

British politics in transition: Austerity, Brexit and the Corbyn challenge

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February 28, 2018 — *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — In the middle of the harshest winter for more than a decade, Britain finds itself still gripped by the icy fingers of neoliberal austerity. Both the health service (NHS) and local government stagger from crisis to crisis, as savage spending cuts by Theresa May's Conservative government make the provision of adequate services – those used mainly by the elderly, disabled people, the ill, the poor and the homeless – impossible. Eight years of austerity and harsh pay restraint among public sector workers have pushed economic growth into a nosedive, sharply reducing tax income, thus giving a further twist to the knife of Tory cutbacks.

The negative effects of neoliberal deflation can be seen in the recent collapse of the giant Carillion construction conglomerate, a company showered with government contracts. As Alan Davies points out:

Carillion highlights everything wrong with a system of private sector greed alongside years of public sector austerity. Already, as workers are laid off by the thousand and sub-contractors go to the wall, the vultures are out seeing what assets can be stripped and what contracts can be picked up at rock-bottom prices. [[1](#)]

This grotesque saga is only possible because of the outcome of the June 2017 general election. Buoyed by favourable opinion polls, May called a general election in the expectation of substantial Labour losses and a significant increase in the Conservative parliamentary majority. Tory leaders talked privately of being in power for the next 40 years. The opinion polls were spectacularly wrong: the election revealed a substantial 9.6% swing to Labour, based on the votes of youth and students especially, who rallied behind Labour's most left-wing leader ever, Jeremy Corbyn. The Conservatives remained the largest party, but had to rely on the votes of the Northern Ireland Democratic Unionist Party – a hard right Loyalist grouping – to secure a shaky and uncertain Commons majority. The results were also a substantial blow to the Liberals, reduced to a mere 12 MPs, and UKIP – the extreme-right UK Independence Party – that lost its only MP.

The election results weakened May's authority in the Conservative Party and her ability to control her rebellious nationalistic right wing, who demand a 'hard Brexit' – that Britain should leave the European Union with a maximum break of trade regulation and other links with the 27 other members of the European Union. These 'Brexiters' are represented inside the cabinet by people like former London mayor Boris Johnson (now foreign secretary) and former education secretary Michael Gove (now environment secretary). Outside the cabinet, the Brexiters are led in particular by MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, whose archaic persona and ultra-reactionary Catholic views have led to him being dubbed 'The Honourable Member for the 18th Century'.

It wasn't only the Conservatives whose internal conflicts were reshaped by the election result. A substantial number of right-wing Labour MPs (called 'Blairites' after the former prime minister Tony Blair) hardly concealed their hope that Corbyn would suffer an electoral debacle, and thus be replaced by someone well to his right. A BBC TV documentary which followed Stephen Kinnock, Labour MP for Aberavon and son of former party Leader Neil Kinnock, during the election campaign showed him and his family [2] clearly shocked and disappointed when news of Corbyn's success came through. Hopes of an early end to left-wing dominance in the Labour Party were dashed.

In order to make sense of these counter-currents, we have to answer three related questions: a) What explains the sudden and unexpected rise of Corbyn to the Labour leadership? b) Why did Britain vote to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum? c) Why does conflict over Europe still divide the Conservative Party?

Oooh Jeremy Corbyn!

On June 24, 2017, just two weeks after the election, Corbyn appeared on the main stage of the internationally renowned Glastonbury music festival and was given a rapturous reception by tens of thousands of young people present. This reception, including the chant Ooohh Jeremy Corbyn! was a reprise of the barnstorming rallies Corbyn had held during the election campaign, all around the country – a return with a vengeance to 'old fashioned' political meetings.

Surveys showed that two thirds of people under the age of 25 had voted Labour. After this The Economist, a bellweather of pro-capitalist option, said 'there are worse things than a Corbyn government', and that such a government would be a 'setback, not a disaster' – provided Corbyn could be controlled and his actions moderated.

