

INTERVIEW

# Britain, general election day: The Movement in Corbyn's Wake

Friday 9 June 2017, by [CORVID Margaret](#), [MASON Paul](#), [WEISSMAN Suzi](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2017).

**Corbyn proves you can run a traditional left campaign and energize young people. The future is ours.**

On April 18, Conservative prime minister, Theresa May, called a snap election. She claimed that the opposition parties in parliament were jeopardizing her government's preparations for Brexit. Currently, the Conservatives have 330 members of parliament, giving it only a slim majority. The election, she thought, would give her the power to push through a hard Brexit.

But things don't always turn out as planned. Labour's Jeremy Corbyn is closing in on the Tories, making today's election a very tight one.

Suzi Weissman spoke with journalist and author Paul Mason on *Jacobin* Radio with Suzi Weissman about Labour's remarkable campaign and what it says about the Left's prospects in the United Kingdom, Europe, and all over the world. This transcript has been edited; you can listen to the episode here [[1](#)] and subscribe to *Jacobin* Radio at iTunes, Stitcher, and Blubrry.

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## **Suzi Weissman - What is the state of play in the election? What's the rough breakdown around the country?**

Paul Mason - When the election started five weeks ago, Labour was trailing really badly. They were at about twenty-five points, and Theresa May was close to fifty. Since then, I think it's fair to say that Corbyn has slowly built up a head of steam, and we are now seeing the gap between the two parties could be as small as three or four points.

That still puts the Conservatives in the lead. It still means they're going to win the election. But with things changing so dramatically, even mainstream commentators are now unwilling to predict the outcome.

This is what we call a snap election. It was an unscheduled election called by Theresa May to try and enhance her power. She needs to do the equivalent of taking Congress. It looks like she can't, so it's all down to the fight that the Left has put up.

## **Suzi Weissman**

When Theresa May called the election in April, she thought that she had the basis for winning a

wider margin than she did when she came in, in the wake of the Brexit vote, because she had a thin majority then. What's going on now?

### **Paul Mason**

Theresa May had to call the election because it became clear that she has what we call a hard Brexit strategy. Britain's going to leave the European Union. It's going to leave it on very bad terms, and her negotiating position is that if it doesn't get the terms it wants, she'll walk away without a deal.

It became clear that she couldn't pull that off with a narrow majority in Parliament, because of so many of her own MPs, and also because in Britain we have a system of checks and balances where the courts have constantly ordered Parliament to deliberate on individual issues over Brexit. So she needed a much bigger majority.

Now, we're hopeful that we can win on the Labour side. If we don't win, we're hopeful that we can achieve what is called a hung parliament, where there's no overall control. If we achieve that, she's lost, because her aim was to add another hundred to that twelve-person majority.

Right now, it looks like there's no way she can do that. The Left has fought a very inspirational campaign appealing to the ordinary principals of working-class voters, and Theresa May herself chose to make it almost presidential: "Trust me. Give me more power," and then disappeared, because she's terrified that she's going to mess up in the debate.

### **Suzi Weissman**

Who's organizing Corbyn's campaign? What about the struggle that we saw leading into Corbyn's election to the leadership, a very strong fight between the parliamentary Labour Party and Corbyn? How is that influencing this election?

### **Paul Mason**

When they were trailing badly in the polls, the two-thirds of Labour's parliamentary group that don't really support Corbyn decided just to save themselves — run local campaigns, don't mention Corbyn, and try and survive with the loyal, basic working-class vote. But then, Corbyn unleashed a manifesto that shocked everybody.

I think it's of world significance, because Labour is part of a big social-democratic family of parties in Europe, and it's the first of those big, mainstream parties to actually stand at election and say, "You know what? Neoliberalism is over. The free market is over. We're going to tax the rich. We're going to nationalize key industries, and we're going to redistribute the wealth to the poorest." That's what he said.

For many people age fifty and above, it was like rediscovering a vinyl record you really liked. You'd forgotten it, but you liked it.

When they did that, of course, the excitement began to build — above all, among young people, because one of the key promises was free college. College fees here are £9,000 per year, so you leave college with a £27,000 debt. Corbyn has promised to wipe that out. He said, "Zero from September," that you go to university for free.

Now you've seen probably up to a million young people register to vote on the basis of that, so once that excitement began, people began to come onside from the right wing of the Labour Party.

