

Online-Artikel: Labour and the 2019 Election

by Mary Kaldor



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How did it happen that the United Kingdom has elected as Prime Minister, a proven liar, someone who does not know how many children he has, and someone who uses facetiously racist and misogynist language? How did it happen that he achieved a Conservative majority for a monumental act of self-harm to the United Kingdom, namely Brexit?

The Conservative Party had hardly any activists; they have less than 70,000 members, mostly elderly (by contrast Labour has half a million members). Those of us out on the door step never saw a single Tory campaigner and very few posters. The Conservative manifesto was sketchy, prone to vagueness and double counting, as in the number of hospitals to be built or the nurses to be recruited. By contrast, Labour had an exciting and ambitious manifesto, representing the outcome of years of hard work, especially by the shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell. It included a green new deal, big commitments to public services and utilities, and innovative proposals like public service broadband.

Boris Johnson made gaffe after gaffe - stealing a reporter's phone after he took a picture of a sick boy on the floor of a hospital, hiding in a fridge to escape the media, not turning up to hustings on climate change or in his own constituency, refusing to be grilled by Andrew Neil of the BBC even though the other party leaders had done so on the clear understanding that the Tory leader would also be interviewed, to name but a few of the incidents. And yet the relentless message of 'Get Brexit Done' combined with the

vilification of Jeremy Corbyn put out by a centralised well-funded Tory HQ through social media and the tabloid press seems to have hit home at least in England and Wales. As a whisky exporter from East Dumbartonshire, where the Lib Dem leader Jo Swinson lost her seat, put it: 'I don't think it would have mattered if Koko the silverback gorilla was the leader of the Tories; they had a message wrapped in the Union Jack and voters in England bought it.'

This was a Brexit election. Those in favour of Brexit united behind the Conservative Party and obtained 47% of the vote. Those who were against Brexit, the majority of the population, were divided among Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens, and the Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalist parties. In the British first past the post system, only the dominant parties matter. Labour had a Brexit policy that satisfied no one. Its commitment to a public vote was opposed by those who want to leave but its refusal to commit to a remain position lost it remain voters. The Conservatives only increased their vote by 1.5% compared with 2017, Labour's share fell by 8%, mainly to other remain parties. This allowed a string of Conservative victories in what is known as the 'red wall' - the traditional English labour heartlands across the middle and North of England from the Irish Sea to the North Sea.

I did a lot of canvassing in the working class estates in Brighton, where I live, and what was striking was that those who wanted to 'get Brexit done' were uniformly elderly white working class people, mainly male, while those who said they would vote Labour were of all classes, all ages and all colours. While there is a lot to be said about the shortcomings of the Labour campaign, I would argue that the fundamental problem has been the failure of influential parts of the party on both right and left sides, to come to terms with the changing structure of society under the impact of globalisation. The election, therefore, holds lessons for Social Democrats in other parts of Europe.

Four decades of neo-liberalism has skewed the British economy in favour of finance rather than manufacturing, mining or agriculture and this was further accentuated after the 2008 financial crisis. First of all, this skewing of the economy has dramatically increased social inequalities and has changed the class composition of society. On the one hand, skilled manual jobs in manufacturing and mining have declined. On the other hand, both skilled white collar jobs (in the public sector or the new tech industries) as well as underpaid unskilled service jobs including the notorious 'zero hour' contract jobs, have increased. Whereas skilled manual workers tended, in the past, to be predominantly white and male, the new professional and unskilled workers are heavily dependent on immigration and involve many more women.

Secondly this shift in social structure is associated with dramatically increased geographical inequalities. The big cities where the decline of the Labour vote was less marked included all these groups but especially professionals and the 'new' multicultural precariat; while there is steep inequality within the cities, it is these places that have benefitted from finance fuelled growth. The so-called left-behind areas are the areas where mining and manufacturing had declined, where both skills and skilled jobs are scarce, where immigration tends to be low, and where bright young people leave for the big cities. These areas have been described as 'geographies of discontent' similar to the situation in East Germany, where the AfD was so successful.

The problem in these areas is political as well as economic. My research on the impact on Brexit at local levels indicates that it is the sense of political disempowerment that is as important as the economic factors. These are regions that Labour has taken for granted. Members of Parliament were often absent, many of the community building political activities of the last century have been abandoned. People in these areas felt let down by the continued neo-liberalism of the Blair and Brown years and unable to find a vehicle through which to express their opinions.

