

Facing up to the Crisis - urgent questions for the British Left

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British politics have entered a profound crisis, characterised by an escalating hard right threat against working class communities in all their diversity. The growing menace of a hard-right Tory or Tory-Brexit Party government is paralleled by the threat - and increasing reality - of reactionary violence in the streets and communities.

The Supreme Court decision against Johnson, and revelations alleging corrupt payments while he was Mayor of London, create new difficulties for Johnson - especially carrying out the promise to leave the European Union by 31st October. The short-term prospects for Johnson's coup hang in the balance. The Tories have the Brexit Party breathing down their neck, waiting to cry 'betrayal' if that date for EU withdrawal is not met. Johnson's way out, of course, is a general election on the theme of 'get Brexit done'. There is no ambiguity about what is intended. This is not going to be a 'business as usual' election, but an immense reactionary spectacle in which the right-wing media are deployed at hysterical levels against Corbynism, designed to get a mandate for a no-deal Brexit and smash the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party.

Johnson's coup attempt and the escalating level of violent language have emboldened the fascist and semi-fascist right. Every day brings news of more racist and xenophobic attacks. There are more threats against MPs and anti-Brexit activists. A serving soldier sends a letter threatening to kill Angela Rayner. The office of a Birmingham MP is besieged and many MPs who oppose Johnson receive death threats. Tommy Robinson's supporters chant Boris Johnson's name, just as the KKK and US fascists chanted the name of Donald Trump.

In this mix Brendan O'Neill, a commentator for the extreme-right website Spiked!, has called - on BBC Radio - for riots to push through a hard Brexit.

The central danger we face today is that of a general election won by the Conservatives or a Tory-Brexit Party coalition. Right-wing commentators fear that without a Johnson-Farage lash up, the election could be won by Jeremy Corbyn. Farage and the Johnson-Cummings team are now competing to outdo one another with ranting language, to win an increasingly-radicalised and mobilised pro-Brexit base. While Johnson talks about 'traitors', Farage promises to 'take the knife' to Whitehall bureaucrats.

A Tory-Brexit Party link-up?

While the Tories want to give away as little as possible in terms of seats, reality is pushing them towards an electoral pact with Farage. Influential *Sun* commentator Rod Liddle says a pact is vital to ensure a Labour defeat, and new chair of the hard-right Tory European Research Group, Steve Baker, is also campaigning for a coalition.

While attention has been focussed on Parliament and the Labour Party Conference, the Brexit Party has been holding large rallies across the country. It claims to have 600 candidates in place for the

election.

Hate Mongers

In the right-wing mass media, growing reactionary hysteria is deliberately stoked by abusive language. In the *Sun*, Rod Liddle says:

“We all want this awful mess over with as soon as possible. Labour and the ludicrous Lib Dems are stopping that from happening. We will have a general election very soon. Most likely in November. And what Boris and his colleagues need to do is make sure they have a deal in place with Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party. Without it, they will lose the election.”

Liddle’s rhetoric is dire. Opposition MPs in Parliament are “gibbering, self-serving weasels”. Corbyn’s popularity is between “a sick bucket and the Ebola virus”. Anna Soubry is a “demented squawkbox”. Corbyn supporters are a “retinue of dingbat Marxists, Hamas lovers and Trots.”

Some people on the Left seem only amused by these rantings, especially if they involve denouncing Tory politicians. But it is much more serious than that. When Anna Soubry is threatened by fascists in the streets, this enables and encourages right-wing violence – violence that is already targeting the Left, as shown by the assault on Owen Jones and the clashes with fascists in Whitehall after a pro-democracy demonstration two weeks ago.

The crescendo of reactionary rhetoric is designed to mobilise hatred against Corbyn and the Left, to de-legitimise and demonise opposition and energise an increasingly reactionary mass base.

