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Britain: 2019 election analysis - A victory for the Far Right. A crisis for the Left

Monday 16 December 2019, by [FAULKNER Neil](#), [HEARSE Phil](#) (Date first published: 13 December 2019).

Neil Faulkner and Phil Hearse analyse the general election defeat and draw lessons for the battles ahead.

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The British ruling class has much to celebrate. Their party - the party of the rich and the corporations - has won its biggest majority since 1987. Our party - the party of working people - has suffered its worst result since 1935.

They are right to celebrate. Millions of working-class people, many of them in once rock-solid Labour seats based on traditional industry and union power, have voted for the party of the bosses. This is the story in many former mining constituencies, where the victims of Thatcher's destruction of the coal industry and the NUM have now come full circle and voted for Thatcher's party. It is a story repeated in a swathe of 'Red Wall' old industrial centres in the North and the Midlands.

The profiteers are celebrating with a share-price hike. The Tory tabloids are running triumphalist headlines: 'Rejoice! Boris set for thumping majority' (Daily Mail), and 'The British Lion Roars for Boris and Brexit' (Daily Express). Michael Gove bragged that the British people had reject Corbyn's 'division, extremism, and anti-semitism'.

Johnson himself - a racist bully, serial liar, and self-serving narcissist in the Trump mould - has proclaimed 'a people's government' of 'one-nation Tories': the party of the elites masquerading as a party of people against elites. The implication, perhaps, is that the rest of us are 'enemies of the people'. Indeed, it is clear that 'one-nation Conservatism' has acquired a new, darker, more sinister meaning, one with echoes of 1930s-style fascist plebiscites.

The shallow commentators of the mainstream media - Laura Kuenssberg, Andrew Neil, Nick Robinson, and many others - are puffed up with smug, self-satisfied, 'told-you-so' sneers at the very idea of a social-democratic alternative to the chaos, misery, and greed of neoliberal capitalism.

And the Labour Right are resurgent, unleashing a torrent of vitriolic attacks on Corbyn, blaming him

and the Left for the defeat, preparing the political offensive they will now mount to destroy the Labour Party's social-democratic character and turn it back into an identikit Blairite neoliberal party.

The demonisation of Corbyn

The struggle continues. It will be harder now, but it continues. First, though, we must analyse what has gone wrong. Socialists have to stare reality in the face. They have to understand the world in order to organise to change it. Here is our view on what we think has gone wrong.

The election result is a massive setback for the working class and the Left. It will mean a deepening of neoliberalism under a hard-right government, threatening the living standards and democratic rights of millions. Every part of the public sector and welfare state will be under attack.

An historic opportunity to implement a radical, anti-neoliberal alternative has been lost. This has happened because of the frantic and unprecedented campaign of vilification against Corbyn, Labour, and the Left - by the increasingly reactionary mass media and the Tories (of course), but also, from almost Day One of Corbyn's leadership, by the Labour Right. A large majority of the PLP (Parliamentary Labour Party), some right-wing union leaders, much of the old party apparatus, and of course the right wing of the party at regional and local level have all contributed to this.

Crucial planks in the anti-Corbyn slander campaign have been some Guardian and Observer columnists, as well as journalists on BBC2's Newsnight and Channel 4 News. The relentless media hounding of Corbyn has been one reason why many working-class, middle-class, and student voters abandoned Labour.

Throughout his leadership, Jeremy Corbyn has been hampered by having a big majority against him in the PLP, and no secure majority in the Shadow Cabinet or, for much of the time, on the Labour NEC.

The failure of conciliation

In response, the path chosen by the Labour leadership was to conciliate and compromise with the Right. This did not work. Even though the 2016 Owen Smith leadership challenge was a fiasco, the Labour Right did not give up - not for one moment.

The Corbyn team, however, refused to unleash the potential of Momentum and other left-wingers in a campaign to de-select right-wing MPs. This would have led to civil war inside the party, of course, but an open civil war - as opposed to the permanent, backroom, semi-clandestine campaign against Corbyn waged by the Right.

Let us be explicit. What has been defeated in the general election is an attempt to get a radical left government into power on the back of a parliamentary party strongly opposed to it.

