

Britain: Tories in crisis - Corbyn's Labour Party in the ascendancy

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On 1 July thousands of anti-austerity activists, Labour Party members and trade unionists marched through the streets of London on a demonstration called by the People's Assembly. It was not the million protestors called for by Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell but it was an impressive show for an action called in three action-packed weeks Corbyn and McDonnell do not see a separation between what they argue for in parliament and what activists fight for in workplaces, communities and the streets. They feed each other.

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On April 18 2017, when British Prime Minister Theresa May called an unexpected General Election for 8 June, she expected that the outcome would strengthen her position. In fact it has done exactly the opposite. Now there is the very real prospect of a Corbyn-led Labour government, elected on a radical socialist manifesto, being swept to office within the next year. The election result was a stunning triumph for Corbyn and a significant defeat for May.

And this possibility has huge implications for the left across Europe and beyond. Britain is not a peripheral country. It is a major economic power with imperialist pretensions which was at the forefront of promoting neoliberalism. A left social democratic government coming to office on the basis of a radicalised mass movement would inevitably have a major positive impact on the British and European working class. So why did May make the gamble she did? She knew that the Brexit negotiations between Britain and the rest of Europe were scheduled to start on June 19. Since the referendum the previous summer in which the country voted to leave the European Union, the historic divisions inside the Tory Party on this question had lain dormant.

Although May herself quietly supported Remain, once she replaced David Cameron who resigned as Prime Minister hours after last summer's results, she packed her Cabinet with hardline anti-Europeans. Her Conservative Party sought to undermine the growing support for Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party by adopting its policies and its approach; through the UKIPisation of the Tory Party.

But that did not mean that everyone inside the party was reconciled to that approach and she knew that these divisions would become more apparent during the forthcoming discussions with Brussels - in the media and potentially even on the floor of the House of Commons where she had only a slender majority. She wanted to consolidate her position before the negotiations got going.

The Tories held Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in contempt and had every reason to believe this approach was shared by the majority of Labour MPs. Aply aided by the mainstream media, the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) with the exception of a smack group of stalwart Corbyn supporters has been trying to undermine and demonise him ever since he was elected in September 2015.

The assault on Corbyn reached its pitch after the European referendum in June 2016, when 172 out of 229 Labour MPs passed a motion of no confidence in the Labour leader in a secret ballot. In the ensuing Labour leadership election over the summer, Corbyn was re-elected easily by the Party membership as a whole.

May and the Tories however knew that the majority of the PLP remained hostile to the Labour leader. The Labour right never missed the opportunity to make this clear on the airwaves and in print. But the Tories massively underestimated the role that Corbyn's political ideas and the huge movement to propagate them would play during the election campaign. The Tory lead of 22 points in the opinion polls when the election was called evaporated as Corbyn's policies were debated across the land.

The Prime Minister lost her narrow majority. Now there is a hung Parliament in which the Tories can only govern with the support of one of the most reactionary parties in Europe - the Democratic Unionist Party.

This party with its long legacy of support for Loyalist terror groups is also deeply misogynist - completely opposed to women having access to abortion for example, and homophobic (having voted against equal marriage. They have already extracted a huge cash price of £1 billion from the Tories but there is strong concern from feminists and LGBTIQ groups that this will not be the only price they will demand. [1]

Labour's manifesto

The primary reason for the extraordinary General election result was the excellent campaign run by Corbyn's Labour Party, centred on a bold manifesto which called for

- Increased tax for the richest 5% and for businesses;
- Renationalisation of the railways;
- Abolition of tuition fees;
- More funding for the NHS and the reversal of key aspects of neoliberalism and similar demands in other areas. [2]

It is not a revolutionary or anti-capitalist set of demands but, in the actual political situation in Britain, its approach was exactly what was needed.

It broke with the neo-liberal consensus in British politics going back more than 30 years. At the centre of the debate that it ignited was the line that Corbyn and his supporters had used inside the Labour Party including during the two leadership elections - that austerity is a political choice and one we reject. And it was the same approach that had led to the massive surge in Labour Party membership during the two leadership elections fought by Corbyn as well as to his victories.

At the same time a great deal of effort went into costing each pledge in the manifesto and to

showing how the necessary money could be raised from taxes on business and on the top 5% of earners. This was a conscious decision, erecting a defence against the response from both the media and the Tories that these were unaffordable promises.

