

# Britain, after the elections: Corbyn confounds the plotters

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Labour's Sadiq Khan decisively defeated Zac Goldsmith after the most disgustingly Islamophobic campaign by the Tories. Khan won 57% against Goldsmith's 43% to end eight years of Tory rule at City Hall. Voters in London showed their contempt for the Tory dog whistle politics that Cameron himself employed in the House of Commons in the run up to the vote. The Green's Sian Berry came third with 5.8%. Turnout at 45.6% was up by 7% on 2012 and above the previous high of 45.3% in 2008. Tory racism as well as support for Corbyn drove many to work harder for Khan than they might otherwise have done. This electoral victory in London by Labour was strongly welcomed by Left Unity [1].

Given the massive attacks on Jeremy Corbyn over supposed antisemitism in the Labour Party, which peaked less than a week before the polls opened, the results of elections throughout Britain are a remarkable testament to his leadership. They are also a strong indictment of a massive media campaign around some ill-advised remarks by Ken Livingstone and Facebook comments by largely unknown party members whilst largely ignoring an outrageously Islamophobic mayoral campaign publicly endorsed by Cameron and Johnson.

John McDonnell was absolutely right to point out that the bench mark against which these elections need to be measured were last year's disastrous results which saw a majority Tory government come to office. Corbyn has had only eight short months to turn the party round.

Prominent Corbyn critic and witch hunter, John Mann MP, was forced to concede on Radio 4 that there would be no challenge for now, although the argument is still being pushed by the right that Corbyn didn't do well enough. The debate is not whether Labour needs to win those not currently convinced - but how to do that. They want to return to the failed strategy of Miliband of adapting to Tory policies and ideas. In fact, it is by arguing unstintingly for radical policies that Labour can build on the amazing Corbyn victory in the leadership race.

The plotters, who were clearly prepared to sacrifice Labour victories in their cause, have not drawn the blood they wanted. There will be no contest until at least the summer. Those Corbyn supporters who have begun to challenge their divisiveness are absolutely right to do so. And Sadiq Khan's statement that "Labour only wins when we face outwards and focus on the issues that people care about" is a sign that he's telling the plotters to shut up [2]. Of course, he's also positioning himself for a potential leadership bid in the next few years. His appointment of arch-Blairite Andrew Adonis and his comments about the direction Labour needs to take to win in 2020 illustrate the problems with his approach. [3]

The majority of those standing on May 5 for Labour were most probably selected before Corbyn's election. In many parts of the country Labour still organises in the apolitical ways introduced under Blair where traditional canvassing which attempted to engage those who weren't sure how (or whether) they would vote in political discussion are replaced by 'voter identification' in which people are just asked how they will vote and then ignored. The London Labour Party went further and told supporters not to bother staffing polling stations - something that was fortunately ignored in some constituencies, notably Corbyn's own Islington North.

As leader, Jeremy Corbyn has had to contest a constant stream of vitriol not only from the right wing inside Labour but an incredibly biased media. Gary Younge put it like this in the *Guardian* [4]: "When it comes to assessing Labour's electoral fortunes, Corbyn is treated with all the due process of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century woman accused of witchcraft and dunked in a river. If she drowns she's innocent; if she floats she's guilty and condemned as a witch. Either way the verdict is never in her favour"

### **Labour holds ground**

In England and Wales Labour held ground - holding a number of English councils that they had been predicted to lose - including by those in the Parliamentary Labour Party who were hoping to use election defeats as a springboard to launch a parliamentary coup against Corbyn. Labour also held their seats in the two parliamentary by elections in Sheffield and in Ogmore and continued to hold the mayoralities in Liverpool and Salford.

Later there was the excellent result in the mayoral election Bristol, where Labour's Marvin Rees, a strong supporter of Corbyn, roundly beat the incumbent independent, George Ferguson. A black mayor in Bristol, a city built on the slave trade is worthy of more column inches than most of the media have given it.

In the London Assembly elections, Labour held their ground with twelve seats despite putting all their energies into the Mayoral campaign. They won Merton and Wandsworth from the Tories but then took one fewer of the London wide seats. UKIP returned to the Assembly with two of the London wide seats with the Tories and Lib Dems each losing one and the Greens holding their two.

In Wales, Labour remains the biggest party and held most of its existing seats - with the exception of the Rhondda which it lost spectacularly to Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood. Leanne Wood's victory shows against the prevailing establishment mood that it is possible for a left wing politician who gains a significant public profile to win strong electoral support.