That defeat has also been caused by the chronic inability of the Corbyn leadership to stand up to the Right inside and outside the party on two crucial issues.

The anti-semitism smear

First, the decision not to resist the smear campaign on anti-Semitism has been a disaster. For those who launched this campaign, the primary objective was to prevent a pro-Palestinian government being elected, and to de-legitimise pro-Palestinian activism. The abject refusal to simultaneously combat anti-Semitism and to fight the smear campaign was a disaster. 'Roll with the punches and it will all go away' has been a catastrophic mistake.

In the face of the anti-Semitism smear - which began with the attack on Ken Livingstone in 2016 - the Corbyn leadership has not so much fudged as capitulated. If you don't run, they can't chase you. But the Labour leadership ran, and the onslaught - from the Tories, the Liberal Democrats, the Blairites, the gutter press, the BBC, even The Guardian - has been relentless ever since.

The ludicrous notion that Corbyn is an anti-Semite, that Labour is institutionally racist, that the party has allowed anti-Jewish hatred to flourish in its ranks has been mainstreamed. And the conflation between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism has been such that the party leadership has attempted to silence all criticism of Israel and shut down any solidarity with the Palestinians among the membership: a pitiful betrayal of internationalism and the oppressed in the face of a right-wing lie that has grown and grown because it has never been effectively challenged at the top.

The Brexit fudge

Second, the failure to take a clear and comprehensible stand on Brexit has been disastrous. The whole campaign for a referendum on Europe was the banner behind which the Tory Right united to win control of the Conservative Party. With the financial support of millionaires like Aaron Banks, and media support from The Mail, The Sun, and other right-wing rags, this campaign worked brilliantly.

Labour and the unions split on this issue, as whole sections of the Left failed to grasp the meaning of the EU Referendum. The Labour leadership should have adopted a pro-Remain position, with a clear stand on free movement and for international working-class solidarity. The attempt to 'unite the class' by fudging the argument failed totally. The lack of a clear position meant losing voters among both Remainers and Leavers. Jeremy Corbyn has been undone not by uncompromising leftism, but by an attempt to conciliate the incompatible.

The election outcome, and Labour losing significant ground in former working-class bastions, is not just the outcome of recent events, but a continuation of the attrition the party has suffered as a result of all the defeats since the miners' strike of 1984-5. As industrial towns and mining villages lost their main workplaces, poverty and neglect compounded the loss of union membership and the decline of the influence and culture of the labour movement more generally.

This is the background to the 'left behind' syndrome in medium and small-size towns. As it became more and more difficult to claim unemployment benefits, millions were forced into insecure, zero-hours, low-wage, non-union jobs, often with no pension and no sick pay. The working poor are everywhere in the left-behind towns, and their demographic make up is often skewed as young people leave. What remains are depressed (and depressing) towns with dreadful housing, neglected streets, and shut-down shops.

The Blair-Brown governments from 1997-2010 did little to break this vicious circle, despite Labour's tax credits and minimum wage. The result was the growing influence of the Far Right, with the BNP

winning council seats in Stoke and Barking, followed by a surge of UKIP, which won 17% of the vote in the 2009 European elections. This new right-wing electorate then went first to the Brexit Party and now has swung behind the Tories.

The role of nationalism, racism, and xenophobia in the 2016 Leave campaign and in the 2017 and 2019 Tory general election campaigns is obvious. When Johnson attacked immigrants for treating Britain as if it were their own country, he was not only making an open appeal to racism, but repeating the reactionary propaganda of the Far Right. Just as in Italy, Germany, and France - and, of course, the United States - the rightward turn of conservatives like Johnson is mainstreaming the politics of the Far Right.

Voting for the enemy

To grasp the overall meaning of what has happened we need to step back and take a broader historical view. Johnson's Tories represent a far-right, ultra-neoliberal, nationalist-racist government of millionaires and bigots.

Forty years on, they represent an acceleration of the counter-revolutionary project launched by Thatcher in 1979: a rolling back of the post-war gains of working people, a brick-by-brick demolition of the welfare state by cuts and privatisation, a wholesale redistribution of wealth from the majority to the corporate rich - only now, after a decade of austerity and social decay, the neoliberal programme is laced with much heavier doses of nationalism, racism, and scapegoat politics.