All this was in stark contrast to the Tory manifesto, where, as Shadow Defence Secretary Emily Thornberry quipped, the only numbers are page numbers! [3] In attacking Corbyn's Labour, the Tories claimed the Labour manifesto was based on 'a magic money tree'. But miraculously they are able to find a huge sum to seal their rotten deal with the DUP. [4]

The Tories also packed into their slim manifesto offering further attacks on every section of the population e.g. rescinding the ban on foxhunting and on creating new grammar schools. [5] But it was the various attacks on older people - from which their core support has come for many decades - that showed their unthinking arrogance most clearly.

They proposed that the winter fuel allowance - a one off payment of £200 paid to everyone over 65 to help with increased heating bills - should be means tested. They responded to the growing crisis in social care by saying they would impose a tax on people who need care in their own home in which the value of their homes would be taken into account. And they said they would water down the triple lock which guarantees that state pensions will rise by a minimum of either 2.5%, the rate of inflation or average earnings growth, whichever is largest. They were confident that they could do this and retain their lead in the polls.

The Labour manifesto for the General Election transformed the situation from one where discussion was dominated by personal attacks on Corbyn, to one where politics pushed its way through. Everyone was talking about what sort of society they wanted to live in - and this moved discussion significantly to the left - to Corbyn's advantage and May's dismay.

There are questions where **Socialist Resistance** does not agree with the Labour manifesto.

Probably our biggest criticism is that it has nothing to say about the massively undemocratic First Past the Post voting system for Westminster. In the 2015 General election, it took a staggering 3.9m votes to elect a Ukip MP and 1.1m to elect a Green MP. It took 299,000 to elect a LibDem, 40,000 to elect a Labour MP, 34,000 to elect a Tory MP. In contrast it took only 26,000 to elect an SNP MP. Ukip came third in the total votes cast but was left with only one MP while the SNP won 56 seats with less than half the votes of Ukip. The fewer MPs a racist party like Ukip gets the better. But nothing is gained by rigging the election against them rather than defeating them politically—particularly when it is rigged against the left as well.

We think there needs to be a campaign for proportional representation inside the Labour Party and more generally across British society. Labour would generate a lot of support -and a lot of political credibility- if it undertook to end this situation once and for all.

We also think that there are serious problems with the Labour Party's stance on Scotland. We support the right of the Scottish Parliament to hold a second independence referendum in Scotland. Our supporters in Scotland would campaign for a Yes vote in such a referendum and those in England and Wales would argue for support for such a position - as we did in the last independence referendum. [6]

The Unionist approach of the Labour Party in Scotland combined with its right wing trajectory over decades has led many former Labour voters - indeed members and activists - to switch their support to the SNP. The Corbyn surge has been much weaker in Scotland than elsewhere in Britain- though the campaign and the manifesto did have a positive impact this time. But there still needs to be a

fight to change the overall approach of the Labour Party on both sides of the border on the question of Scottish independence.

Free movement?

The issue on which there has been most debate and dissent on the left is on the question of Labour's attitude to the European Union and in particular freedom of movement – and beyond that more generally the question of migration.

Despite rumours to the contrary Jeremy Corbyn campaigned tirelessly for a Remain vote in the EU referendum. He didn't appear as part of the official Remain campaign because he didn't want to be seen to be campaigning alongside the Tories and big business – something that had certainly damaged Labour in the Scottish independence referendum.

But afterwards it was essential that Corbyn made clear that he recognised the result of the referendum – to do anything else would have been undemocratic.

But Labour had another problem. While the majority of Labour voters supported Remain, the majority of Labour MPs were in constituencies where Leave had a majority. In order to prevent a Tory landslide at the next General election, Corbyn needed to win the support of many of these people. The Labour manifesto, with promises of public services for the many not the few, was critical to doing this, but so was being clear from the beginning that Labour accepted the results of the referendum. Some argued that Labour should have voted against the triggering of Article 50, the process that would start the discussions with the European Union – but this would have been wrong as well as electorally damaging.

This is what the manifesto says in relation to EU nationals currently living here:

“A Labour government will immediately guarantee existing rights for all EU nationals living in Britain and secure reciprocal rights for UK citizens who have chosen to make their lives in EU countries. EU nationals do not just contribute to our society: they are part of our society. And they should not be used as bargaining chips.”

The latter point in particular has been made countless times by Corbyn both before the General Election and more recently in reaction to Theresa May's “offer” to the European Union. It is a good position.