Unfortunately, the decision at Labour Party conference for a neutral position in a new referendum worsens its electoral prospects by failing to minimise the possibility of Remainers defecting to the Liberal Democrats or Greens. As Jonathan Lis explained in the *New Statesman*:

“The problem is that this stance makes an election victory much less likely. What was decided on Monday was not bad policy so much as bad politics.

“The first reason is that the policy is extremely hard to explain. Not only is Labour suggesting it might negotiate something and then campaign against it, but it refuses to confirm what it thinks about the key issue of our time. On the doorsteps it could come across not as noble or conciliatory but evasive and absurd.

“The second and more important reason is that Labour’s destination is now all but locked in. It is a *de facto* Remain party. The vast majority of its MPs want to remain. So does the shadow cabinet. So do the party’s members. So do its voters. ...Eventually the party will have to admit that. The mistake was not to admit it now. Why didn’t they? Put simply, it wants to convince voters that the party may eventually back Leave. It sounds dishonest, because it is.” [\[1\]](#)

Creeping Fascism: Threat of a Hard-Right Government

For some on the Left there is complacency about the dangers of a Johnson or Johnson-Farage government, a complacency that often comes out of a fatal misreading of Brexit and the Brexit Party. Either a Johnson Tory government or a coalition with the Brexit Party would result in a government hell-bent on smashing up the last remnants of the welfare state, imposing new anti-union laws and restricting the right to strike even further, tying Britain to a crushing trade deal with the US and victimising immigrant workers and refugees. There are already straws in the wind of a redefinition of ‘extremism’ to include not just the far right and terrorist Islamism, but the radical left as well.

Such a government would double down on austerity. It would be a disaster for those poor and neglected communities that often voted heavily for Brexit. Boris Johnson will pledge to spend billions on public services in order to win the election and those promises will evaporate when the election is done.

The election of a hard right government would not come in a vacuum, but against the background of escalating economic recession, an exultant reactionary and fascist right and ever-deeper austerity. It would also result in a profound political demoralisation in the labour movement and the Left, and probably result in the collapse of the Corbyn movement.

We have talked about creeping fascism and situated the hard-right nationalist Brexit project in the context of the international rise of the hard right – not least Trump in the United States, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Orban in Hungary. The truth of this will become increasingly clear: there is no left-wing Brexit, it is a fantasy, a pipe-dream.

The Brexit Party already has many of the features of fascism, mobilising from the petty bourgeoisie and often more impoverished sections of the working class. It is backed up and surrounded by the gangs of fascist street fighters. The direction of travel is clear.

Prospects

The Left has a number of inter-linked tasks. It should fight against any no-deal Brexit and back the [October 19th 'Let Us Be Heard](#) march in central London. It is important to build the Left Bloc at the heart of the march.

We have to prepare for a bruising and difficult election, against the odds trying to deprive the Tories of a majority and win a Labour government. We have to say to those opposing Brexit that the only chance of a government that will stop Brexit is a Corbyn government.

We have to reach out to the youth and others mobilised by Extinction Rebellion and explain the urgent need for a Corbyn government – for the environment and the future. The Extinction Rebellion mobilisations and those in the aftermath of Johnson's suspension of Parliament show the scale of progressive, anti-Tory opinion in the country. These forces have to be mobilised against a no-deal Brexit – the best way to prepare for a general election.

And we have to continue to raise the alarm over, and mobilise against, creeping fascism, the rising tide of right-wing extremism and racist attacks. If Johnson wins the coming election, and implements a hard Brexit, this will be a huge defeat that will eclipse that of the 1984-5 miners' strike. The alarm must be sounded.

We need to open up the broadest possible discussion in the Left about the meaning of the crisis and the way out. Business as usual will be swept aside in an almighty thunderclap in the coming weeks. We need to be prepared.

Phil Hearse

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P.S.

Public Reading Rooms

<https://prruk.org/facing-up-to-the-crisis-urgent-questions-for-the-left/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2019/09/labours-decision-remain-neutral-brexit-could-destroy-its-election-hopes>