Who's responsible for organizing the campaign? It is the tight group around Corbyn himself: veteran left-socialist operatives inside the trade unions, inside the Labour Party, left journalists. That's who did it. We don't know whether we can win, because on the other side of this, we had a very liberal Conservative Party.

We had a Conservative Party, many of whom could have been Democrats in the United States, but, after Brexit, flipped to the right. We also had about 12 percent of an alt-right party called UKIP, an anti-immigration, xenophobic, racist party, drawing its support from some working-class people.

Now, their vote has collapsed. The Conservatives have swung right. UKIP has basically melted into the Conservatives. It's standing down in thirty key seats to try to help the Conservatives defeat Labour. So, it's a really uphill task in this one election straight after Brexit for Labour to win, but I think if we can do really well and if we can achieve some kind of parity with the Conservatives, then it empowers Corbyn to take Labour's transformation to the next level.

### **Suzi Weissman**

An economic report last week said that Britain was doing the worst of any economy in Europe. How is the state of the economy affecting this election?

### **Paul Mason**

It's not really, because we had a surge of growth after Brexit, and then that's fallen back now. The cost of living is rising because the pound has plummeted, but all these factors take a long while to feed through. What people are sick of is the austerity program.

We had a horrific terrorist attack in Manchester two weeks ago. The emergency services clearly struggled in light of those cuts to maintain resilience in terms of anti-terror activity. They had to, for the first time in many years, put the army onto the streets. We don't have a National Guard, so you had to put the army directly on to the streets.

People looked at that and said, "If you cut one-sixth to one-fifth of the police numbers in seven years," which is what the Conservatives did, "this is what you end up doing." People are saying, "Hold on a minute. Whose fault is this?"

It's the sickness over austerity. It's the school budget cuts. It's the continued erosion of the quality of health care that people are really sick about.

### **Suzi Weissman**

What about immigration, which played such a huge role in Brexit?

### **Paul Mason**

People blamed immigrants in a different kind of way than they do in the United States. It was all about the economic impact. "East European migrants are undercutting our wages." Those who voted for Brexit were trying to stop that.

Now, I think that sentiment is still there, but you can't eat racism. It doesn't put any money in your pocket. It doesn't put any food on the table. I think that is the primary motivation for the working-class people who are still going to vote Tory, the Conservatives, or even for UKIP.

But, remember, Britain is by and large, like the United States: a country of salaried people, an

educated workforce of big cities. And it is here that Labour is absolutely strong at the moment. It's a culture war, the same as in the United States, and you cannot give an inch in the culture war.

Because, even if you wanted to, even if Labour wanted to appeal to xenophobia and racism, all that would happen is that tens of thousands of its own members would leave and join the Green Party. So it can't, and of course we don't want to.

### **Suzi Weissman**

Let's talk about the impact of Brexit and turn to Scotland. Scotland was always the base of the Labour Party, and now the Labour Party in Scotland is quite right wing and really is discredited, and the Scottish National Party is in the ascendancy. Can Labour win without Scotland?

### **Paul Mason**

I don't think Labour can ever win without Scotland. That's the problem. Scotland is a nation of six million people. It is quite prosperous. It has an oil supply. It has high tech. It has a big cultural, left nationalism going on, and I think it's inevitable over the next ten to twenty years it will become independent from the United Kingdom.

However, in addition to the Scottish Labour Party being a little bit to the right of Corbyn, the issue is in or out of the United Kingdom. The Conservatives have been very clear they're against Scotland breaking away. The Scottish nationalists have said they want to break away, and Labour is kind of in the middle.

It's been squeezed from the nationalist left, and now it's getting squeezed from the pro-British right. The Scottish Labour Party wants to stand against the cultural nationalism of some people in Scotland, and stand against the sort of extreme conservative unionism of others, and Brexit. In that sense, it's against two forces of history, and it doesn't have a third force to rely on itself.

From the point of view of the British government, it barely matters. All that matters is an anti-Tory majority, and the sad thing is that Labour had to suspend a local town council recently in Scotland because its councilors wanted to make a bloc with the Conservatives against the nationalists.

### **Suzi Weissman**

If there's a hung Parliament, would SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon form a bloc with Labour or would she just do it on issue by issue?

### **Paul Mason**

They've said they'll do it issue by issue. There's no way the Scottish nationalists could ever support a Conservative government, so Labour in that sense has them at a tactical advantage. If Labour were to be the largest party, the Scottish nationalists were saying, "We'll do it on an issue-by-issue basis." That's fine, but then Labour would just publish a list of issues and then you've got a government.