Interestingly Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer went further. In taking apart May's position he criticised the way that existing income threshold of £18,000 prevents some British nationals bringing family members to live in Britain. He was asked if he was saying that EU citizens should have more rights than British nationals. No he replied, we would review that policy when we are in government.

Of course the debate does not end there. There is the question of what EU migration to Britain will be permitted after Britain leaves and how that fits into overall migration policy. Here the manifesto is less precise but implies that freedom of movement would be replaced by a Labour government (probably for all migrants) with freedom of labour i.e. that people could move with a job. This is accompanied with strong rhetoric against the whipping up of racism by the right e.g. “Labour will not scapegoat migrants nor blame them for economic failures”.

It is not perfect; there is for example a tension between the essential argument that migrants are people and the use of terms such as “managed migration” which dehumanises them, but it is

definitely going in the right direction.

Socialist Resistance supports a No Borders position but that doesn't mean we think such a position is one that will easily win mass support – especially just a year after the poisonous EU referendum where racism and anti-migrant sentiment was legitimised by the media and many mainstream politicians.

It is completely understandable that EU nationals and campaigners for migrant rights are passionate about this question but we think it is more effective to think concretely about where the Labour Party is in relation to where we would like it to be, as well as how to move it further in our direction. That means recognising that the current position expressed in the manifesto is not at all bad. It means proposing positive measures such as inviting antiracist campaigners as speakers and discussions about how to challenge racist ideas on the doorstep.

We criticise Labour politicians or anyone else who we think is giving succour to racism. There have been statements from pro-Corbyn MPs that we think do that, for example Shadow Secretary of State for Education Angela Rayner made comments that migration is responsible for falling wages. It is not true – the problem is usually lack of trade union organisation- but it is a myth constantly repeated by the right.

But we are confident that other key Labour figures – Jeremy Corbyn who came from his first leadership election to speak at a pro-migrant demonstration, John McDonnell who has fought against immigration detention and Dianne Abbot who has written and campaigned extensively for example – have a different view which they are fighting for inside the Labour Party.

Labour's campaign

The nature of the Labour Party's campaign was significant. In the 7 weeks between 18 April and 8 June, Corbyn spoke at 90 rallies in more than 60 towns and cities across Britain, under the slogan "for the many not the few." They were huge meetings attended by thousands – sometimes on beaches or parks because there was no indoor venue large enough for the crowds that he was attracting. The message was that campaigns such as those in defence of the NHS, trade unions and the activists were an essential part of the campaign.

In every area of Britain thousands of activists were pounding the streets talking to voters about Labour's offer. Many who had joined the party since the 2015 General Election, including those who flooded in to back Corbyn had not got that involved in the day to day rhythms of the party. But now they came out, understanding that blocking a landslide for the Tories was vital.

The trade unions and campaigns, particularly those around public services also played a significant role. In particular the teaching unions (none of which are actually affiliated to the Labour Party) ran a wonderful campaign around funding for schools. Parents and school students joined in and many schools displayed banners showing the cuts that the Tories were imposing - forcing them to spend time fundraising or appealing to parents to pay for books and stationery.

All of this was in massive contrast to the Tories and Theresa May. Where the Prime Minister held meetings these were for handpicked members of her party. One was held in a factory before the workers arrived, another in a community centre which had lost government funding. Photos began to leak out of how small numbers were cropped into what looked like a crowd. And May also refused to debate head to head with Corbyn or other party leaders in the media.

There was another significant loser on election night alongside the Conservative Party - media magnate Rupert Murdoch also had an extremely long face. [7] Both Corbyn's team and left wing pressure group Momentum did an excellent job on social media which had also been central to Corbyn's internal election campaigns. Fewer and fewer people depend on newspapers or mainstream TV stations for news. Less than half the readership of Murdoch's Sun even turns out to vote.

The national campaign from the Labour Party apparatus, which Corbyn does not control, was defensive and unresponsive. People were generally encouraged to work in their own areas even where Labour already had a sizeable majority. Some additional resources were put into places where Labour MPs had scraped in last time, but even when the opinion polls shifted against the Tories, their marginal seats were not targeted.

