

# **Absolute: On the British General Election - An in depth analysis - Earning optimism after pessimism**

Tuesday 13 June 2017, by [Salvage](#) (Date first published: 12 June 2017).

*'Obedience to the force of gravity. The greatest sin.'*

— Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

*'Things can only get better. Can only get better, if we see it through.'*

— D:ream

An uncharacteristically subdued President Trump described the result of Britain's snap general election of 8 June as 'surprising'. The *Guardian* went further, calling it a 'shock result'. The redoubtable Jon Snow for *Channel 4 News* was closer to the mark, that this was 'one of the most remarkable election results in modern British History'. This was astonishing, staggering, extraordinary.

The result did not emerge quite from the void: it had been clear for some weeks that Jeremy Corbyn was considerably more popular with the electorate than his countless detractors in all parties contended, let alone than the deeply unlikeable and widely mocked Theresa May. So too was the Labour manifesto, a statement of historically modest social democracy, but unapologetically redistributive and anti-neoliberal in post-Washington Consensus terms. After an excellent Labour campaign that, crucially, gave no sense of defensiveness, and pitched unapologetically to the left, there was cautious optimism among many Labour activists and supporters that the party would win enough to consolidate Corbyn's leadership and, more importantly, his longer term project of reconstituting the party on the left, and with a tilt to the grassroots. That he would buy time and continue his ongoing - and successful - recasting of the political conversation in the UK.

A few glowing and proud outliers aside, few, even among his most trenchant supporters, dared expect anything like what happened. What happened was, in the words of Corbyn's New Labour enemy Peter Mandelson, an earthquake.

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A record surge in the Labour vote, the biggest since 1945, was enough to rob Theresa May of her majority and kill stone dead her hopes of a parliamentary supermajority to negotiate Brexit, and to stamp down the dirt on the grave of Corbynism, if not the Labour Party. She is now dependent for a razor-thin and unstable majority on the support of the Democratic Unionist Party, an obstructionist, hard-right, deeply socially reactionary Northern Irish rump of ten MPs, little known in the mainland, up to its neck in a history of Loyalist paramilitarism.

Labour did not win the election. Jeremy Corbyn, crowned 'The Absolute Boy' by a buoyant social media Left, is not Prime Minister. He was achingly close to being able to form, through coalition and agreement, a minority or even possibly majority government. For one brief, giddy moment in the small hours, as the scale of the Tory catastrophe unfolded, the bookmakers had him as favourite to

become Prime Minister. But Labour did not win a majority of seats.

Still, it is hard to exaggerate the scale of this achievement, in the fact of active sabotage from Labour's own backbenchers, and unanimous media attacks. Labour won over 40 per cent of the popular vote, a ten point rise from two years ago, and the highest share since 2005. The swing of 9 per cent was the highest for any party in the country since 1945. Even hamstrung by the UK's unforgiving first-past-the-post electoral system, the party won a string of seats, bellwethers, Tory safe seats, and Tory-Liberal marginals, which it should normally never win, certainly not unless it's winning the election. Almost unbelievably, it won the richest constituency in the country, for the first time ever (by a hair-raising twenty votes). Kensington, home of the *Daily Mail*, where working-class communities are made culturally invisible, sedimented into the richest streets in the country. The Labour candidate was a local councillor and anti-gentrification campaigner. Canterbury, which has been blue since the Great War, went Labour thanks to a combination of a mobilised student population and a wider buzz about Labour's national campaign. It resurfaced in Scotland despite a death-spiral of a campaign by Scottish Labour, a truculent rump organisation deeply resentful of Corbyn's project, but, like other Labour saboteurs up and down the country, beneficiaries of it. Only five Labour MPs lost their seats in the general election, most of whom were among the sullen anti-Corbyn rump, including Alan Meale, Tom Blenkinsop, Rob Flello, and Natascha Engel.

But the Tories are still in government.