Election results showed Labour had achieved some remarkable results where there were large numbers of students. For example, in Canterbury where there are two universities and more than 40,000 students, the incumbent Tory MP Sir Julian Brazier, a Brexiteer and former defence minister, saw his 9000 majority overturned. He put it down to 'a student movement on social media'. Eight thousand new voters registered in the constituency before the election. And indeed the left-wing Corbynista faction Momentum ran a brilliant social media campaign.

In fact, young people delivered Corbyn not only his relative electoral success, but also his leadership of the party. He became Labour leader in 2015 when the party decided to offer cut-price party membership online and a leadership vote for new members. Membership of the Labour Party has gone up from about 120,000 under Blair, to more than 600,000 today – the biggest political party in western Europe. How can this apparent radicalism among young people be explained? On the one hand there has been a general radicalisation over the past two decades on issues like the environment, racism and human rights. This was expressed in the growth of the Green Party prior to the 2015 election, which went from around 40,000 members to around 50,000. The advent of Corbyn has swamped the Greens with a much bigger and more mainstream radicalisation.

But another key factor is the dire economic situation that many 'millennials' in the UK find themselves in. *The Guardian*, quoting a report by the Resolution Foundation said:

The report ...paints a gloomy picture for all young adults across the developed world – apart from the Nordic countries. It highlights how incomes are depressed, jobs scarce and home ownership is slumping for the millennial generation compared with the baby boomers that preceded them.

But it also reveals that on many measures – apart from unemployment – British millennials have

suffered a more significant decline than those in other countries.

The situation facing young people is a subset of the damage done by neoliberalism to the workforce in general. Because of the lack of social housing and an absurdly expensive housing market, many young people find themselves paying 50% of their income on housing – either for sky-high rents in private accommodation or a steep mortgage. Jobs are poorly paid and often based on ‘zero hours contracts’, with no guaranteed hours or pay levels. Because of the privatisation of utilities, charges for gas, water and electricity are also high. Factor in some of the highest transport prices in the world, and expensive restaurants, pubs and other places of entertainment, it results in just one thing: massive levels of debt and young people relying on credit cards for everyday spending – an unsustainable mountain of debt. No wonder lots of young people are fed up.

One would have thought that senior Labour figures would have been ecstatic about the huge surge in membership, but for scores of Labour MPs and hundreds of Labour local councillors, this is not the case. Without doubt the Blairite right would be happy to see an exit of some hundreds of thousands of Corbynistas who are making their life difficult. Sharp conflict has taken place across the party on a number of fronts. Organisationally, the right wing has fought a rear-guard action to keep control of the National Executive Committee (NEC), a fight they have for the moment lost. In January three vacant seats on the NEC were all won by supporters of Momentum, the left-wing grouping that supports Corbyn. Among the victors was Jon Lansman, Momentum’s secretary and a veteran of the ‘Bennite’ [\[3\]](#) movement of the 1970s and ‘80s. The left won these seats with votes between 62,000 and 68,000, as against a vote of 38,000 for the highest polling Blairite candidate Eddie Izzard, the well known stand-up comedian. Izzard claimed to stand for no faction or grouping, but his material was printed and published by the Blairite group Labour First.

The Labour right wing has lost control over the national disciplinary committee and has suffered another loss with the resignation of Blairite-leaning general secretary Ian McNichol.

But the Labour right wing is hanging on tenaciously at local level, in particular trying to prevent left-wingers being selected as local council candidates, but especially trying to prevent any MP being ‘re-selected’, that is, replaced with a more left-wing candidate. In fact the Corbynista left seems to have little stomach for such fights. Many of the new levy of members are inexperienced and reluctant to get involved in bitter local infighting. The net result is that even if Labour wins the next election, it may be very hard to mobilise the majority of Labour MPs in support of radical measures.