Momentum did an excellent job over the heads of the apparatus to break that conservatism and direct people to campaign and generated a huge response. [8]

Local campaigns also varied. Some MPs hardly mentioned the Labour Party, let alone Jeremy Corbyn in their material and sought to run on their individual record as local advocates. Some of them had swallowed the myth that radical policies would be a vote loser; others wanted to continue their feud against Corbyn. But the election results have forced many to publicly eat humble pie and praise Labour's campaign as well as the result. Don't hold your breath that this represents a real change from many of them, but Corbyn's position as leader is more secure than ever.

From that point of view there are still two Labour Parties, the one which supports Corbyn and the one which is controlled by the right of the PLP and the apparatus. But the election campaign has swung the balance of forces further in Corbyn's direction than ever before.

British General Elections usually result in a political hiatus as a new or re-elected government beds in and translates its manifesto into a new legislative programme and activists take a rest after the campaign. This time the reverse has happened.

Jeremy Corbyn has played a key role in this. At his eve of poll rally in his home borough of Islington, North London,, when it was clear that the result would be better than either the Tories or his right-wing opponents inside the Labour Party hoped, he urged his supporters to keep campaigning.

Grenfell: murdered by neoliberalism

Only a few days after the General Election another event happened that further underlined the transformation in the fortunes of the two main parties and their leaders by the result - a huge fire in a tower block of council flats in north west London, Grenfell Tower in which at least 78 people died.

Millions watched in horror on their TV screens as the twenty-three storey building burned from the outside with extreme rapidity. This took place in the royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (K+C) - the richest local authority in Britain - but one in which the Tory administration has been at the forefront of cost cutting and privatisation. While the Royal Borough has many well-heeled residents, this was certainly not the case for the tenants of Grenfell. It was no surprise to anyone who knows North Kensington that the first person to be confirmed dead after the fire was a Syrian refugee.

This was an entirely preventable tragedy created by neoliberal deregulation in which working class people were sacrificed on the bonfire of austerity. John McDonnell has rightly asserted that people were "murdered by political decisions". [9]

Those decisions include the reduction in building regulations which allow developers to build or refurbish estates on the basis of profit not need, not only through using dangerous materials but failing to include emergency lighting, adequate fire exits or sprinkler systems. They include the dismissal of health and safety regulations, including fire safety regulations, as “red tape”; these are therefore weakened both in law and through cuts to the workforce needed to properly oversee them.

The material used to insulate the tower, and many other blocks across Britain was flammable - but it was cheaper than other, less dangerous alternatives. Tenant’s organisations on the estate had been campaigning over this and other safety issues for years - and had been threatened with legal action to try to shut them up. They had written in 2014 that the “improvement” works had turned the tower into a death trap [10] and “it is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord,” in 2016. [11]

As more and more information comes out about the events fury builds both in north Kensington and beyond. The visits of two senior politicians were in this context emblematic. Prime Minister Theresa May went to Grenfell but didn’t meet the grieving, injured or traumatised residents. Instead she had a private meeting only with members of the emergency services the morning after the fire. This echoed her behaviour during the election campaign where in contrast to Corbyn’s mass rallies she held meetings with handpicked audiences of Tory supporters.

A few hours later, Jeremy Corbyn went down to Grenfell and met not only with exhausted fire fighters but with many residents who welcomed him with open arms. So too did the thousands of volunteers who had flocked to Grenfell with food, clothes and other essentials in a wave of solidarity not offered by the local Tory council.

So when Corbyn in a House of Commons debate on tragedy said “From Hillsborough to Grenfell the pattern is consistent: working-class people’s voices are ignored,” he was echoing the sentiments of millions. [12] Kicking out the Tories and electing a Corbyn government is the best way to prevent further Grenfells - though that will also mean tackling those many Labour-run local authorities who have also been managing austerity rather than fighting it.

It has become clear since Grenfell that other councils - including Labour controlled ones - and housing associations have used some of the same materials and practices as Grenfell. Camden Labour controlled council had several tower blocks that it evacuated. Initially we were told that this was because the same cladding had been used as at Grenfell - but it now seems that in addition all the fire doors had been removed during a recent ‘refurbishment’. So listening to and responding to the concerns of both tenants and workers needs to be a lesson that Labour councillors take from Grenfell.

A Labour Government (impatiently) in waiting

The General election and the contrasting performance of Labour and the Tories has transformed the political situation in Britain. Many who previously made attacks on Corbyn either in the media or from the Labour right have been commenting that he looks Prime Ministerial.

