

INTERVIEW

Britain, general election day: Corbyn and working-class radicalism - A Rebirth of Hope

Friday 9 June 2017, by [OVENDEN Kevin](#), [WEISSMAN Suzi](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2017).

Whether Corbyn wins or loses, we're seeing a rebirth of working-class radicalism in Britain that will not end today.

When Theresa May called for a snap election in the United Kingdom, her Conservative Party had a massive lead — at least twenty-one points ahead of Labour. But that's not the case any longer. Jeremy Corbyn has been surging in the polls, cutting the Tories' lead into the single digits and leading them in some districts.

Whichever way the country votes today, Corbyn and his supporters have revitalized class politics in the United Kingdom.

Suzi Weissman and Kevin Ounden discussed the campaign, class and identity politics, and the most likely election results on this week's Jacobin Radio. This transcript has been edited; you can listen to the episode [here](#) and subscribe to Jacobin Radio at [iTunes](#), [Stitcher](#), and [Blubrry](#).

Suzi Weissman

The Guardian recently came out endorsing Jeremy Corbyn. Ed Miliband, came out almost endorsing Corbyn. What's the lay of the land?

Kevin Ounden

It's changed dramatically. Shortly after the election was called a month and a half ago, we were discussing the gap in the opinion polls, which then reflected a year and a half of systematic hostility, not just from the mainstream media but from the establishment class generally, against Jeremy Corbyn.

In the course of the last five or six weeks, the more people have seen of Jeremy Corbyn, the more people have rallied to the Labour side.

Secondly, against all of what we were told for a period of possibly a generation, from the early 1990s to 2008, which is that politics was gravitating towards the center — Blair/Clintonism, the big ideological questions are dead, the big political divide is dead, and we had gone beyond Left and Right — that's just come crashing down in Britain in the last five weeks, and quite spectacularly so.

Jeremy Corbyn and Labour are ahead by about five points in London. The polls vary a lot, but all of them show a narrowing of the gap, which, were it to continue, does not rule out the Labour Party winning the general election on June 8.

I'm not predicting that, but what is certainly incontrovertible is that Corbyn is pushing a clear position that the people to blame are not migrants coming to this country; it's the eight billionaires who own more than half the wealth of the bottom half of the population in Britain. That message is working.

These kind of arguments — that the state can be used to redistribute wealth for productive investment, for sustainable growth, for redressing the social crisis in Britain (which is acute for older people; for younger people, maybe four million children living in poverty now), the crisis of the National Health Service, and so on. These arguments are really connecting with people.

What remains to be seen is how many of those layers, who cumulatively over the past thirty years have been disinclined to vote because they've not felt anybody's speaking for them, turn out. These are disproportionately poorer or working-class people, and they're also disproportionately younger people. So we have a big age imbalance in who has historically voted in the last twenty-five years in Britain.

If these layers that are moving with some enthusiasm to the Labour campaign actually go out and vote, then we could be in for a fantastic surprise.

Suzi Weissman

When Theresa May came in, she shocked everybody by adopting a somewhat "compassionate" program that she's called various things like "social care." She then promptly turned around on that issue. Do austerity and the economic situation, and the fact that so many people have been left behind, account for Corbyn's surge?

Kevin Ounden

Some of us made this point when May became prime minister, and it's now clearer to hundreds of thousands, millions of voters in Britain, that this talk of repositioning the Conservative Party to be a party of working people, a hint at economic nationalism along the Trump mold, had no conviction behind it and no plan.

It was purely a political repositioning exercise, because the Brexit vote had happened. It exposed this great discontent at the base of society. People were behind from not just the crisis years since 2008, but the so-called good years of neoliberal globalization running up to that.

People in formerly industrial areas (our equivalent of what you in the United States call the Rust Belt) were not just feeling left behind, they really were left behind, and as in the United States, life expectancy falling for women and men in those areas.

Suzi Weissman

Is there a lot of drug addiction?

Kevin Ounden

Absolutely. We have that in areas where I grew up in Yorkshire, in the north of England. With the de-industrialization of the 1980s, heroin addiction, other forms of class A drugs, things that people take

to desperately try to escape from reality and become dependent on. That has been very, very widespread.

It wasn't alleviated but masked. A newer generation could find jobs, but they could find jobs with low pay and without the prospect of the social and community structures that their parents and grandparents had. This has been building up for thirty years in Britain. So the election has taken on a kind of existential character.

Various journalists are saying this isn't a normal election. Well, they're only comparing it with what have been fairly anodyne elections. This is an election like 1945 after World War II. It's an election like 1964 or '74. It's an election like 1979, or like 1997. It pitches two great directions about where society's going to go, and that's a big social feeling.

What is of dramatic significance is that one of those two poles is represented by a Tory Party which is essentially the same old Tory Party, but with this adaptation to economic-nationalist talk on the basis of Brexit, but not much more than that, nothing in terms of a coherent direction. That's one pole.