In some localities – for example Haringey and Walthamstow in London – bitter fights are taking place over ‘redevelopment’ projects. In these, right-wing Labour local councils are attempting to force through plans to demolish social housing and replace it with retail centres and expensive housing schemes, only a small part of which will be in any sense ‘affordable’. The left charges that these projects are in effect a form of ‘social cleansing’, where poor people will be pushed out – certainly pushed out of the borough and probably out of London. Corbyn has backed local Labour activists fighting alongside trade unionists and community activists against this social cleansing. [\[4\]](#)

Nationally the Labour right are waging a series of campaigns that in reality are aimed at Corbyn and his supporters. First, in a campaign run directly by Blair and his former press secretary Alistair Campbell, they accuse Corbyn, together with deputy leader John McDonnell of being too reluctant to come out in favour of Britain remaining in the European single market and customs union after Britain leaves the EU. However, on February 26, Corbyn changed Labour’s position on this, saying they would now fight to remain in the customs union, a move that will take the wind out of the Blairites’ sails on this issue. Potentially this could result in the government being defeated in the Commons, if pro-EU Tories form a bloc with Labour, the Liberals and the Scottish Nationalists.

Second, and scandalously, the Labour right is accusing the Corbynistas of being 'anti-Semitic'. This campaign is based on just one real fact: the Corbyn team stands for Palestinian national rights. This is enough to qualify as 'anti-Semitism', and it is a slander repeated endlessly in the right-wing press and taken as good coin by some in the left of centre liberal media, for example some journalists on The Guardian newspaper and on the most radical TV news programme, Channel 4 News. Key people on both these outlets are viscerally hostile to Corbyn. The Israeli government itself has every reason to be interested in this debate. The last thing they want is a Corbyn government, which would disrupt their system of international alliances.

The Blairites are also trying to undermine a key trade union ally of Corbyn, UNITE general secretary Len McCluskey, by claiming there were irregularities in his election. If the government Certification Officer were to remove McCluskey, it would be a major blow to the left on the Labour NEC.

Finally the right wing is running another campaign aimed at the Corbynistas, one based on gender. Right wing MPs Jess Phillips and Harriet Harman, among others, are insisting that the next leader of the party 'must be a woman'. This is based on the assumption that the left does not have a credible woman candidate, and will want to propose McDonnell when Corbyn retires (he is 69 and will likely be in his 70s when the next election occurs).

Brexit, UKIP and the Tory right

Labour's internal fights are paralleled by acute tensions within the Conservative Party and the catastrophic crisis of UKIP. Although many people on the left didn't see it this way [5], the 2016 vote to leave the European Union was a political disaster. The referendum was used by the hard right of the Conservative Party, aided by UKIP, to take control of the party and to impose their own anti-immigrant, anti-welfare state agenda. In particular, the Brexiteers want to pull Britain out of compliance with the European Court of Human Rights and make a bonfire of worker and environmental rights the EU insists on.

During the referendum campaign this was most precisely called by Nicola Sturgeon, Scottish First Minister and leader of the Scottish National Party, who described the referendum as an 'attempted coup' by the Tory right. [6]

Anti-Europeanism has always been the calling card of the Tory right, a badge of its extreme nationalism. The problem is that it doesn't correspond to the objective interests of most sections of the British capitalist class: both the financiers of the City of London and large-scale manufacturers want to have access to the European single market and customs union. External investors in Britain, like Japanese carmakers, want their operations in the UK to have immediate access to the rest of Europe. As a result of these objective capitalist interests, a big majority of Conservative MPs were against leaving the European Union. But not their base: only 38% of Conservative voters cast their ballot to remain in the EU.

During the referendum campaign the majority of the Conservative leaders, together with Labour, the Liberals, the Scottish Nationalists and the Greens - as well as Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland - were all for staying in the EU. How then did the Brexiteers win by 52% to 48% (about 17 million to 16 million votes)?

