A bloody bitter pill – Britain and the "Brexit election"

Sunday 29 December 2019, by CHOONARA Joseph (Date first published: December 2019).

The reasons for the Tory victory extend back beyond Jeremy Corbyn's time as Labour Party leader and beyond Brexit. Joseph Choonara explains and points a way forward.

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Yes, this was the Brexit election. Yes, Jeremy Corbyn, the most decent figure to lead a major British party in recent history, was subjected to a campaign of slander in the media, aided and abetted by the right-wing of the Labour Party. This was indeed the context in which Labour's "red wall" of formerly safe seats in the north of England and Midlands came crashing down, paving the way for Boris Johnson's landslide election victory.

But the wall began crumbling long before — back when Corbyn was a peripheral figure within the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Take Rother Valley in South Yorkshire, held by Labour since 1918. From 1945 until February 1974, support for Labour never dipped below 70 percent. In Labour's 1997 landslide, the party still won 68 percent of the vote. The story is one of Labour decline through the Tony Blair and Gordon Brown years, driven by the deeply unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq but also the continued adherence to neoliberal policies — privatisation, deregulation and slavish support for big business.

The bitterness towards New Labour was particularly intense in areas once dominated by manufacturing and mining, industries decimated in the 1980s, where optimism that Blair's election might reverse the decline soon turned to despair. The collapse of the Labour vote in these areas was arrested somewhat under Ed Miliband in 2015, and partially reversed by Corbyn in 2017, before resuming its downward trend in 2019.

This fall in Labour support has led some commentators to argue that the Conservatives are today the party of the working class. The Financial Times presented a startling graphic, showing a correlation between the proportion of "blue collar" jobs in a constituency and the swing towards the Tories. The finding is valid, but the title — "The Conservatives won on a working class wave" — a gross oversimplification.

The working class cannot be equated with manual or blue collar work. Today the bulk of the working class in Britain is employed either in the public sector, in service sector jobs, such as retail or restaurants, or in industries linked to finance. These workers are subject to the exploitation inherent in wage labour, and increasingly suffer the same indignities, overbearing managerial control and

stress traditionally associated with manual labour.

Oversimplification

It is also an oversimplification to imply that the most deprived are turning away from Labour. The constituencies with the highest level of deprivation (using an index combining various forms of deprivation) are Liverpool Walton, Birmingham Hodge Hill, Blackpool South, Blackley & Broughton in Manchester, and Birmingham Erdington. Four of these remain safely Labour — indeed, in these seats Labour's vote has increased or remained stable under Corbyn. The exception is Blackpool South, a Tory seat until 1997, which voted heavily for Leave in the EU referendum and turned Tory as part of the collapse of the red wall.

So we should be careful in identifying exactly whose votes are shifting. An academic study published in Political Geography just before the election looked at the idea that "left behind" voters were deserting Labour:

"If we understand 'left behind' areas to be those with large proportions of old, low-skilled, white, working class people living far enough from 'cosmopolitan' cities, then there is significant supporting evidence… However, if a conceptualisation of 'left behind' is adopted which describes constituencies that are the most economically disadvantaged — often ethnically diverse, urban areas — then there is no evidence of any shift away from Labour to the Conservatives. In fact…Labour's support remains particularly strong in those areas of the country with not only the most significant levels of poverty but also those with the greatest proportion of insecure employment."

Labour's support historically relied on at least some level of identification with collective working class organisation. The crumbling of Labour's red wall has to be seen in the context of the erosion of these forms of organisation, which is particularly profound in the former manufacturing heartlands. It is in this sense that some groups of workers are becoming less likely to vote for Labour.

Aditya Chakrabortty, who has consistently highlighted this issue in the Guardian, wrote in the wake of the election: "the mines and the manufacturers, the steel and the shipbuilding were snuffed out. With them went the culture of Labourism: the bolshy union stewards, the self-organised societies, most of the local newspapers. Practically any institution that might incubate a working class provincial political identity was bulldozed."

One occasion when many people in these areas did clearly express themselves was in the 2016 referendum, when large numbers voted — against the leadership of every major Westminster party, including Labour — to leave the EU.

Demonised migrants

All kinds of sentiments were involved in this process. Racism played some part, though this should hardly surprise a political establishment that has demonised migrants, refugees, Muslims and black people. Yet it was not primarily an outburst of racism but, as Diane Abbot argued at the time, a "howl of rage" against the establishment, by people increasingly sceptical of mainstream politics in its entirety.

In other areas of Britain, with younger, more diverse and urbanised populations, some others developed their own often contradictory forms of political identification. For instance, alongside a welcome embrace of Corbyn's socialist vision, some came to conflate an EU that increasingly

buttresses neoliberalism and excludes non-Europeans with efforts to protect workers and to combat racism.

The resulting division in the working class has been extremely damaging. There is condescension towards northern manual workers, stereotyped as ignorant racists, while Corbynistas in cities such as London are portrayed as virtue-signalling hipsters who cannot see beyond their Remain-voting social media bubble.

Neither stereotype is helpful. The point, instead, is to recognise and respond to the challenges posed by changes within the working class and, critically, a low level of class struggle over many decades. A basic premise of socialism is that struggle ultimately generates self-confidence and a capacity to envisage radical change within the working class, pushing back the boundary of what seems possible. This is what is desperately needed.

