NEC panel had unanimously reinstated his membership was the first major symbol of this but has been followed by many other attacks on party democracy. The disqualification of three women standing for Liverpool mayor, where a Corbynista was the favourite, was another major step but since then there have been a whole number of other suspensions of prospective council candidates or moves that prevent them standing. The party is now under very tight centralised control by the apparatus – although it varies a little according to how bad the regime is in different Regional/National offices.

There is still a rear-guard political fight in many local LPs to defend the progressive policies gained under Corbyn and to fight the witch-hunt and for party democracy. Labour remains strategically important for the left and the working class as it is the only alternative UK government to the Tories under the undemocratic electoral system and because of its links with the trade unions. But Labour’s failure to offer a clear progressive political alternative to the Tories and its collapse in Scotland makes that prospect of forming a majority Labour government difficult especially under the current electoral system and likely boundary changes. This probably explains the renewed support in the Labour Party for a total reform of the system, replacing it with a form of PR, something which SR has supported as a move towards a more democratic system. In the present situation, in England, Labour starts from a poor performance last time these bodies were elected so will likely make modest gains and keep the London and Manchester Mayors and many councils, which will bolster Starmer to an extent, but seems unlikely to make a major breakthrough that opens the drive for an alternative government at the next General Election. In Scotland and Wales, Labour will be struggling to avoid significant losses of seats though the fall of the Tories in Scotland may mean Labour can grab the figleaf of moving from third to second place.

The lack of progress in the polls by Labour under Starmer is creating discontent even amongst his

supporters in the PLP. It is not inconceivable that a leadership challenge could occur at some point in the next few years. Whether that happens or not, the left in Labour should continue to argue that the party should return to a line of "For the many – Not the few" because "Family, Community & Security" has failed and is deeply reactionary. It is not impossible for Starmer to recover Labour's position in the polls given Johnson's ability to mess things up. Covid is not yet over, and a public inquiry might change public opinion. The consequences of Brexit and the economic crisis are also both minefields for the Tories.

The political fight in the Labour party is a rear-guard defensive action. Left LP members should carry on this fight both in the party and in the unions. But if they stay in the party, then they should fight. In doing so, they should have no illusion that simply winning left policies is enough or that Starmer needs left activists to win elections. Initiatives like Peace and Justice, Momentum, the recall LP conference, etc. are useful in keeping left activists together. But the Labour left needs to draw the lessons of defeat of Corbynism. The right in the Labour party, with the backing of the establishment outside the party, will stop at nothing to keep the left out, even if it means staying out of office for decades. That means building as much outside the party as inside, and arguing very clearly inside about the need to ditch the illusion that it is possible to transform Labour fundamentally and still maintain its unity. It is that illusion in particular that has led to repeated concessions to the right by sections of the left and Corbyn himself over the IHRA, reselection of MPs, etc. Some on the left, peeled away in the leadership election to support Starmer, considering him more electable while others who claimed to support Corbyn, failed to wholeheartedly defend him during his suspension and when the whip was not restored.

The impact of the pandemic and the March budget on local councils in England will be devastating. The Tories are set to implement massive public spending cuts outside the NHS and schools that will create thousands of redundancies and closures of services. Labour councils will be hit particularly hard, especially as the Tories are blatantly directing what little discretionary funds there are towards Tory-voting areas in a classic case of 'pork barrel' politics. Labour councils will either have to implement major cuts in services and jobs or, most unlikely, be forced to resist. Local campaigns to defend services, eg to stop the likes of libraries and play centres closing, could well spring up.

The left in the Labour Party in England and Wales has shrunk as a result of the election defeat 15 months ago followed by Starmer's election and subsequent move to the right and shutting down of party democracy. Nevertheless, in many areas it remains larger and more combative than pre-Corbyn. We have also seen since the right retook control of the National Executive Committee increased co-operation between left representatives coming from CLPS and from trade unions – including importantly from Unite. This has massive implications to break with the rotten division of labour which says the Labour Party is for elections and the unions for terms and conditions and we should welcome it and seek to strengthen this.