There were also significant swings to Plaid in two other constituencies (Blaenau Gwent and Cardiff West). Turnout was up by nearly four percentage points - making this the second largest turnout in an Assembly election. With 29 seats, Labour are two short of the number they need for a majority. Whether there will be an agreement with Plaid or whether Labour will govern from Cardiff Bay as a minority administration remains to be seen.

UKIP have done well in Wales, as was predicted; taking seven list seats. The Conservatives lost three seats and Liberal Democrats four. UKIP have been showing strongly in Wales since the 2015 general election where their share of the vote leapt from 2% to 14% - not very different from the shares that they gained in the Assembly elections.

In England too, despite the council elections not falling in their strongest areas, UKIP have had some significant successes - with an increase of 25 councilors, coming second in both Westminster by elections and winning over 17% in the election for the Mayor of Salford. UKIP won seats from

Labour in working class council areas like Thurrock, Bolton and Dudley and overtook Labour in Great Yarmouth. UKIP has probably taken as many votes from Labour as from the Tories. But in the situation where the referendum means that UKIP is scarcely out of the media attention this is no surprise - though it does certainly mean we need to step up campaigning for a 'Remain' vote against racism in the referendum [5]].

## **Scotland - problems for Corbyn**

The news from Scotland is of course much more problematic for Corbyn and Labour with the Tories pushing them into third place in the Scottish Parliament. The SNP did well to win their third consecutive term as Scottish Government. Their vote overall went up though the vagaries of the mixed electoral system for the Parliament meant that they failed to repeat the absolute majority they won in the Scottish Parliament in 2011 or their constituency landslide in the UK General Election last year. But given an electoral system devised to prevent majority governments it's still an impressive result especially their complete wipe out of Labour in most of its heartlands, including a clean sweep in Glasgow.

As *Socialist Resistance* has consistently argued, Labour will not succeed in Scotland while it continues to promote a Unionist agenda. The anger that was generated by Labour cosying up to the Tories during Project Fear and the lack of delivery over Devo Max went ebb for a long time. These results show is that amongst those who want to vote Unionist many think they might as well support the Conservative and Unionist Party (as the party is officially known), though Ruth Davidson's leadership and the distance she put between her direction and that of Cameron and the Westminster Tories probably also played a role in her party's success.

The Scottish Greens did well with six list seats - pushing the Liberal Democrats into fifth place and meaning their support may well be critical for the SNP administration getting its proposals agreed by Holyrood. The Scottish Greens have won many of the more radical voters from the 'Yes' side of the Independence referendum. Both Solidarity and the RISE grouping, in which the SSP participates, had very poor showings - only scraping above 1% in Glasgow.

Scottish Labour and Corbyn should be looking at what the Scottish Greens have done - showing that it is possible to successfully criticize the SNP from the left if you also support them where they are putting forward progressive policies. And this is a lesson not only for Holyrood but for Westminster - where an anti-austerity alliance against the Tories involving the SNP, Plaid and the Greens would strengthen opposition to the Tories.

Apart from their strong showing in London, the Greens in the England and Wales council election had only modest results given the undemocratic first past the post system, though many of their existing councilors increased their majorities and they were key to toppling the Tories in Worcester by winning an extra seat.

In the Six Counties of the north of Ireland, where 46% of potential voters stayed at home, a general picture of "business as usual" was upset by the election of two People before Profit candidates to the Assembly, with Gerry Carroll topping the poll in the Sinn Fein heartland of West Belfast and then veteran SWP member Eamonn McCann (with Bernadette McAliskey as his election agent) taking a seat in Foyle. Having two left wing socialist voices in the Assembly puts pressure on Sinn Fein to break with their role of implementing austerity.

So of course there remains much work to be done if Corbyn is going to lead Labour to victory in the 2020 general elections. No one could argue anything different.

## **Put up or shut up**

Corbyn needs to build on the successes he has had at the polls as in the London Mayoral elections and all the by elections since he took office - which some of his opponents in the party seem to have done their best to prevent happening.

At the same time both he and his other supporters need to loudly echo John McDonnell's demand of the plotters to put up or shut up. The left within the Labour Party needs to seriously consider the next steps in wresting control of the machinery which is repeatedly used against it.