It would be the worst kind of point-missing and posturing to insouciantly inquire as to the whereabouts, then, of the big deal. Just an election, just more votes for Labour, not even a win – why get too excited? The question is, what is the meaning of the vote? This was a national sea-change, a reversal of the verities of British political life. This was an epochal shift.

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John Harris, one of Jeremy Corbyn's erstwhile 'Blue Labour' sceptics, went to the streets of Birmingham to report on the mood. Footage from drunken celebrations in the early hours of Friday morning show young, working-class people chanting Jeremy Corbyn's name – charmingly, to the tune of the White Stripes '7 Nation Army'. Why did they vote Labour? 'We want a new future,' they say. 'Free school meals.' 'They were all ganging up on him.' 'The *Sun*, oh my god...'

This was a class vote, a youth vote, a vote for a left-wing modernisation project, a vote against the political class ganging up on an honest politician, a vote against the reactionary tabloids. It is a vote for a project that they – the ubiquitous 'they' – said had no chance, was wildly unrealistic. Now it looks more and more like the only project, at least for social democracy, that has any chance at all.

All over Europe, social-democracy has been in accelerating meltdown since 2008. In Spain, the crisis-ridden PSOE, which has been the dominant post-Franco party, stands at between 23 and 27 per cent of the vote, and can't form a government. The victory of Pedro Sanchez, not a natural left-winger, on the platform of rank and file members, is a consequence of this. In the Netherlands, the PvdA has been reduced to 9 per cent of the vote. In France, the Socialists polled just over 6 per cent in the presidential elections, with Jean-Luc Mélenchon's radical left *La France insoumise* easily outpolling them. Even in Germany, where the SPD is supposed to be reviving, the social democrats stand at between 20 and 25 per cent of the vote, and were recently crushed in the key North Rhine-Westphalia regional elections.

Corbyn's Labour is, electorally and in membership terms, now the strongest social democratic party in Europe, and is gaining even more members off the back of this success. And though no one would deny that the party's socialist leadership has made political and ideological compromises with its

own right wing, including some that have pained the left, overwhelmingly it has achieved this growth, and a concomitant shift in the political discourse, not by 'triangulation', not by accommodating reaction, but by resisting it, by defending left positions. And it has started – indeed, come far further with than most of us could have imagined – the process of translating that into electoral power by expanding the voting base. This is the exact opposite of the Blairite strategy, which was to try to win the largest single slice of a diminishing electoral pie. In this tactic of striving to win by deepening rather than etiolating democracy, no less than on grounds of political substance, Corbynism is the death of Blairism, as even Blairism's more perspicacious advocates admit.

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The generational aspect of Corbyn's success can be overstated or confused. A substantial part of Corbyn's success was reaching out to a chunk of UKIP-voting older voters in the North. But the biggest increase in turnout was in constituencies where 18-34 year olds are the majority of the population. The 18-24-year-old turnout increased from 58 per cent to 72 per cent. Thirty-eight per cent of the Tory base was made up of over-65s, as compared to 16 per cent of the Labour base. Nine per cent of Conservatives were 18-34, compared to 28 per cent of Labour voters.

The youth surge was the great unknown of this campaign, which upended all calculations, made a mockery of most predictions. Shortly prior to the election campaign, Labour was 20 per cent behind in the polls. Corbyn's personal approval was poor among all demographics. But as the campaign unfolded, with a strong Labour manifesto driving up the party's support, and a youth-oriented campaign focus – Corbyn's surprise appearance at a Libertines concert, the #grime4corbyn trend, the meme-and-banter driven culture of young Corbyn supporters online – the polls found that The Absolute Boy had won the political argument among the young. It only remained to be seen whether they would turn out.

What's different about the younger generations? One important factor is that they don't read the papers. Less than a fifth of those aged under thirty-five read any daily newspaper on a regular basis, compared to half of pensioners. The tabloid smears about Corbyn's 'links' to the IRA worked on a section of older, less educated white voters, who are more likely to read the tabloids. But the diminished influence of this sector is vivid and clear in the upending of conventional wisdom and reflexes. For the Labour party to so dramatically increase its share of votes, let alone under a socialist, in the aftermath of not one but two horrifying terrorist attacks, in the midst of a truly deranged onslaught of smear by the Sun and the Daily Mail, is to defy what we have learnt is political gravity.

