

Britain - A disastrous election result: defend the gains of Corbynism

Friday 13 December 2019, by [STOWE Andy](#) (Date first published: 13 December 2019).

On an emotional level it feels like a death in the family writes Andy Stowe.



In Chingford & Woodford Green, Faiza Shaheen narrowly failed to unseat Iain Duncan Smith. But the hundreds of activists who turned out in all weathers to work for her victory can be part of a rebuilt left

The Tory victory was, above all else, a triumph for a reactionary project of the hard right that has been incubating in the Tory Party for many years. They managed to persuade many Labour voters that an assertion of English nationalism was more important than getting rid of food banks and homelessness or making sure that people don't die while waiting to be admitted to hospital.

Only anyone who chose not to hear Johnson's sole slogan "get Brexit done" can believe otherwise.

The Tories won 43.6% of the vote, gaining 66 seats and Labour's vote share fell by 7.8% to 32%, resulting in a loss of 42 seats. These mostly went to the Tories in England and to the SNP in Scotland. Even in many of the seats that Labour held the party's vote share went down, often by about 10%.

All this, despite a Labour campaign that managed to get hundreds of activists travelling long distances to work in marginal seats. In the end the ruling class acted in their own class interest despite their dislike of Brexit, the working class in the deindustrialised north ignored their class interest and bought into the Brexit and the "taking control" rhetoric.

The outcome in Scotland is more promising. The SNP now holds 48 seats and is stepping up its demand for independence in an explicit rejection of the wave of English chauvinism. In the north of Ireland the DUP is now outnumbered by pro-remain MPs, prompting the leader of the unionist Alliance Party to say "it is almost inevitable that there will be a push for an Irish unity referendum." [\[1\]](#)

Britain, however, will be out of the EU by the end of January. We could be facing another no deal Brexit by the end of the year and a highly damaging free trade deal with Donald Trump. Get Brexit done was the biggest lie that was used in this post-truth Trumpian election campaign which delivered a flagrant racist as Prime Minister.

Two issues stand out.

As John McDonnell has rightly said, the election was dominated by Brexit to the extent that Labour's radical manifesto was unable to cut through. Brexiteers voted Tory in huge numbers. The psephologist John Curtice says [2]:

"The Conservatives' share of the vote rose on average by six points in those seats where more than 60 per cent voted Leave in 2017, whereas it fell by three points where more than 55 per cent voted Remain.

In contrast, Labour's vote fell by 11 points in the most pro-Leave seats and dropped by a more modest 6 points in the most pro-Remain constituencies." [3]

Brexit sentiment had hardened over the past year with many strongly resenting Labour's role in opposing a no-deal Brexit and its pledge for a second referendum if it took office.

The second factor has been the relentless vilification of Jeremy Corbyn in the two and a half years since the last election. He was slanderously depicted as not just as an antisemite and a defender of terrorism. Not even Scargill in the miners' strike faced the degree of abuse directed against the Labour leader. From the first moments of Corbyn's leadership the entire media establishment and virtually all Labour's right set out to slander him.

We are now, however, confronted with a Tory government with an untouchable parliamentary majority and a mandate to implement Brexit. Many on the Labour left will be demoralised and already the right wing is arguing that Corbynism must be undone to return Labour Party's credibility [4]. The right are rubbing their hands with glee and will no doubt push for the expulsion of the Corbynite left from the party and a sharp tack rightwards to appeal to the English nationalism of Brexit supporters.

Nor is this just a defeat for the British working class. A Corbyn Labour government would have had a global impact on progressive movements, climate activists and the left internationally.

What could have been done differently?

First of all the decision to hold the election before a referendum was a disaster, coming as it did before the struggle in Parliament for a second referendum had run its course. The initiative for it was made by the Lib Dems and the SNP who jumped ship and left Labour with little option.

Second, Labour should have adopted and campaigned for a second referendum at a much earlier stage and made the case for retaining the benefits of EU membership while setting out ideas for reforming the organisation. It's hard to recall any serious challenges by senior Labour figures to the mainstreaming of anti-EU rhetoric. It was difficult for Labour to turn around this perception, but a clear remain for change position from day one would have minimised the scale of the loss.

In the inquest that will now take place the pro-Brexit left will tell us that it is the remainers' fault and of those who defend freedom of movement of labour.

Lindsey German of Counterfire argues that Corbyn's big mistake was to have supported a second referendum, rather than supporting Brexit itself [5]. She points the finger of blame at the People's Vote Campaign and Another Europe is Possible who managed to lead him astray.

We should stand our ground against all this stuff and defend the platform on which Labour stood. The Labour manifesto set out to meet the needs of the British working class and was a serious effort to address the climate crisis. It appealed both to the workers' movement and to the new generation that flocked to Corbynism. Next time around Labour should include a more democratic voting

system so that people aren't obliged to engage in tactical voting.

Corbyn has said he will step down as leader after a period of reflection in which the party can draw some lessons on what has happened. That's probably the best way to avoid an ugly interregnum. It also gives the left a chance to survey the landscape and hold on to what it has gained in the Corbyn years.

Johnson is not going to have it all his own way. He has put a border down the Irish Sea and has set up an ongoing constitutional crisis with Scotland that is likely to lead to independence. His project challenges the foundations of the British state and this will have huge implications for his party. He is also looking at an immediate future of economic fragility that will quickly take the sheen off his government.

However, we have to be realistic. The election result was a major defeat for the left and the interests of the working class. The Johnson government will have the upper hand for a period as people despair of the possibility of radical change or even effectively defending their jobs and working conditions. Anyone who says that there is a quick fix is selling snake oil, but in the first days of the new decade our job is to rebuild a left that can defeat the Tories and the people who say Labour has to become more like them.

Andy Stowe

P.S.

- Posted on 13th December 2019:

<http://socialistresistance.org/a-disastrous-election-result-defend-the-gains-of-corbynism/18903>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.irishnews.com/news/generalelection/2019/12/13/news/push-for-irish-unity-referendum-almost-inevitable-following-hard-brex-1790192/?fbclid=IwAR2lp4Hn5VLigexXOtyjlteVxUdNyj8vLHHF3d96SGNPDJAyiSREWWQcxJU>

[2] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/john-curtice-election-polls-tapped-into-how-brex-1790192>

[3] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/uk-election-results-shaken-john-mcdonnell-fails-to-rule-out-jeremy-corbyns-resignation-tv27kqsxf>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/jeremy-corbyn-labour-manifesto-antisemitism-brex>

[5] <https://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/20776-where-do-we-go-from-here-election-briefing-13-december>