The Brexit case was hammered home daily in the influential right-wing press, and the core of it was anti-immigrant racism. "Take back control" was the Brexiteers slogan and this mainly meant 'take back control' of 'our' borders to keep immigrants out.

At the same time the vote represented a rejection of mainstream politics by a significant number of working-class voters, especially in poor working class northern and Midlands towns. Ironically many of these voters will agree with Labour on properly funding the health service and local government, and on re-nationalising utilities like gas, electricity and the railways. But they will not agree with Labour on immigration. Racism and xenophobia are the Achilles heel of the more backward sections of the British working class. The right wing of the Labour Party is putting forward the demand for a new referendum, and are calling for Corbyn to take a much more clear-cut position in favour of Britain remaining inside the single market and the customs union. Corbyn has shifted on the latter but will not put forward the demand for a new referendum, which would open Labour up to accusations of defying a democratic vote.

UKIP has suffered catastrophically from the outcome of the referendum. In the pre-referendum election in 2015, UKIP won 3.8 million votes, 12.9% of the total. In 2017 this was down to 550,000, just 2.1% of the vote. A party set up on the single issue of getting Britain out of the EU naturally suffered when that objective seems to have been achieved. But more than that, UKIP's right-wing politics post-referendum dominate the Conservative Party. What's the point of UKIP when the governing party is adopting its policies? UKIP has suffered the same marginalisation fate that the fascist National Front suffered after Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979.

After the 2015 election, UKIP's leader and best known figure Nigel Farage went off to work in the media and hob-knob with the likes of Donald Trump and Rupert Murdoch. Farage expressed delight that he would no longer have to regularly mix with 'low grade people', a searing dismissal of the petit bourgeois reactionaries that make up UKIP's activist base. Since Farage's departure, UKIP has had three leaders, the latest of whom, Henry Bolton was forced out after it was revealed that his newly acquired glamour model girlfriend had tweeted posts referring to Black people as 'ugly', and saying that Prince Harry's mixed-race fiancée Meghan Markle would 'taint' the British royal family.

As the European Union turns up the heat on May, demanding major concessions in return for a transitions period and new favourable relationship with the EU after Brexit, the conflicts inside the Conservative Party are becoming intense. At the same time the Tory feral right, represented by the parliamentary Brexiteers and the key right wing daily papers - the Telegraph, Sun and Daily Mail - keep up a barrage of slanders against Corbyn and his team. The latest, which ended very badly, was the accusation by Tory vice-chair Ben Bradley that Corbyn had sold British state secrets to Czech intelligence during the 1970s and '80s. This preposterous piece of mendacity - as if Corbyn were actually privy to state secrets - resulted in Bradley admitting the whole story was fabricated and having to pay libel damages.

In the wake of the referendum there was a spike in attacks against immigrant workers. The Home Office, Britain's interior ministry, has utilised anti-immigrant sentiment to step up its deportation campaign against 'illegal' residents, including people who have lived in Britain for decades - indeed, some people who came to the UK from the Caribbean as children in the 1950s have been told to leave. A consequence of this is that sectors that depend on immigrant workers - for example the health service, care homes for the elderly and agriculture - are running short of staff. It is estimated that up to 40,000 European nurses who would otherwise have come to work in Britain, either went home or decided not to come after the referendum.

Disillusionment with mainstream politics runs right through the working class, especially the understanding that Britain is rapidly becoming more and more unequal. The disastrous July 2017 fire in the high-rise Grenville Tower in west London, in which more than 70 people died, was widely seen as a symptom of the contemptuous treatment of the poor by the rich elite. Grenville Tower was a centre of social housing, occupied by many low paid and immigrant workers, whose management was hived off by the Tory council to a semi-private management company that neglected basic safety

concerns, despite repeated warnings.

Despite myths by some left wingers, working class disillusionment was not the core of the Brexit vote. About 65% of Labour voters voted to remain in the EU. The core of the Brexit vote was older voters and middle class voters in the shires and affluent suburbs, which parallels the core support for the Conservatives. A big majority of people under 45 voted against leaving the EU. Among under-25s it was nearly 70%. The majority against leaving the EU was huge in multi-racial London.