Complacency would be foolish. But the much-vaunted 'dark arts' of spin, of media manipulation abruptly look as threadbare and pathetic as the hocus pocus of some two-bit conjuror.

And the liberal-realist press, the *Independent* and the *Guardian*, is also losing influence, with the former folding its print edition and the latter losing 10 per cent of its readership year-on-year. This is partly due to the shift away from print culture, producing an economic crisis for the old media. But it is also the outcome of an ideological crisis not just for an ageing Tory Britain, but for the management of what had become 'Third Way' social democracy, the *Guardian's* ferocious anti-Corbynism losing it the support of a readership that was overwhelmingly supportive of Corbyn, just as *El Pais's* difficulties arise from its role as the brain trust of the PSOE centre.

Commentators, even on the Left, treat age as a purely independent variable, as if the de-composition and re-composition of class experience in the UK over the past twenty years occurred because people got older. This was a class vote – a vote of proletarians enthused about the prospect of a

material improvement in their collective interest – even if the class concerned is not your grandmother’s working class. The much-maligned Millennials, who grew up in the era of the disastrous ‘war on terror’, and the elite debacle that was the credit crunch, came of age amid a lost decade of stagnant wages and economic growth. While oligarchs hoarded capital and hoovered up ever greater chunks of national resources, especially from the privatised parts of the public sector, businesses used precarious work and zero-hours contracts to drive up the absolute rate of exploitation. The austere economic formula had produced only stagnation and the bottoming out of labour productivity. And it was the young who got the worst end of that deal, with 16–24 year olds three times as likely to be unemployed as other workers. The UK’s insane property market, the pivot of a debt/speculation economy, works for those older voters who have assets against which to borrow money – above all, of course, a house. But it leaves young workers, especially those in cities and large towns, with no chance of joining the mythical ‘property ladder’.

The generational question, then, is in part a class issue and a culture issue. Younger voters were unconvinced that the pressing issue was that Jeremy Corbyn was unwilling to trigger a nuclear doomsday, or that he had met Sinn Féin representatives in the 1980s. Almost twenty years since the Good Friday agreement, after which former IRA leaders have participated in the British state, administering the sectarian mini-state under the rubric of neoliberal capitalism and shaking hands with the Queen, young voters had other things on their minds. It is, with this in mind, notable that many of the recent figures of left-wing revival have been older politicians – Mélenchon is sixty-five, Sanders is seventy-five, and Corbyn is sixty-eight. The difference between those politicians and their, sometimes younger opponents, is that they are completely unsullied by the betrayals of the centre. Corbyn’s record as a principled opponent of British foreign policy, anti-nuclear campaigner and proponent of Irish republicanism was of a piece with a general incorruptibility. Those politicians implicated in the hacking scandal, or the expenses scandal, or in betrayals such as Clegg’s reversal over tuition fees, appealed to a cynical subjectivity: this is just how politics works. Corbyn was being demonised for breaking with this pact, which had been part of what turned millions off parliamentary politics altogether.

Labour, under Corbyn, has intelligently harnessed these social-demographic shifts, responded to capitalism’s crises, and produced a broad class agenda which answers to all of these crises and the diverse lived experiences of students, the precarious and pseudo-self employed, public sector workers, and trade unionists. It combined elements of an emergent common sense and shared experience in a ‘national-popular’ thrust, in the authentically Gramscian sense. It also exploited hitherto concealed weaknesses in the Conservative strategy of nationalist *kulturkampf*, which derived part of its persuasive power from a thin gruel of ‘class’ rhetoric that looked risible next to Labour’s agenda, and its ability to terrify from the intimidated acquiescence of its opponents in shoring up a failing consensus on war, terrorism and national security. The most exciting thing about the election is this potential birth of such a new, politicised working-class culture – embodied in the #grime4Corbyn phenomenon – adequate to the working class of 2017, not that of 1957. For some years, ‘working class’ has been taken as a synonym for ‘white and racist’. Corbyn’s achievement enables us to nail that canard.