The blunt fact is that millions of working-class people - millions more than before - have voted against their own interests for a viciously anti-working class party of the rich and the corporations.

Labour offered a radical programme in this election - a programme of social reform the implementation of which would have represented a substantial improvement in the lives of millions of ordinary people.

It is true, of course, that the Labour Party historically has not been a consistent representative of working-class interests. Again and again, when forced to choose between 'national interest' (i.e. the interest of British capitalism) and class interest, it has chosen to bail out the system by attacking its own supporters with cuts in wages, welfare, and public services.

But that does not alter the fact that Labour under Corbyn has been an expression of the traditional aspirations of the labour movement for greater equality, democracy, and social justice. A vote for the Tories was a vote for reaction. A vote for Labour was a vote for radical social reform. Yet well over half the people who stood to benefit from the social reforms in the Labour programme (however modest) voted against the party.

Labour's electoral decline

It has not always been like this. We are witness to a historic collapse in the Labour vote. It peaked in October 1951, when the party won half of all votes cast. Working people constitute about 80% of the population. This means that six out of every ten working people voted Labour in 1951. In the December 2019 general election, the party won less than a third of all votes cast - which means that only four in ten of its 'natural supporters' voted for it.

This reflects a long-term decline in the core Labour vote since its high-point in the immediate post-

war years. Why has this happened?

A wider process is under way. Old parties are in decline. Electoral blocs are fragmenting. Traditional allegiances are more fragile. New parties are emerging. How people vote is much more volatile and unpredictable. Instead of a 'cold war' between two solid electoral blocs – a progressive bloc around a social-democratic party rooted in the working class, and a reactionary bloc around a conservative party of the middle class – we have a kaleidoscope of parties, with each election creating new configurations.

This process has gathered pace in the neoliberal era, with the hollowing out of civil society, the atomisation of society, the retreat into privatised worlds of competitive individualism and neurotic consumerism. Deep processes of social disengagement and alienation are at work.

This affects political parties. No longer rooted in strong civil-society organisations, they become relatively free-floating collections of technocrats, careerists, and opportunists. Elections resemble game shows. Politicians are packaged as celebrities. Policies are all about spin. Campaigns are managed by PR spivs. This lack of rootedness of the political system is a large part of the explanation for the collapse in standards in public life and the epidemic of lying, corruption, and manipulation by the political elite.

Contributing to the trivialisation of parliamentary politics is the shrivelling of the state as an economic actor. Globalisation – the domination of the world economy by giant conglomerates straddling the world and stashing profit in tax-havens – has reduced the internal role of the state to the provision of basic infrastructure and the policing of the working class.

The state does not manage capital: it serves capital. Governments do not serve the people: they manage the people. This is the deepest root of 'the democratic deficit'. Whatever they say, governments do not act in the interests of society: they act in the interests of the system.

The smashing of the unions

These generalisations apply in a very particular way to the working class. From the late 19th century up to the 1980s, trade unions were the primary expression of class identity in modern capitalist societies. Class consciousness, class organisation, and class struggle were reflected most immediately and strongly in trade-union membership, rank-and-file organisation in the workplaces, and strike action.

Trade union membership peaked in Britain in 1979, when there were 13 million members, an estimated 250,000 shop stewards (directly elected workplace representatives), and a total of 29 million strike-days. This immensely powerful workers' movement was the basis for the major shifts in wealth that occurred between 1945 and 1979. It was also the basis for the solidity of the Labour vote in 'traditional' working-class areas – in practice, areas with strong union organisation.

The British ruling class set out to smash this movement. The Thatcher government of 1979-90 was a class-war government determined to break the unions, privatise the public sector, and redistribute wealth from working people to the corporate rich. This they did. The decisive battle in this essentially counter-revolutionary effort was the year-long battle against the miners.

The NUM (National Union of Miners) was the strongest union in Britain. Thatcher prepared for a showdown and provoked an all-out strike by imposing a drastic pit-closure programme. Some 150,000 men, supported by their families, communities, and the wider trade-union movement,

remained on strike for a year, despite paramilitary police violence, courtroom frame-ups, and a barrage of anti-union propaganda in the media. The eventual defeat of the strike sent a shock-wave of demoralisation and despair across the British labour movement. We have never recovered.