The shift from manufacturing to finance has also affected the nature of the state. The British state has become heavily dependent on finance as a source of revenue, turning it in to a sort of rentier state, prone to some of the same ills as, for example, oil dependent states. The contracting out culture associated with neo-liberalism has, it can be argued, produced a new class of conservative politicians more interested in power for its own sake, and in access to the sources of public patronage than the public good. It has created what might be described as a new class of crony capitalists or oligarchs who fund the Tory Party and who control large parts of the media, especially the tabloid press.

It was the appeal of the oligarchs to the traditional white working class that delivered a Tory victory and that underlay the basic social arithmetic that led to the leave vote in 2016, a similar coalition to the one forged by Donald Trump in America. Indeed the combination of technology and crony capitalism is typical of contemporary right-wing populism.

The Labour Party had an ambiguous, dithering position on Brexit. After the 2016 referendum, Labour promised to respect the result of the referendum and supported the triggering of Article 50. Labour argued for a 'softer' deal than Theresa May that would protect jobs and the economy but restrict immigration. Despite substantial grass roots pressure from pro-remain members, Labour resisted explicit calls for a public vote and this resulted in big losses in the local and European elections earlier this year, mainly to the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. Finally after local Labour parties had sent more than 60 resolutions to the Party Conference in September, the leadership adopted what was described as a 'compromise' position in which Labour would negotiate a 'better' deal and put this to a public vote. Labour refused to say whether it would support leave or remain, although Corbyn finally said, during the election, that he personally would remain 'neutral'. In the end Labour lost at least twice as many votes to remain parties as to leave parties. In 28 of the heartland seats that were lost, votes for remain parties other than Labour were greater than the Tory majorities. The dithering over

Brexit policy, the readiness to triangulate on the most important issue of our time, the willingness to accept the control of immigration, for example, may also have cost Jeremy Corbyn his reputation for being a different kind of principled politician.

In the aftermath of the election, the so-called lexiters, the left pro-Brexit wing of the party, epitomised by Len McClusky, the General Secretary of the Unite union, accused the remainers of having lost the election by pushing the Party towards support for a second referendum. The lexiters, akin perhaps to parts of Die Linke in Germany, see the working class in traditional terms and believe that to win the Labour heartlands, Labour needs to be left in social policies but culturally right on nationalism and immigration. The right of the party, the inheritors of the Blair years, believed that Labour was too left-wing. They argued that the policies were too ambitious and unrealistic, an argument that resonated with those who believed that the Conservative argument it was Labour extravagance rather than the banks that led to the financial crisis and that austerity is somehow necessary. These people, who had opposed Corbyn from the beginning, were those who had taken the working class for granted and believed that Labour could only win power by appealing to the middle class - perhaps they could be likened to the Clinton wing of the Democrats. .

The overwhelming majority of Labour party members do not fit either of these positions. They are both left and for remain, they are both internationalist and socialist. These are the people who surged into the Labour Party when Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader. They tend to be young and multi-cultural. They include skilled workers in the public sector and the tech industries as well as unskilled workers from a wide range of different backgrounds. The Labour vote in the South and indeed parts of the North was not just a middle class vote; students and BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) voters largely supported Labour, as did many white working class people.

It was the pro-Europe, left activists in the Labour Party, in Momentum (the social movement

that mobilised support for Jeremy Corbyn), and in anti Brexit left groups like Another Europe is Possible that organised a large-scale grass roots campaign -the biggest I have ever experienced in any elections campaign. There was a surge in new registrations, mainly young people. There was a grass roots tactical voting campaign online with several different tactical voting sites and millions of visitors. Tens of thousands of activists were out campaigning in marginal seats. Momentum organised a social media campaign that reached millions of people, on a tiny fraction of the money that was spent by the Tory party. For those of us involved in this campaign, the election result came as a shock. Even though the polls had consistently shown a Tory lead, most of us believed that people based politics trumps digital politics.