There are complex local and political details behind Labour’s performance that deserve fuller investigation. In Scotland, for example, though Labour also returned from the abyss, the major beneficiary of the falling away from the social-democratically inclined Scottish National Party was, rather, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. The SNP, whose platform prominently featured a second independence referendum, lost 500,000 votes; Labour gained a mere 10,000. Enough – against all expectations – to recover seats in not only its target seat of East Lothian, but Midlothian, Glasgow North East, Kirkcaldy and Rutherglen and Hamilton West – but a very different story from the huge swings to Labour in England and Wales. As a result, the long complaint of Scottish

nationalists, that they are governed by Tories without a mandate, has been reversed: without her Scottish seats, Theresa May would be unable to cobble together even such a majority as she currently seeks with the Democratic Unionists.

The peak of SNP support in 2015 represented a continuation of the previous phase of the crisis of the British state, the Scottish independence referendum of nine months prior. The bold and radical campaign that ran that referendum far closer than expected shifted en masse to the SNP, providing the landslide that gained a full 50 per cent of the Westminster vote share. Scottish Labour, having reached a nadir of participation in the politics of the extreme centre by campaigning together with the Tories against independence, were wiped out in their historic strongholds. The devolved parliamentary elections of 2016 provided less cheer to the SNP, albeit still a victory. The recent general election results, still commanding a majority of Scottish seats but sustaining a massive loss of twenty-one MPs continues the downward trend. Why?

The SNP, and the independence project, no longer commands the sense of insurgent purpose against a crisis-ridden British state that it did in 2015: certainly not by comparison with Corbyn's far more robust and limpid Left reformism. The SNP have been in government in Scotland for ten years, ruling largely from the position of stultifying social consensus that constitutes the 'Scottish ideology' [1]. They have a record on which to be judged. Sturgeon's strategy was also unclear. Having promised a second independence referendum in response to the threat of 'Hard Brexit', she enraged the curmudgeonly bloc that despises everything the first referendum stood for: political contestation, hope, mobilisation, 'division'. Yet, having tacked solidly to the centre-right for the previous two years, hoping to win over the 2014 'No' voters of the Scottish petit bourgeoisie, Sturgeon could offer little to enthuse the base of 2015.

The Scots Tories' bounty was born of this stuff. Ruth Davidson, the least mediocre politician in British conservatism, easily channelled the anti-political instincts of the 2014 'No' voters. Detoxified by the cross-party unionist campaign, the Tories have again become the natural option of their natural supporters, the provincial middle class of a nation whose social attitudes are no more – in comparison to cities such as London somewhat less – egalitarian than England's. The aim of Scottish nationalism has long been for Scotland to become another small nation like any other. That, as the general election result demonstrates, is what it has always been.

Scottish Labour bear no small measure of responsibility for the return of the Scots Tories, however. The rump apparatus of the party again prioritised (British) nation over class. Even in seats contested by excellent socialist candidates, Scottish Labour harped on about opposing the 'divisive' referendum. Corbyn's programme doubtlessly did bring voters back to Labour in Scotland, yet at nothing like the rate seen in England. The resulting undeserved victories ought to prompt a period of reflection on the part of the Scottish Labour leadership. Experience suggests this will not be forthcoming. Yet the Scottish Left, having attached itself so firmly to the independence cause now also has some serious thinking to do. As Scotland turns right, and we see the most realistic chance in seven decades for a Britain that is not solely for the rich, what reasons other than identification with a national project are there not to throw all into the battle for Corbynism?