And the increasing voices raised against the bias of the mainstream media against the Corbyn leadership need strong support. Serious allegations over electoral fraud by the Tories during the 2015 election [6] in relation to their battle bus campaign have received little exposure for example. The BBC's Laura Kuenssberg's commentary has become little more than a constant stream of abuse against Jeremy Corbyn and the general perception is that she's the voice of the Tory HQ on the TV and radio [7].

In the referendum campaign which will move centre stage now these elections are over, Corbyn has rightly explained that it's absolutely possible to be deeply critical of many of the policies and much of the direction of the European Union and fight for an internationalist, anti-racist remain vote

Like John McDonnell, who signed a declaration calling on Labour to back proportional representation [8], *Socialist Resistance* also believes that Labour needs to go on the offensive about the undemocratic nature of the election of the Tory Government, which will be further worsened by the forthcoming Westminster boundary changes. Labour needs to embrace and campaign for PR to stop the Tories winning another term so undemocratically.

Going into the 2020 General election campaign with a manifesto committed to proportional representation would greatly strengthen Labour's prospects. This would be big tent politics but of a radical kind - reaching out to supporters of other parties who are rightly critical of the first past the post system, as well as many who may traditionally not vote at all. To achieve this will require those on the Labour left who defend the existing Westminster system to break with that position - but with the existing patchwork on electoral systems in these islands and the influx of younger members into the party as well as McDonnell's stance this seems more possible than it has done in the past.

## **United action**

A critical task in going forward to a Labour government is in successfully fighting Tory policies which are devastating people's lives.

The latest government U turn over forced academies is a sign of how unpopular measures can be thrown out - through united action from trade unionists and communities with support from political parties. Of course the campaign against forced academisation is not over despite this victory - education activists know that the notion of 'failing schools' is used against those working in communities with greatest need - who could still be at risk And the Education White Paper contains many other objectionable proposals - not least the 8% cut in education funding.

After refusing to talk for months, Jeremy Hunt has been forced back into discussions with the BMA after the most determined action by the junior doctors in the history of the NHS continues to sustain massive public support. The publication of the Oxford University study of the so-called weekend effect showing how data was miscoded [9] - further strengthening the argument made by NHS staff

and campaigners from the beginning that Hunt is talking nonsense. And Corbyn delighted housing campaigners on May 3 when he unexpectedly attended a meeting in the House of Commons organized by the Kill the Bill campaign and reiterated his absolute commitment to defeating the bill.

The Queen's speech to parliament on Wednesday May 18 will set out the next phase in the Conservatives' onslaught on the welfare state and the working class. As a result of these elections, Corbyn and Labour are in a stronger position to oppose these measures inside Parliament and support resistance outside.

Labour's right has been praying that Khan would lose to Goldsmith and that the party would take a knock in the local government elections. Neither of these things happened. The task now is to consolidate the people who have joined, or rejoined the party and to act on what Sadiq Khan also says about issues such as the lack of affordable housing, transport infrastructure and fares, the NHS while developing an economic programme that explains how a Corbyn / McDonnell government will deliver improvements in the lives of the vast majority of the population in a socially just and ecologically sustainable way.

**Veronica Fagan**

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**P.S.**

\* Socialist Resistance. May 10, 2016:

<http://socialistresistance.org/8359/corbyn-confounds-the-plotters>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] ESSF (article 37920), [Britain: Left Unity welcomes Sadiq Khan's victory as the new Mayor of London](#).

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/07/sadiq-khan-londoners-deserve-better-tory-campaign>

[3] Khan said in an article in the Observer on May 08 : Campaigns that deliberately turn their back on particular groups are doomed to fail. Just like in London, so-called natural Labour voters alone will never be enough to win a General Election. We must be able to persuade people who previously voted Conservative that Labour can be trusted with the economy and security as well as improving public services and creating a fairer society."

[4] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/06/doom-merchants-corbyn-viable-leader-labour>

[5] [ESSF (article 37963), [Britain & EU referendum: For a critical in vote against racism](#).

[6] <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/media/2016/05/why-havent-we-heard-more-about-allegations-tory-election-fraud>

[7] Anger at Kuenssberg's role has led thousands to sign this petition:

<https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/sack-laura-kuenssberg?bucket&source=facebook-share-button&time=1459191855>

[8] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-john-mcdonnell-proportional-representation-pr-make-votes-matter-protest-a7018056.html>

[9] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/junior-doctors-row-jeremy-hunts-claims-of-nhs-weekend-effect-based-on-flawed-data-a7019806.html>