It's all complicated by the fact that Labour and Labour's mass base, and the majority of its parliamentarians are very pro-keeping our Trident nuclear deterrent, but the Scots are very against it. That matters, because the deterrent is based in Scotland. This has geopolitical ramifications that I think would make it quite difficult for Labour and the SNP to form any kind of coalition.

### **Suzi Weissman**

The *Guardian* recently came out in a strong editorial for Labour, and apparently Ed Miliband nearly endorsed Corbyn. How much significance will that have on the election itself?

### **Paul Mason**

The *Guardian* is a big influence, and it has to be said that both its comment writers and its news editorial stance have been about as pro-Corbyn as the *New York Times* was pro-Bernie Sanders — that is, not at all.

And for the same reasons. These are the liberal elitists. It's people who don't like old-style socialism. All the identity politics around Corbyn, they're different than the ones around Sanders, but they were there. Lots of mainstream feminists don't like Corbyn.

In the end, Corbyn has proved you can run a traditional left campaign and energize young people. The other possibility is so dire — a right-wing Conservative and racist UKIP alliance government.

The *Guardian*, which I write for, has had this hope that some centrist party would emerge, a bit like Emmanuel Macron in Paris, or like the Clintonite Democrats. But that kind of politics has collapsed in Britain, and the Liberal Democrats, who are the small third party here, just have really not done anything.

Brexit reset politics. I'm surprised that we're doing so well on the Left, even if we may not get there in this moment.

People in America still have to say, "Bernie would have won." But even if Bernie had lost, the question would have been, what kind of movement do you leave behind? What kind of ground war can you prepare over the next four years? I think we'll be in the same position if we lose. We'll be incredibly confident.

\* Jacobin. 06.08.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/06/jeremy-corbyn-labour-party-paul-mason-austerity-theresa-may>

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## **"We're Filling the Street With Hope"**

### **Paul Mason on the power of the Corbyn campaign and his experience canvassing for Labour.**

It is unusual for a high-profile journalist to play a central role in a political party in the midst of an election campaign, but that is just what Paul Mason, former *Guardian* writer, former economics editor for Channel 4, has been doing. In February 2016, he quit Channel 4 so he could participate fully in the affairs of the political left without the presupposition of impartiality that is (unevenly) imposed on broadcasters.

And participate he has: since joining Momentum, the pressure group formed in support of Jeremy Corbyn's policies after his surprise 2015 win of Labour's leadership contest, his writing has been explicitly partisan. He has authored emails to Momentum members exhorting us to get involved in election campaigning, and he has spoken out on Twitter and his own Medium blog in support of

Corbyn's Labour, becoming a leading voice of the unprecedented movement that has swelled the party's ranks.

Mason has been traveling the country as a sort of embedded journalist-activist, visiting the marginal constituencies — those parliamentary seats where, in 2015, Labour had only won or lost by a few thousand, or a few hundred, votes. On Saturday, he came to Plymouth, where I live.

Two of our three constituencies are marginals: Plymouth Sutton and Devonport, where in 2015 our candidate, Luke Pollard, lost to Tory incumbent Oliver Colville by a bit over five hundred votes, and Plymouth Moor View, where in 2015 our candidate, incumbent MP Alison Seabeck lost by a bit over a thousand votes to Tory challenger Johnny Mercer.

The summer after these losses, Labour leader Ed Miliband stepped down, and a new voting process which allowed members to choose the leader swept Jeremy Corbyn to power. Our city, deep in the country's southwest, is an industrial center with a busy military dockyard, a city where many voters that have historically voted Labour have abandoned our party due to their skepticism of Jeremy Corbyn and his long associations with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Stop the War Coalition.

But our local constituency party organizations, like those across the country, have been swelled by an influx of new members, inspired by Corbyn. When Paul Mason announced that he would be visiting our constituency to canvass alongside our candidates and activists, dozens of us joined him.

I caught up with Mason as he was canvassing with our Plymouth Moor View candidate, Sue Dann. I interviewed him in Honicknowle, a ward in the north of the city, historically Labour, where in our 2016 local elections, a swathe of habitual Labour voters switched to UKIP. Dozens of activists had come out to campaign with him and Sue, visiting our marginal seat from places hours away where Labour candidates had little chance of winning. As Sue spoke for five minutes with a voter, Mason and I spoke on a sunlit street, as children played and householders washed their cars or cut their lawns.