The other pole is the Labour Party, which is being seen once again as the party of working men and working women. Its leader is the most left wing-leader that the Labour Party has had since George Lansbury in the 1930s. You have an election between left and right, between social democracy versus an outright capitalist party. But in the Labour Party you have somebody and a group of people around him who are connected with a much more radically left vision about how things can progress, which is rooted in the idea of popular mobilization.

Suzi Weissman

In the French election, you could say that Le Pen failed to win, rather than was defeated. But given that, and Trump's victory and his governing, has there been any impact on the British voter, or is it something peculiarly insular?

Kevin Ovenden

No, it's not just about British politics, and the Trump-Theresa May connection is working against her to a significant extent. Donald Trump's never been popular in Britain, and certainly not after he was elected.

The recent news of him pulling out of the Paris climate accord has been accompanied online with images of Theresa May holding hands with him. People are saying, "Look, you're supposed to have this special relationship with the president of the United States, and yet you can't sign the complaint which came from other European leaders of Trump pulling out of the climate accords." That's worked against Theresa May.

In December 2016, lots of international pundits were saying, "Look, the election in France will be between Francois Fillon," who's to the right of Macron, "and the fascist Le Pen. The hard right is growing everywhere. The Tory government will be strong, the Labour Party will collapse, and Donald Trump will govern strongly."

All of these things have been thrown up in the air. We're not seeing in France or indeed in the United States, and certainly not in Britain, some inexorable shift to the right, shift to nativism, shift to popular racism and xenophobia. Those things are there, but on the other side of the picture is a radicalization to the left, and class polarization in social terms.

When the Left can gather itself to be a national credible force as it's happened under Jeremy Corbyn, then it can have a huge impact on the outcome of politics. Britain is not insular. It's an island, but it's not insular in this respect. I would place it on a spectrum of other developments.

Suzi Weissman

One thing you've mentioned is the return of not just left-wing politics, but class politics. You could also say that class politics is why people are moving to the far right, even though their program barely pays lip service to it.

How is this reflected now in Britain in this surging support for Corbyn?

Kevin Ounden

By class politics, I'd put it in two ways. One, a basic class sentiment. It's not difficult to describe it, and it's not difficult to feel it when you look at the incredible amounts of wealth that have gone up to not so much the 1 percent but the 0.1 percent. So the basic sense is that life is difficult, and for younger generations coming afterwards, it's getting more difficult.

But in the political sense I'd say it's an interesting development. It is quite modern class politics. More than half the labor force in Britain in many industries is female, and one of the biggest shifts powering the surge around Jeremy and the Labour Party is a movement of women voters, disproportionately working-class women voters. Also, it's very pronounced among black and minority ethnic voters. It's pronounced among all those people in society who face some additional form of disadvantage or oppression.

That is bundled up when you talk about the class politics. I can give you just one anecdote which sums it up brilliantly. The shadow education secretary for the Labour Party, who, if Labour would win the election, would be in charge of education, schools, and universities, is a woman called Angela Rayner.

Angela Rayner is a working-class woman. She left school at sixteen and she had a baby at sixteen. She never went to university. She was a home help, she cared for disabled and elderly people in their homes, joined the Labour Party, became political, studied part-time, and is now a top-flight politician.

In a sense, Angela Rayner sums up the feeling of very large numbers of people. Just because you didn't go to university at the age of eighteen and got all these letters after your name, it doesn't mean that you don't count. You can achieve something. You're just as good as anybody else. It's a sense against the class system, but also against the patriarchal system and against the sneer at working-class people.

Suzi Weissman

Women traditionally were thought of as conservative, docile, and for the status quo, but what you're saying is that women are in the forefront, something that we saw a century ago as well. Given that Theresa May, the last I saw, is still a woman, could we say that US-style identity politics don't hold sway over class politics in Britain?

Kevin Ounden

If we wanted to put it in that opposition, I'd say yes, they don't hold sway.

What's the difference between a radical, transformative politics of women's liberation, on one hand, and having a woman in a position of political authority on the other? What's the difference between the Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn with people like Angela Rayner generating this enthusiasm, on the one hand, versus a woman, who, leading the Tory Party with a cabinet of millionaires, has put through legislation that states that, after having a second child, a mother would have to prove that the child was the product of being raped if she wanted to get benefits?

Suzi Weissman

My God.

Kevin Ovenden

It's an absolutely incredible piece of legislation. This is from the Tory Party, which is led by a woman. Now, one thing that's very interesting is that there's no sexist or misogynist rhetoric directed at Theresa May, which is very good. I think people see her as Tory.

Actually, when people see her. One of the running jokes in this campaign is that she's avoided virtually all contact with ordinary people.

She's avoided any head-to-head debate with Jeremy Corbyn, and it's like she's being imperious. She called the election and said she wouldn't call the election. She had a twenty-five-point lead, which is now being frittered away.

She thinks that she ought to be there almost by divine right, and it's going down very, very badly. But, it's not at all to do with the fact that she's a woman. It's to do with the fact that she concentrates not just a lot of the inequality, but a lot of the outright class snobbery of the people who run Britain.