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We are faced with the extraordinary phenomenon of a radically rejuvenated, vibrant, agenda-setting left movement in a social-democratic party – in the absence of any real upsurge in (historically weak) trade-union activity or industrial action. This is, to be absolutely sure, and in electoral as well as other terms, a class vote, and a certain 'return of class', but not one that maps neatly onto traditional socialist models of and assumptions about class consciousness and militant action. It would not be at all surprising, of course, if what a certain reductive Marxism might see as the tail

now wagged the dog – if, buoyed by this shift, and with a newly empowered and comradely Labour leader, the unions become markedly more bullish. Encouragingly, part of Labour’s current agenda is the abolition of anti-union laws and the creation of new workers’ rights, thus making union revival more plausible.

What has been urgently necessary since the astonishing success of Corbyn – first within Labour’s ranks, now within the British electorate – and to which we fervently hope the newly buoyed up activists in and around the Labour party will commit themselves, has been a militant base that can defend and push Corbyn from outside of electoral politics. Thus far, energies have been – understandably – focused on winning power within the Labour party, and defending Corbyn’s leadership. But this cannot remain the only focus if Corbyn’s project is to have any lasting success. So far, there has been little success in turning the energies of the new activists towards local and community organising, or towards workplace-based politics. It is one thing for the unions to be bullish, but if Prime Minister Corbyn is to be in charge of the British state, he is going to need more than union bureaucrats to keep him on track.

To concretise this problem, some statistics: of the 31.2 million people currently employed in the UK, around 6.2 million were trade union members in 2016 (around 20 per cent), and the year between 2015–2016 saw the largest annual fall of overall union membership recorded since 1995.

The situation becomes even more alarming once this is broken down sectorally. In the public sector, trade union density is 52.7 per cent, but it is falling year on year. But the public sector makes up only 18 per cent of the UK’s workforce. The private sector, which is growing, makes up over 80 per cent; there, trade union density is pitiful – 13.4 per cent – and is also falling. It must be an urgent priority of Corbyn’s supporters to turn their attention to remedying this dismal situation. At the time of writing, Labour’s membership is rumoured to have reached more than 800,000. If its doorknockers and campaigners can deliver the biggest upsurge in Labour’s vote share since 1945 in six short weeks, one can only giddily imagine what impact they might have if the same energy were directed towards a union membership drive.

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Perhaps most intriguing has been ‘the Brexit Effect’. At one level, Brexit was, as the *Financial Times* put it, ‘the dog that didn’t bark’: the Liberal Democrats staked all on this being the key issue of the election, and of benefitting from their promise to revisit the issue. Their deeply underwhelming performance has led to rumblings of great discontent against their leader, Tim Farron, who barely held onto his seat. This is not to say that Brexit wasn’t a factor – but that it was complexly imbricated with other factors (of class, of culture, of education, and of geography) and that it could not be simplistically read off, politically. UKIP collapsed, but where its vote went was not straightforward. In some pro-Brexit, Northern, traditionally Labour constituencies, a strong swing to the conservatives seemed to vindicate the commentariat instinct that the UKIP vote was taken by the conservatives. This was especially pronounced in the north-east. But even there, a significant portion, in fact, went to Labour, and there were enough examples of seats like Portsmouth, strongly pro-Brexit but swinging, in one shock turn of events among many that night, to Labour, to undermine any simplistic ‘pro-Leave = Conservative’ equation. Conversely, Labour did also astonishingly well in many pro-Remain seats, like Hampstead and Kilburn, where a majority of 1,000 became one of 16,000. For Brexit to be integrated into some grand unified theory, to articulate how it interacted with other factors to aid or hamper Labour, will take detailed work. Before the election was called, many – including *Salvage* – deemed Corbyn’s strategy regarding Article 50 a panic-driven mistake. Had May not called the snap election, her hand would have been no doubt strengthened by this blunder. But it’s worth pointing out that during its campaign, Labour was clearly able to appeal to both sides of the debate. Corbyn’s emphasis on a ‘jobs first Brexit’, on

securing tariff-free access to the single market and on allowing EU nationals the right to remain, in the face of May's alarming 'no deal' position, clearly appealed to both sides of the referendum electorate. But what was perhaps his most impressive achievement was precisely in making issues other than Brexit the focus of the election: Ashcroft's poll revealed that only 8 per cent of Labour voters ranked Brexit as their most important issue (they were most likely to cite the NHS and spending cuts).