For almost three decades now, the strike rate – the essential measure of class-based resistance to the bosses and the system – has bumped along close to rock-bottom. Trade union membership has halved, and the vast majority of union members today have no experience of workplace-based activity – for most, a union card is little more than an insurance policy in case of need.

This could change. The unions could rise again. If large numbers of workers came into action, if they kicked over the anti-union laws and their do-nothing leaders to mount all-out strikes, organise mass pickets, and spread the action, a workplace insurgency could take off. But right now, we live with the consequences of the breaking of union power: a collapse in consciousness, confidence, and combativeness which has severely eroded the class base of the Labour vote.

The legacy of Blair

Tony Blair's attempt to turn the Labour Party into an alternative pro-capitalist party – a party of counter-reforms like NHS privatisation – was one consequence of the defeat of the miners. The effect was to deepen further the sense of alienation from Labour in traditional working-class communities.

Repeated sell-outs in the 1960s and 1970s had already damaged the relationship between party and class, but until the 1990s Labour had remained essentially a party of social-democratic reform. This ended under Blair, and the electoral consequences have been permanent, most obviously in Scotland, where Labour's betrayals of the class interests of its own supporters have resulted in its effective replacement by an alternative (tartan) social-democratic party in the form of the Scottish National Party.

The election of Corbyn to the leadership in 2015 represented a sudden (and wholly unexpected) reassertion of the party's social-democratic character, halting and reversing its creeping neoliberalisation under the Blairites. But the hollowing-out of union power – the decline of the working class as an organised industrial force – has meant that the social foundations of Corbynism have been much weaker than, say, those of Bennism in the 1980s, or Bevanism in the 1950s.

In this election, nationalism and racism has performed its historic role yet again: splitting the working class and blocking socialist advance. Ever since the French Revolution, two broad sets of ideas, one reflecting the interests of the ruling class, one the interests of the working class, have confronted each other: nationalism, racism, imperialism, and militarism form one set, equality, democracy, internationalism, and peace the other. Socialists have been involved in this struggle for hearts and minds for 250 years; and whenever we compromise, wheedle, dodge, 'triangulate', reactionary ideas gain traction.

It is likely that the Johnson government will face an economic crisis soon, and certain that its fairy tales of funding for the NHS and infrastructure investment will come to little or nothing. We are in for an ugly period in politics, where new space will be created for fascists and racists, and where bitter battles to defend living standards and the welfare state are certain. There will also be a fierce struggle inside the Labour Party, with the Right blaming the Left for electoral defeat and on the offensive to regain control.

David Rousset was a revolutionary socialist who lived through the black night of the mid 20th

century. He was a Holocaust survivor. 'Disappointment is a trifle,' he later wrote. 'Disappointment is a luxury we cannot afford. The dilemma is simple but imperative. Whether to submit to mere fortune or to understand and take action.'

Hundreds of thousands have protested in Britain against Brexit, Trump, and climate catastrophe in the last few years. Millions are protesting across the world against austerity, corruption, and dictatorship. On one side are the rich, the corporations, the police, and the fascists; on the other, the mass of ordinary working people, led by the radical youth, black and white, women and men.

We face climate catastrophe, creeping fascism, and corporate power. We face the nationalism and racism of Brexit. We face a regime of speculators, privatisers, and landlords. So we must organise, mobilise, and fight.

Neil Faulkner and Phil Hearse

We are in full agreement with our friends and comrades Andrew Burgin and Kate Hudson, whose complementary analysis of the election result appears on the Public Reading Rooms website [1]

P.S.

• 13 December 2019. Updated: 14 December 2019:
Neil Faulkner and Phil Hearse are joint authors, with Samir Dathi and Seema Syeda, of *Creeping Fascism: what it is and how to fight it*.

Footnotes

[1] <https://prruk.org/the-election-defeat-what-happened-and-what-do-we-do-next/>
Also available on ESSF (article 51531), [2019 election defeat in Britain: what happened and what next?](#).