Some of the worst aspects of the Tory manifesto were dropped in the Queen’s speech. [13] The cover for this was that the DUP opposed things like ending the triple lock, but the battering their expectations took at Corbyn’s hand must also have been a factor. There is now a real debate even in the mainstream media about whether austerity should be ended.

Theresa May does not seem to be currently under threat as leader of the Tory party - but only because there is no obvious alternative. Polls show that another leader would be even less popular against Corbyn than she is. After all Corbyn's Labour has challenged the whole austerity brand rather than just its current figure head. But when former Tory Chancellor George Osborn (now editor of London's Evening Standard) refers openly to her as a dead woman walking, the precarity of her position is very obvious. [14]

Labour are driving the advantage home by putting an amendment to the Queen's Speech calling for an end to the public sector pay freeze and for extra funding for fire and police staff. While it is unlikely that this amendment will be passed it keeps the debate on the fact that austerity is a political choice at the centre of debate. [15]

In the first Prime Ministers Question's [16] after the General Election on 28 June Jeremy Corbyn welcomed the fact that prosecutions had been announced earlier the same day over Hillsborough and then focused on the lessons of Grenfell and the steps that need to be taken both to support those involved and to prevent the reoccurrence of such a tragedy, not only in high rise housing blocks but other buildings where similar materials may well have been used.

There is a new confidence amongst Labour Party members, prepared for the next General Election that could come at any time as the Tory crisis deepens - one which Labour stands a real chance of winning on a platform of radical demands.

The activists that have flocked to join the Labour Party since the General Election in 2015 have much in common with the people who have joined parties like Podemos in the Spanish State, to fight for a different kind of society. There are reasons particular to the history and structure of the British Labour movement which means that there such a revolt was more likely to go through a social democratic party, rather than by creating an alternative party. The victory of a Corbyn government would be a big step forward for the left in Britain, across Europe and beyond.

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P.S.

* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5049>

Footnotes

[1] *The Guardian*, 26 June 2017

["The Conservative/DUP deal: what it says and what it means"](#).

[2] For the Many, Not the Few [Labour Party Manifesto 2017](#).

[3] Talk Radio 2 June 2017 ["Theresa May is so arrogant the only numbers in the manifesto are page numbers", says Labour's Emily Thornberry"](#).

[4] See ESSF (article 41324), [Ireland & Britain: Why is the DUP so reactionary?](#).

[5] Grammar schools are secondary schools to which access is dependent on passing an exam, commonly known as the “eleven plus”.

[6] See ESSF (article 32939) [September 18, 2014 referendum: Why the international left should support a yes vote for Scottish independence](#).

[7] Rupert Murdoch is the proprietor of the *Sun* tabloid newspaper - widely disliked indeed boycotted for example for the way it spoke of Hillsborough fans impeding the emergency services and pillaging dead bodies. The upmarket *Times* and *Sunday Times* from the same stable are strongly rightwing and anti-Corbyn.

[8] Momentum is a campaigning group, initially of people both inside and outside the Labour Party, which organised people to go and campaign door to door in different constituencies, notably through the website [mynearestmarginal](#).

[9] *Independent* 25 June 2017 [“Grenfell Tower fire victims were ‘murdered by political decisions’, claims John McDonnell](#).

[10] Grenfell Action Group 26 August 2014 [“IS GRENFELL TOWER A FIRETRAP?”](#).

[11] Grenfell Action Group 20 November 2016 [“KCTMO - Playing with fire!”](#).

[12] Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield was the site of a football match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest in 1989 in which 96 people died and 766 were injured as a result of police actions which caused a surge of Liverpool supporters into already overcrowded areas. False stories were fed to the press blaming drunkenness amongst the fans. It took campaigners until 2016 to get an inquest verdict of unlawful killing after many cover ups by the establishment.

[13] The Queen’s speech is an address to both Houses of parliament at the beginning of each session laying out the legislative programme.

[14] *The Guardian* 11 June [“Osborne says Theresa May is a ‘dead woman walking’”](#).

[15] The amendment was indeed defeated, *The Guardian* 28 June 2017 [“Commons rejects Labour’s amendment to Queen’s speech - as it happened”](#) although since then there are signs some leading Tories believe it should be eased, *Telegraph* 3 July 2017 [“Boris Johnson ‘strongly believes’ public sector pay cap can be lifted ‘in a responsible way’”](#).

[16] A weekly parliamentary session in which the Prime Minister answers direct questions from MPs.