Although the left is in retreat in the Labour party, all political spaces inside the party and in the trade unions should be utilised to defend the political gains of Corbynism and resist the witch-hunt. At the same time, the left should re-focus its energy into grassroots social and labour struggles at local and national levels as the way to rebuild itself.

The Dis-united Kingdom

In England, a general vote for Labour is necessary on 6 May as the only viable political alternative to the Tories. The election of Labour local councillors and mayors would be regarded a blow against the Tories. It would give confidence to millions who want change. The exception would be where

there was a local left candidate with a clear mass base such as Caroline Lucas in a general election, or for example if Anna Rothery, the frontrunner removed from the Liverpool mayoral Labour shortlist, decided to stand.

In Scotland, the election of Anas Sarwar, a Blairite, as Labour leader will do nothing to change Labour from being way behind the SNP. Its unionism, opposition to a second referendum and its acceptance of UK Labour's support for the unpopular Trident and there programme for its replacement are massive dead weights which will keep it as a fringe party. The removal of a pro-indyref left candidate in Glasgow Kelvin has sent waves of protest through the 40% of the party who voted against Sarwar but Labour seems set to continue to repress demands for an alternative view on the referendum that will dominate the election. The SNP are ascendant electorally but there are deep fissures over the questions of how to achieve independence that is likely to lead to a recomposition of the extra-parliamentary movement, alongside the fracas over the Salmond and other issues. The mixed voting election system creates complex tactical voting questions, but it is likely that the election will focus minds on the left on how to move forward electorally the independence and environmental struggles.

In Wales, there has been a rise in support for independence with polling indications that a majority of Labour members and supporters are moving towards support for at least devo-max and the possibility of independence. The causes for this are in some senses the same as in Scotland: increased centralisation by the Westminster UK government, the fall-out from Brexit, and the handling of the pandemic by the Tories at Westminster and the Labour Party at Cardiff Bay. However, there is also a significant right wing movement against all aspects of devolution and support for the abolition of the Senedd and direct rule from Westminster. Plaid Cymru has failed to make significant breakthroughs in recent years particularly since the defeat of former leader Leanne Wood by the more moderate Adam Price. It may rise again, especially if they become the only viable coalition partner for Welsh Labour. The independence movement has a unitary character in Wales with the massive growth in recent months of Yes Cymru (from a few thousand to 20,000) and newer left political formations have emerged and grown, such as Labour for Independence, Undod ("Solidarity" in Welsh) and the revolutionary Valleys Underground. Labour for independence is stronger in Wales than any equivalent in Scotland.

In the north of Ireland which is still part of the UK, there are no elections but the Brexit deal is causing real problems for the transport of goods and food from Britain, and leading the Loyalists to feel betrayed by Johnson and Westminster with the border controls in the Irish sea. With the north of Ireland increasingly heading towards becoming an integral part of the EU single market, a process has started of a gradual economic, and eventually political, integration into the south, leading to an increased dynamic for a united Ireland in spite of Dublin and Westminster. The only way of preventing that is for the unionists to introduce a hard border between the north and the south, leading to tearing up the Good Friday Agreement and to the possibility of a resumption of violence between Loyalists and Republicans.

The fragmentation of the United Kingdom post-Brexit referendum has accelerated, and continues with the consequences of the Tories' Hard Brexit. It is no longer ridiculous to ask how long will the UK or even GB last as a unified state. This means that taking up these issues and educating people around the different dynamics of politics in Wales and Scotland as well as the role of the British Empire will be an increasingly important job for SR supporters in England and hopefully for the ACR too.

Covid pandemic

The successful roll out of the Covid vaccine by the NHS is happening despite Johnson's disastrous handling of the pandemic with his cronyism, failed test, trace and isolate, late and repeated lockdowns and cavalier lifting of them, etc. The pandemic has deepened and made more visible pre-existing social and economic inequalities e.g. fewer Black or migrant workers, including large numbers of women can afford to isolate because of inadequate support, health inequalities have grown and are one of the reasons there is a lower vaccine uptake amongst some black workers, both violence in the home against women and the amount of social reproductive work done by women has skyrocketed.