And perhaps that would have been true had the official campaign been in line with the grass roots campaign. Although the Brexit position was the main failure of the official campaign, there were other shortcomings as well. First, the anti-semitism charge stuck to Labour much more than racism and Islamophobia stuck to the Tories. The paradox was that it was the Conservatives who had to sack a candidate for anti-semitism and no less than five Tory candidates were accused of Islamophobia; it was after all Boris Johnson who described the burqa as a letter box, prompting extremists to try and put letters through the eye slit, and it was Boris Johnson who referred to black people as picaninnies. This is not to excuse Labour's anti-semitism, which was, in my view, more about left sectarianism (no less reprehensible) than anti-semitism. Likewise, the charge that Corbyn was a security risk because he had spoken to the IRA and Hamas also stuck, even though the Tory alliance with a similarly extreme and violent organisation, the DUP, was never questioned.

Secondly, the official campaign was somewhat lack lustre perhaps because Corbyn had lost his magic. Labour had not managed to set up its phone banking system for the first two weeks of the campaign. Corbyn himself looked tired and irritable for much of the campaign. Loyalty evidently came before winning elec-

tions as solid loyalists, like Richard Burgon or Rebecca Long-Bailey, were given prominent roles rather than the pro-remain stars of Labour such as Keir Starmer or Emily Thornberry. The campaign team reportedly refused to believe polls and allocated resources to marginal seats they hoped to win rather than defending Labour seats.

And thirdly, the ambition and scale of the manifesto may have undermined the strength of a simple slogan or narrative that could have competed with 'get Brexit Done', even though the 'real change' slogan does seem to have gone down well. So many voters had become naturalised to austerity that they were not ready to embrace the kind of hope offered by Labour.

It is worth noting that the group of pro-remain left MPs, with a high proportion of women and BAME MPs, known as Love Socialism Hate Brexit did rather well. Only two members of the group lost their seats and onewas in Scotland to the SNP. My own constituency Brighton Kemptown had been Conservative in 2010 and 2015. It was won by Lloyd Russell-Moyle in 2017 with a 10,000 majority although the green candidate had stepped down. Lloyd Russell-Moyle took a clear and committed remain position and really worked to build up local support in the period since 2017. Every time, I went canvassing, I came across someone who knew Lloyd or who had been helped by Lloyd. The campaign was supported by several hundred local activists, who held some 20,000 conversations with electors, stuffed and hand delivered tens of thousands of leaflets, undertook phone banking or set up street stalls. This time there was a green candidate who won 3000 votes. Nevertheless, Lloyd managed to retain a majority of 9000. And similar successes were recorded in both North and South - Rosie Duffield in Canterbury, for example, Chi Onwurah in Newcastle, or Alex Sobel in Leeds.

The results in Scotland and Northern Ireland were quite different from England and Wales. In both places, pro-EU nationalist parties won. In Scotland, the SNP gained 14 seats with the Tories losing seven seats, Labour six and the Lib Dems one. In Northern Ireland, the DUP lost

two seats, and there is now a nationalist majority. In both places there will be demands for referenda on independence for Scotland and unification of Ireland that are likely to be resisted by the Conservative government.

The prognosis for Britain is grim. This is a government that will do anything to retain power; they will introduce boundary changes and new techniques like voter IDs that will make it even more difficult for Labour to win power in the future. They are likely to apply the hostile environment for immigrants to Europeans with dire consequences for the economy and a likely rise in hate crime. They will negotiate trade deals that lower environmental, health and safety standards. They will come into conflict with Scotland and Northern Ireland. And the Brexit drama will continue as the relationship with the EU is negotiated. Above all, the confidence of people like me who felt that we lived in a fundamentally decent society has been lost.

Social Democrats in the rest of Europe should not draw the conclusion that Labour lost because it was too left-wing. Labour lost because it was not internationalist and pro-EU enough. Social Democrats need to develop radical policies that address both climate change and social justice and that appeal both to traditional voters and to what might be described as the 'new' working class – multi-cultural, skilled and unskilled, young, and female as well as male.

The Labour manifesto was probably difficult to implement without changes in the rest of Europe, without controlling financial speculation, global carbon emissions, and transnational corporate tax evasion. The social movement that came into being as a consequence of the election of Jeremy Corbyn will not go away. It will resist the Conservative government and it will work with local communities across the country. Britain is still part of Europe, even if it leaves the European Union and the left still needs international solidarity. ■

Übersetzung folgt in Kürze