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## **Margaret Corvid**

Can you tell me about your experience canvassing in the marginal seats in this election?

## **Paul Mason**

Well, what made the difference was Labour's manifesto. Before Labour's manifesto came out, all the messaging from the Conservatives was kind of hitting home.

Remember, in a lot of these marginal seats in English constituencies people are not that bothered about politics. You were on the doorstep really struggling to get people interested. But once they heard that there was a kind of cash offer — 9,000 pounds a year if you were a student, 9 pounds a week for school meals, social care for elderly people worth about 1,000 pounds a month for some people, they just woke up. They actually just woke up and said, "Wow!"

And you know, what I compare it to is — especially for the baby boomer generation, people in their fifties and sixties — it's like finding an old piece of vinyl that you'd forgotten and thinking, "That sounds better than anything I've heard for the last twenty years." So that's been the difference.

## **Margaret Corvid**

People keep saying about the Corbyn movement that it's a bunch of keyboard warriors. You're a person interested in the digital economy. Can you evaluate that kind of thinking?

## **Paul Mason**

What we're taking part in this afternoon here in Plymouth is a traditional Labour canvass, a face-to-face canvass. The difference is, is that what we have got is relative autonomy, so we no longer have a rigid machine ordering us to say things and do certain things in a certain way.

We have got a whole new generation doing this. They know they have to do the face-to-face stuff, but they do it in a different way because we've got — certainly, centrally, in the Momentum office — people from the Bernie Sanders movement actually saying to us how you link the online stuff to the offline stuff.

And let's remember another thing: there are keyboard warriors on the other side. The other side is doing voter suppression and fake news on an industrial scale that we can't afford and we don't have the expertise to do. Therefore, we have had to find and train people to just monitor and counter that.

Online, we aim to get thousands of people onto the streets this week to do the campaigning — although it's not the keyboard, it's the little phone thumb screen that most people will do it through.

## **Margaret Corvid**

What has the role of Brexit been on doors in your experience canvassing?

## **Paul Mason**

Amazingly, when I started out, I did a speech to some campaigners in Nottinghamshire who were saying, "There is a big bad old world of crisis out there that people are very worried about. When you knock on their door, you're bringing the world of Brexit, you're bringing the world of Trump into their lives."

No, you're not. They don't — to use an English colloquialism — give a shit about that. What they care about are the very, very basic figures and facts and money issues around their own lives, especially in a poor area like this. They've been able to completely detach that from Brexit in their minds.

Another way of looking at it: in these little patches of grass that are in front of all of these houses, the drama of Brexit is too big to play. It's like trying to play Wagner in somebody's front room — it doesn't work. So they're not interested in it.

## **Margaret Corvid**

What do you think our chances are for Labour nationally and here in Plymouth?

## **Paul Mason**

I think here in Plymouth there are two winnable seats. If we win the one we're in now, where there is an ex-military guy in a military city sitting in the seat for the Tories, it will be a signal of real success. It will mean that our message has really cut through to a bunch of poor, alienated people who have found hope. That is the top end of the scale.

I think the more likely thing is that we reduce the Tory margin of victory, because they have

everything going for them: surprise, incumbency, all the media supporting them. But we have got big things going for us.

Therefore, the point about the Labour movement in Britain is that it's a movement. It understands the need for resilience and we understand the fact that we're up against a party that if it wins this election, will crash the economy and Brexit will fail on its own terms.

We will have to pick up the pieces of that. What you'd need for that is a mass activist party. Look at it. On this street, we're filling the street with life. The challenge is to fill it with a bit of hope.

### **Margaret Corvid**

Do you think Corbyn should stay as leader either way?

### **Paul Mason**

After the election, if we don't win, if we don't form a government, it's quite likely there will be a period of instability in British politics. That's the last time to lose a leader in terms of Corbyn. But as a person, if we then face another five years, I don't think he would fight another election.

But we need to consolidate the democratization of the party first. I have never, as a left winger in the Labour party, been obsessive or fetishized Corbyn.

\* Jacobin. 06.07.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/06/labour-general-election-jeremy-corbyn-paul-mason>

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### **P.S.**

\* Paul Mason is a former economics editor for Channel 4 News and the BBC's Newsnight. His most recent book is *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*.

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### **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.blubrry.com/jacobin/24277769/jacobin-radio-w-suzi-weissman-can-corbyn-win/>