

Britain after the elections: No False Consolations

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This is our defeat, and we have to own it. As if we have a choice. And we know what this means. The body count from austerity and the hostile environment will multiply. An already fairly awful society is going to get brutally worse. And it is difficult to see how this won't feed into yet more violent racism and hatred of foreigners predicated on zero-sum ethnic competition.

Labour's vote has been reduced to just slightly more than Ed Miliband's total, but – thanks to the wipeout in the north and the distorting effects of first-past-the-post – it has fewer seats than Michael Foot. There are many false consolations to go around if we want them. Just over 10m votes is roughly what Tony Blair got in 2001, and more than he achieved in 2005. Despite everything they threw at us, we got more votes than Miliband. Many of the seats we lost are held with tiny majorities, and can be won back. Every single centrist melt defector is gone. Jo Swinson is gone. We won Putney and held a lot of marginals. We would have won more if it hadn't been for those divisive Lib Dems and Greens. And there is always 'the streets'.

If our enemy was a weakened Conservative party chasing the centre-ground, 10m votes for Labour wouldn't be terrible. But our enemy is a Conservative party driven to the hard racist right by the Faragites, and enjoying an electoral revival as a consequence. And, following the wipeout in Scotland in 2015, this the second major loss of historic heartlands over a national question. Labour has mishandled both, badly. And the resulting breach is of historic significance, even if it's possible to repair the damage and win back many of the seats lost. In this context, the fact that the centre has been crushed by the same enemy is scarce consolation.

It is no good arguing, either, that the Lib Dems and Greens divided the vote. That's what they do. They stand their own candidates, because they are separate parties. The Liberals were particularly obnoxious liars in this election. But our job is to persuade some of their voters to support us. It is never a good sign when people start drinking the 'tactical voting' kool aid around election time. It's an even worse sign if we take one look at seats like Blaenau Gwent and shake our fists at the Liberals. The bottom line is that at least 3m people who voted Labour in 2017, simply didn't vote in 2019. That was the big shift. Not to the Liberal Democrats, not to the Greens, not even to the Brexit party, many of whose votes would otherwise have gone Tory. We lost millions to abstention.

We thought the 'ground game' would be decisive. We thought we had pretty good data, and the canvassing was encouraging toward the end. We thought the polls were missing something big. In fact, the huge canvassing and 'get out the vote' operation appears to have helped in London and a number of the marginals which we won in 2017. We kept places that we normally wouldn't if we were losing, like Enfield Southgate, Canterbury and Bedford. We held Battersea and won Putney. Yet it fell completely flat elsewhere. If the 'youthquake' happened at all, then it probably happened only in big cities and university towns. The worrying thing is what could have happened even in those cities if it weren't for that ground operation. Yes, comrades, it can go lower.

This is the election result that would have happened two and a half years ago, were it not for the success of that Labour campaign and that Labour manifesto. Labour was weak in its historic heartlands, where it had been losing ground for decades. New Labour had done nothing to stop the erosion-tending-toward collapse of local industry, trade unions, employment and incomes. The Brexit vote had completely reanimated the right and rebuilt its popular support. And the combined Tory-Ukip vote in the rustbelt would have been over 50%. Despite what some deluded commentators concluded, Jeremy Corbyn's 2017 surge was not proof that another leader would have won with a 20-point lead. It was a big deviation from the established pattern of Labour's vote since 2001, and we have now seen a reversion to the political mean.

This election, though centrists will be loathe to consider what this means, wasn't about a revival of the political centre. They were crushed by the same juggernaut of disaster nationalism that just brutally savaged the left. Those who cleave to a centre-seeking approach will unite over little of substance. They will present no coherent answers as to how one can defeat disaster nationalism, and not be ripped apart by Brexit culture wars, if not by some variation of the 2017 formula. But they will all agree to treat the election as a referendum on Corbyn's leadership and, by extension, the dominance of the left within the Labour membership.

It is absolute truth that 'Corbyn', *qua media persona*, was an issue for some voters on the doorstep. However, that simply pushes the question back. Why was 'Corbyn' more of an issue this time? What did people, who didn't care about the IRA allegations and the 'security risk' trolling two years ago, and who had already voted for a left-wing manifesto, and who seem to be fine with most of the policies, object to? What had changed in the wider political context? What had changed about his leadership? Why did some of these voters suddenly have trouble deciding what Corbyn stood for? I predict there will be no convincing answer from those who want Labour to veer right. They will repeat the same shibboleths they've been uttering since 2015. They will learn nothing.

What should we learn? For most of the Labour left, the main line of analysis is that we screwed up on Brexit. By opting for a second referendum, we were too easily portrayed as betraying a democratic mandate. Several weeks into the campaign, it was noticeable that people like Grace Blakeley were sending out warning messages about the collapse of Labour's support in the north. I dare say the Brexit party's campaigning helped the Tories here. Not by taking a lot of Labour votes per se, but largely by amplifying Tory messaging: namely, that Labour had betrayed Brexit.

We should be careful here. There was no 'good' position on Brexit. Just because you have found a problem doesn't mean you have found a solution. Or, indeed, that there is one ready to hand. Part of the problem appears to be that parliamentary victories against Theresa May and Boris Johnson - regarded as 'playing a blinder' by the punditry - were received poorly by a lot of leave voters. They saw the political establishment stopping Brexit. The anti-parliamentary rhetoric initiated by May, and turned into a foghorn blast by Johnson, was operating on real discontents. But how would Labour have justified voting through May's deal? How much support might that have lost? How many people would have been utterly demoralised and 'done with Corbyn' at that point? How many voters would have gone Lib Dem or Green then? Would 'tactical voting' have saved us?

Besides, there is another issue of how policy has been communicated. At a certain point, with regard to Brexit, constructive ambiguity ceased being constructive. There was a need to outline a definite agenda for Brexit. Labour went into the European elections barely campaigning, and running on the idea of reuniting our divided country. Which was not the mood. We then went into the general election with a second referendum position, decided on quite abruptly after three years of saying no second referendum. And we only clarified the position - that Corbyn would be neutral - mid-campaign. Several MPs refused to say, when asked, which side they would back, knowing either answer would be a trap.

There seems to be no obvious solution on Brexit, nothing that would not be taken as 'treason' by someone. This is why Labour did not want this to be a Brexit election. And it succeeded to an extent in shifting the conversation. Despite what some claim, austerity is not 'over'. It's an ongoing crisis. And only the kind of agenda that Labour sought to get elected on could feasibly undermine the social bases of Brexit nationalism. The problem is, the election was called because parliament couldn't make a decision on Brexit, after three years in which the Brexit vote had been radicalised. Nationalism is such an established script in this country that its abstractions can be experienced as intimate, concrete. Whereas the policies in Labour's carefully drafted, carefully budgeted and yet ambitious manifesto, offering specific help, were so remote from everyday experience of the government, that for a lot of voters it felt abstract and utopian.

Disaster nationalism has just cut through the Labour heartlands, and there is no obvious solution. The seat losses may be reversible; as Momentum suggests in an email to its supporters, the margins of Tory victory being small. But the swings were huge, and the breach is historic. To rebuild any kind of Left in these constituencies, after decades of neglect and local Labour rule being pretty useless, will sadly require more than a six-week election cycle and a passionate campaign run by heroic volunteers. It's no consolation that we probably have ten years of vicious Conservative government in which to do that rebuilding.

Richard Seymour
@leninology

P.S.

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- Richard Seymour is a political activist and author. His latest book is The Twittering Machine.