Conservative finance minister Phillip Hammond clearly sees the need for the British economy not to suffer a sudden lurch out of EU membership and has put forward a version of a 'soft' Brexit, which he said would be "a lot like the present situation". This prompted a furious response from the Brexiteer right, and a retreat by Hammond under pressure from May. The central problem for May and her Brexit minister David Davis is this: they want at least a transition period during which Britain will have full access to the single market, but the price demanded by the EU for this is free access to Britain for EU workers, and the right for these workers to stay in Britain after Brexit. This is anathema to the Conservative right wing, for whom stopping immigration was the key point of the referendum in the first place.

Conflicts inside the Conservative Party are also fuelled by the obvious fact that the Brexiteers' much vaunted economic 'advantages' for Britain going out of the EU are completely delusional. The idea that Britain will rapidly conclude super- advantageous trade deals with the rest of the world, which will be better for British trade than the existing EU deals, is a pipe dream.

Perhaps the most intractable post-Brexit dilemma for Theresa May is the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. For twenty years there has effectively been no border as far as trade and travel are concerned. Nobody on the island of Ireland, not even hard-line Loyalists in the north, want to see a new policed border and customs posts in place, which would damage the economy of both north and south and perhaps revive a Republican campaign against the border. But how can a hard border be avoided if the United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is a part, is outside of the European Union while the Republic remains inside the EU - which of course it will be? If there is no hard border, then goods, services and people can come into Northern Ireland from the EU, and once there it will be very difficult to stop them getting into the rest of the UK, especially as the Democratic Unionists will cease all support for the government if there is any attempt to construct a 'border' between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain.

Conservative austerity holds sway for one reason only, because Thatcher's anti-union laws, which subsequent Labour governments refused to repeal, prevent effective action strike against the public sector pay cap and public service cuts. Of course that does not mean a total absence of industrial struggle. The last six months have seen rail workers mounting days of action to 'keep the guard on the train'. British Airways cabin crews have held repeated strikes over pay. In the manufacturing sector, BMW workers have been striking in defence of pensions and earlier in the year Fujitsu workers had walked out in protest against mass redundancies. There is currently a major national strike by university teachers over pensions. School teachers in the South East had been on strike against education cuts. And there have been many more small, if militant, strikes. But that cannot disguise the fact that the number of strike days is at an historically low level. Like the myriad of local campaigns against NHS, school and council service cuts, most of these are defensive struggles.

In this situation immense hopes have been invested in the possibility of a left Labour government led by Corbyn. Just as the Brexiteer Tories have marginalised UKIP, so the Corbynistas have for the moment marginalised the left that remains outside the Labour Party, although of course that left remains active in the unions and in the battles against public sector cuts. British politics has entered a period of intense turbulence and for the first time in decades the radical left is a key player at a

national political level.

Phil Hearse

P.S.

* <http://www.links.org.au/british-politics-transition-austerity-brexit-corbyn>

* Phil Hearse is a member of the Transform! Editorial board.

Footnotes

[1] <http://socialistresistance.org/make-carillion-a-watershed/11409>

[2] Kinnock is married to Helle Thorning-Schmidt, former Prime Minister of Denmark, seen in the BBC2 documentary Labour, the Summer Everything Changed, strongly advising him not to talk to the media after Corbyn's success. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/labour-documentary-general-election-jeremy-corbyn-stephen-kinnock-a8067606.html>

[3] After Tony Benn, key Labour left leader in the 1970s, '80s and '90s.

[4] <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/labour-party/jeremy-corbyn/news/89328/jeremy-corbyn-vows-end-social>

[5] For example the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party-Morning Star.

[6] http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14556787.Nicola_Sturgeon_Leave_campaign_is_an_attempted_coup_by_right_wing_Tories/