One blog post from a Labour canvasser notes that, along with the sense of betrayal over Brexit, there were worries among voters about how realistic the transformation posed in Labour's manifesto was. The price of low levels of combativity and self-confidence is that workers' horizons can be lowered to what seems realistic given the existing balance of class forces.

This is not a static situation, but the damage can only be reversed through greater engagement of the radical left with the lives of working class communities, including outside election periods, in an effort to rebuild collective organisation and elevate the level of struggle.

In the absence of this, the distrust of the political elite can create opportunities for the right. It is in this context that we have to understand the 2019 election.

Back in 2017, Corbyn's position was to respect the referendum result and push for a progressive Brexit. This combined with Theresa May's laughable election campaign, focused on her own dubious attributes as a "strong and stable" leader, allowed Labour to enjoy a substantial upswing in popular support.

Establishment manœuvres

By contrast, in 2019 Johnson was able to pose as a champion of Brexit against the establishment manœuvres in Westminster and the courts. He promised little more than that he would "get Brexit done" — but for lots of people, including not a few Remain voters, this was enough. Labour by now supported a second referendum — against Corbyn's better instincts but with the collusion of some even on the left of the party. As the secretary of one Liverpool Constituency Labour Party put it: "Once you say that you're going to disregard the vote of 17.4 million people…you're on a hiding to nothing."

An election day poll of voters by the Conservative peer Lord Ashcroft suggested that for three quarters of Tory voters "getting Brexit done" was the main priority. The Conservatives tapped 73 percent of the Leave vote, up from 60 percent in 2017, while Labour won just 16 percent, down from 25 percent. Although only one in ten Labour voters switched to the Conservatives, and one in 100 to the Brexit party, this effect was concentrated in Leave-voting areas. Perhaps more important still was the tendency of Labour voters in such areas to stay at home.

Here the smears against Corbyn and the treachery of sections of his own party played a role, whether voters actually believed ludicrous claims that he was an IRA member or an anti-Semite, or whether, as many canvassers reported, they simply expressed an ill-defined unease about him.

Breaking out of this impasse would have meant tapping an insurgent, anti-establishment mood, pulling it to the left. But the reality is that, with the exception of the climate movement which has relatively weak ties to Labourism, the period since the 2017 election has been a period of demobilisation of social struggles. Likewise, Labour's campaign featured far fewer of the mass rallies witnessed in 2017, and a more statesmanlike approach from the front bench. Neither the impressive canvassing operation nor the sophisticated use of social media could counteract these problems.

Where does this defeat leave British politics? Johnson now has the biggest Conservative majority in parliament since Thatcher. However, it is unlikely his victory heralds 18 years of Tory rule.

He has not won on the basis of the popularity of his policies, or even on the basis of high levels of trust. Just one in five people believe he keeps his promises, according to one poll.

Again Chakrabortty offered some of the clearest insights, on this occasion reporting from a run-down area of Colchester in Essex: "In one of the country's biggest leave-voting regions, most people in this room had voted for the promises of Brexit, and yet had zero faith in them. They would believe the lying £350m bus, but not its fibbing, blond frontman. They accepted how bad things were, but they didn't imagine for a minute that politicians would make it better."

It is hard to see Johnson translating the votes "loaned" to him in such areas into solid Tory support.

Hardened Tory Brexiters

Even Johnson's pledge to "get Brexit done" might prove harder than he suggests. His large majority makes him less dependent on the most hardened Tory Brexiters or the Democratic Unionist Party. But it is not simply a case of achieving exit at the end of January. After that comes the process of negotiating Britain's trade relationship with the EU, which Johnson wants to conclude by December 2020. Unless he is prepared to accept large tranches of existing EU regulation, this seems unrealistic.

Then there is the emerging constitutional crisis provoked by the Scottish National Party's triumph north of the border, where a new referendum on independence will be demanded. Compounding all this is the state of the world economy. As I have argued in these pages, there are signs that the weak, fragile recovery since the crisis of 2008-9 is beginning to run up against its limits. Issues such as unemployment, economic growth and the cost of living, which rarely featured highly as motivations for voters in 2019, may soon rise up the agenda.

The most urgent task for the radical left is to look beyond the debates likely to engulf the Labour Party and the demoralisation induced by this defeat. It was a welcome sign that thousands took to the streets at a Stand Up To Racism demonstration under the slogan "Not My Prime Minister" the day after the election.

Anti-racism will be an important front in the struggle to come. Another will be the growing rebellion over climate change. There are strikes set to take place in higher education — and these ought to be generalised across the public sector and beyond. Then there is the fight to reverse a decade of austerity, which continues to affect the lives of working class people, north and south.

These struggles can begin to turn the tide against Johnson. That means revolutionary socialists, who desperately wanted to see Corbyn win but who were aware of the limits of parliamentary socialism, working with the broader layers of Corbynistas to begin to rebuild collective organisation and

struggle across Britain, and in doing so restore hope within the working class.

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P.S.

• Socialist Review, Issue: December 2019: http://socialistreview.org.uk/bloody-bitter-pill?