Suzi Weissman

Maybe we should just talk for a moment about the campaign, because Corbyn was seen as lackluster as well.

People were saying last summer that he may have had great politics but is not great at being a messenger for those politics, especially during that really vicious fight that he had within the Labour Party and within the Parliamentary Labour Party. But he's come out ahead of her.

As you mentioned, she's reluctant to get into a debate, and they're having separate question times. What can you say about Corbyn's campaign and who organized it?

Kevin Ovenden

I've known Jeremy for twenty-five years, and he's always been at his best when he's outside of what we call the Westminster bubble — the equivalent would be outside of the Beltway — talking with people, campaigning. Some politicians have to pretend to listen and some of them can be very good at it.

I remember Bill Clinton was a fantastic actor. Jeremy doesn't have to pretend to do that. When he's with people, his genuineness completely comes through.

So what's happened in the course of the election is actually quite interesting. When an election is called, the MPs are out of parliament, but the rules of the Labour Party state that power devolves to

the election team around the leadership.

All of that nastiness from last year, the noises off from other MPs to get rid of him — that was pushed to one side by the rules of the Labour Party, which concentrated decision making in the hands of the leadership for the duration of the campaign.

Jeremy, Diane Abbott, John McDonnell, Angela Rayner, Emily Thornberry, a number of people of the Left who are from the core of the leadership, could be much less impeded by noises from right-wing or Blairite MPs who've been back with their constituencies having to fight for their vote.

One, he's been able to put forward a very good manifesto with some radical social democratic measures. Two, they've been able to conduct a campaign which both plays to his strengths, but also is the right campaign to conduct — one of mass rallies, one of getting out to speak to people rather than funneling it through a very controlled and biased media.

Three, he's turned upside down the Tory election strategy. It was to rely upon the constant denigration by the establishment and the media, and sections of the Labour Party of Jeremy Corbyn, and to say, "Look, this guy is useless. You've read it all in the papers. He's going nowhere," and it's him versus the strong, imperial Theresa May.

People have seen more and more of Jeremy Corbyn and of the policies, and of the style of campaigning. They are really liking it, and the more they see of Theresa May — or rather the more they feel that she's not prepared to be seen and to answer questions — the more they don't like it.

So you have a crisis in the Tory campaign. I'm not saying that they will lose, necessarily. They still are ahead, but there's a crisis in the campaign.

They had run the campaign to be "Back Theresa May," as if it was a US presidential campaign, not a British parliamentary campaign for hundreds of MPs.

It was "Back Theresa May," and now Theresa May's name is getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller on the propaganda that's going out. This is a very difficult situation for them.

Suzi Weissman

How are party leaders chosen? If the Tory majority is reduced substantially, will she have to resign?

Kevin Ounden

Parties choose their leaders by whatever processes. The Labour Party is one member, one vote, and that's how Jeremy was elected twice with an overwhelming mandate. The prime minister is the person in the House of Commons, of which there are 650 MPs, who can command a majority.

Essentially, one or other party has to get over 323 MPs, there or there about, to form a government, or they can form a minority government with other parties supporting them, or possibly a coalition. That's how we end up with a prime minister. You have to have the majority in the legislature to be the leader, so it's not like a presidential system.

The outgoing parliament had a majority of thirteen MPs. If that were to fall by one, I believe she'd have to go, because she called this election to strengthen her hand. She called it with a big majority in the opinion polls, but has been losing throughout the course of the election.

Also, she called it to strengthen her hand against factional rivals inside the Tory Party, and they will

pounce, not even if she loses some seats, but if she fails to gain a significant advance on the thirteen she had before. I think she'll be in serious trouble, because it was her decision. It was her campaign.

They have been running a presidential campaign, even though we don't have a presidential system. Therefore, anybody with a grievance inside the Tory Party will take her out very, very hastily.

Suzi Weissman

Do you think this will end up with a hung Parliament, or do you think that we're in for a surprise?

Kevin Ovenden

There's a big range of possibilities. There was a poll that was predicting a hung Parliament. We have 650 constituencies here, sort of like congressional districts, but they're quite small, and so a national share of vote can be unevenly distributed around the country.

The second factor is that in Scotland, the Scottish National Party is now the dominant party, so it's extremely difficult for Labour to form a majority government of its own, given the position in Scotland of the Scottish National Party. A hung parliament is certainly possible.

I wouldn't trust anybody who is saying what the result will be. I'll tell you one thing that can be guaranteed: the extraordinary political events we've seen in the course of the selection campaign will not come to an end, whatever the result on Thursday.

The Labour campaign has generated these things we've been talking about, which have restored a kind of radical left against the Right. It's giving people hope, and that will feed into all sorts of other social processes. We're seeing a rebirth of the political engagement of radicalized working class people in Britain, and that will not end next week.

P.S.

* Jacobin. 06.08.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/06/jeremy-corbyn-labour-theresa-may-snap-election-radical-politics>

* Kevin Ovenden is a UK-based political activist and writer. His dispatches from Greece are being funded by Philosophy Football through the sale of t-shirts.