Disabled people have also experienced an increase in hate crime, huge frustrations with the inadequacy of domiciliary care and a benefits system that stigmatises rather than supports them. This has led to the UK having one of the world's highest death tolls at 130,000. The BMJ has called this "social murder". The strategy to suppress and eliminate the virus, or for Zero Covid, is now backed not just by Independent SAGE, but also the Lancet and the Guardian. Some left Labour MPs are supporting Zero Covid and de facto challenging Starmer's acquiescence to Johnson's non-strategy, and have won support from Plaid Cymru and the SNP (as well as some of the Westminster parties in the north of Ireland, though Sinn Féin remain on the sidelines both in the UK and in their failure to campaign for an all-Ireland ZC strategy).

The England wing of the Zero Covid campaigns to repress the virus, popularise the Independent SAGE message, fight for safe workplaces and to make those responsible for the social murder pay the price of their callousness. KONP in England also has an important role to play in this campaign both through the People's Covid Inquiry [1] and the local Crush Covid test and trace campaign run by Oxfordshire Test and Trace. In Wales and Scotland there are important dynamics that relate to how the devolved governments acted. The Westminster government will not be able to avoid an inquiry into its handling of the pandemic, and its conclusions may remind the public of who is responsible for this disaster in the run-up to the next Westminster general election. We should help publicise and support campaigns for such an independent public enquiry.

Labour and social struggles

Despite the pandemic, there have been social and labour struggles. These have occurred without the backing of the Labour leadership. Black Lives Matter was a mass protest with an unprecedented participation of white people, particularly youth. It was triggered by long festering resentment against institutional racism in the UK, but was dismissed as just a "moment" by Starmer. The struggle against racism, and in defence of migrants and refugees will continue to be high on our political agenda. The NEU and other teaching unions forced Johnson to retreat on reopening schools after Xmas, again without the support of Starmer. Smaller disputes have arisen because employers have taken the opportunity of the pandemic to fire and re-hire (London and Manchester buses, British Gas), or care workers wanting at least a Living Wage. The 1% pay rise to NHS staff in England has opened a political crisis for the Tories. Challenging this and supporting a decent wage rise for all NHS workers must be a campaign to be embraced by the whole of the left and the labour movement, and the struggle should be widened to embrace all care staff. That the vast majority of health and care workers are women should be a key part of the mobilisation on pay and the need for a huge feminist element to labour and social struggles, alongside the importance of black workers and disabled people. Starmer's response again has been timid, arguing only that he will "challenge" the government. The rebuilding of the NHS must also be a key campaign for the left and the labour movement through participation in KNOP.

Democratic rights under attack

The Tories have used the pandemic to suppress the rights to political protests and to heavily suppress young people, especially Black youth. The dispersal of the Manchester demonstration in solidarity with health workers and the fining of Karen Reissmann was an outrage.

The events around the kidnap and murder of Sarah Everard and the public response are contradictory. As in many other countries one high profile case acted as a trigger to women's fury and grief about gendered violence. The actions of the Met in refusing to negotiate with the original organisers Reclaim These Streets a Covid secure event and then their behaviour towards the vigil that did take place are both unspeakably vile – but also in some ways self defeating. As a result far more people have seen repressive policing – the policing that black communities have always been used to was exposed to people many of whom had ignored it. Calls for Cressida Dick to resign and discussions about the execution of Jean Charles de Menezes in 2005 under her command in the same area of London, parallels and differences between racism and misogyny and calls to defund the police reached a much wider audience than if the Blairites had retained their original control.

The political impact is all the greater because of the co-incidence of these events with the draconian Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill [\[2\]](#) which had its second reading in Parliament two days later. Prior to the Clapham events opposition was pretty much confined to long term campaigners for civil liberties, the Gypsy and Traveller community – for whom it is a major threat – and the radical left. Labour was certainly intending to only abstain on the bill – the shift to vote against from the Front bench only came on Sunday as outrage about Saturday night was clearly expressed way beyond the usual suspects. Now the government has delayed the report stage hoping that the protests will die away.

The objective will be to recoup the mood. A government consultation on violence against women and girls which had been taking place with little coverage has been extended until the end of the month – and a broader debate is taking place in the context of the legislation being discussed in parliament. The job of socialist feminists and their allies is to argue against an approach which suggests that combating violence against women requires more police on the streets, longer prison sentences, more registers i.e. more repression rather than moves which challenge the structural discrimination against women in every area of our lives – empower women educate men.

The Prevent agenda is being used to attack the left and climate activists, the “spycops” bill was adopted with the backing of Starmer, a new offence of “hateful extremism” is being considered, and the Tories are known to want to scrap the Human Rights Act and introduce photo ID for voting. The defence of democratic rights and against authoritarian and anti-democratic practices must be high on the agenda of the left and the labour movement.

The pandemic has dramatically highlighted the destruction of ecosystems by savage capitalism. The natural barriers that prevent pathogens jumping species to humans are being destroyed with intensive farming, agri-business, deforestation and megacities and the massive expansion of air travel. Without an urgent halt to this destruction, future pandemics are almost inevitable. At the same time, the reduction in economic activity during the last year is not being taken as an opportunity to transition towards a zero carbon world. The dramatic drop in air travel should be used to convert current methods of transport to less polluting and carbon intensive ones. Yet, the TUC has united with Heathrow to call on the government to provide massive financial support for the re-opening of aviation with the Tories already set to reduce the air passenger tax. The Tory government is pushing ahead with plans for airport expansion, road building, and until very recently the Cumbria coal mine and at the same time scrapping millions of pounds from its green homes

grant programme when 95% per cent of the £1.5bn is unspent. All this clearly fails to deliver on the Paris COP agreement to reduce carbon emissions to prevent a rise above 1.5degC by 2030.

Climate mobilisation

With the UK hosting the COP in Glasgow later this year, the climate movement, which the left has to be part of, has to step up its mobilisation, challenge Starmer's abandonment of Labour's Green New Deal, argue against capitalist growth and popularise its programme of transition to a carbon neutral world. The COP process itself will be transformed by the engagement of the new Biden presidency rejoining, and we should avoid pressure from many on the left to ignore the process at the same time as recognising that we need to expose the dangers of the 'cul-de-sac' of offsetting and 'net zero'. The G7 summit in June also hosted by the UK will be an important stepping stone on both climate action and the post-pandemic recovery. While there are unlikely to be major opportunities for mass demonstrations, thousands are likely to be drawn towards the movement particularly from young people. Engaging with this movement is a crucial task of the left in general. The scale of the climate crisis is such that many activists and youth understand that action now is increasingly urgent but that system change is also necessary. The arguments for ecosocialism will find an audience.

Conclusion

Labour is struggling badly with Starmer as leader and it is not inconceivable that he could be replaced before a general election. With a deepening social, economic and climate crisis, only a return to "For the many - Not the few" can offer a clear alternative to the Tories and rebuild its fortune.

The Tories are ahead of Labour in the polls, but they have big challenges ahead which can throw them into crisis: the Brexit fall-out, their responsibility for the Covid "social murder", the dis-United Kingdom, and looming mass unemployment and deepening poverty. These challenges could also lead to Johnson being retired on health grounds before the next general election.

The Brexit fall-out, the Covid "social murder", the dis-United Kingdom, and the economic and environmental crises are all major political bombs on a slow burning fuse waiting to explode.

Political fights and mass mobilisations will need to be mounted by the left to defend democratic rights (including supporting the right of self-determination), defence of public services, against racism and in solidarity with migrants and refugees, and against climate chaos and environmental disaster. The COP is a major focus for this.

A period of political turmoil lies ahead. The multi-faceted crisis will continue and deepen. In this context, there will be a greater receptiveness for a radical ecosocialist and revolutionary alternative and we hope to seize the opportunity of renewing and strengthening our political tradition.

Socialist Resistance editorial committee

P.S.

- Socialist Resistance. Posted on 31st March 2021:
<https://socialistresistance.org/politics-in-britain-is-entering-a-new-phase/21831>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.peoplescovidinquiry.com/>

[2] <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9158/>