There has always been a tremendous fragility to Corbyn's project of rebuilding social democracy. It has at crucial moments been painfully tenuous, its various victories even within its own party won against the resilient institutional weight of conservatism, and in spite of the inherited frailties of the Left. Had Corbyn not mobilised his support in 2016, and had they not responded to the gravity of the crisis, the NEC would have prevented him from standing again as leader. Had Corbyn not pulled off this near-miraculous electoral performance, the splitters and plotters had already signalled to the George Osborne-edited *Evening Standard* that they were ready to try to take him down again. The narrow and mean purview of the *Guardian* centre, from Jonathan Freedland to Martin Kettle, would have justified a new self-destructive spiral, blaming Corbyn for not immediately turning round social democracy's long-brewing crisis.

Fortunately, Corbyn's Labour critics – as their own farther-sighted representatives have known for some time, and has been made abruptly and shockingly clear to them – are adrift in history, bereft of ideas, strategy or tactics. Some, it should be said, were quick to offer fulsome and seemingly sincere apologies for underestimating Corbyn's electoral strategy, whatever their take on his politics (Owen Smith, Alastair Campbell, Ayesha Hazarika). There are also, of course, many mouthing such opinions with the faces of bulldogs chewing wasps (Chuka Umunna, Harriet Harman, Angela Eagle), and those who have yet to say a word on the matter. But it is extremely telling that those like the clueless klutz Chris Leslie, returned with a 71.5 per cent majority thanks to the Corbyn surge, actually claiming on the BBC that the result is not enough, and that Labour should have won, that he's disappointed and there's not much to see here, are vanishingly rare. Wiser heads on the Labour Right know better, and are feigning humility for now. Because this reversion to the old anti-Corbyn script is not merely pinched and mean, but totally absurd, and will persuade absolutely no one. What efforts there are to rouse a discourse of 'We would have done better with another leader' are feeble, largely ignored, and flatly contradicted by polling.

Corbyn's enemies within his party are profoundly weakened, and they know it. He has over the course of one astonishing night earned the right to be leader, and to push forward his political project, in a phrase being uttered across the party, 'as long as he wants'. Not everyone is agreeing to a cessation of hostilities. Mandelson, in his Mail on Sunday column, has offered a rallying cry for 'mainstream Labour MPs, who worry about the impact of the continuing Corbyn revolution on centrist voters,' and whom he suggests should 'stand by the wounded PM' even as her own party sticks the stiletto in. And the begrudging commentariat, from the Observer's Nick Cohen to the New Statesman's Helen Lewis, are already laying vital groundwork for future stupidity. But they are, for now, marginalised.

Corbynism will face serious battles, including within its own party. But it is now beyond doubt that it will face them, rather than being effaced itself by its Labour enemies: it has the agenda for the foreseeable future, and the importance of that, and the possibilities for the radical left that opens up, can hardly be overstressed.

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*Salvage* has, more than once, teased the far Left's fevered claims in response to every possible occurrence that there are 'opportunities in this'. Here and now, to be unequivocally clear, there are

political opportunities of a scale and importance unprecedented in the UK in many decades. Abruptly, the stakes and possibilities are astonishingly high. Nothing is certain: Corbyn's project will remain hemmed in, traduced and assaulted by forces of reaction and entrenched interests; his critics in the Labour Party, too, will regroup, and bide their time.

But this thunderbolt vindication of his tactics and strategy vastly stretches the boundaries of the possible. Apart from anything, it opens a space to clarify political positions. There is a substantial layer of Labour activists (perhaps particularly those slightly older than most of the uncynical enthusiasts of Momentum, the stock of which group is now vastly and justly increased) for whom the boundaries of the possible have been so tightly policed by their New Labour taskmasters that they have not had the political space to even consider radical political ideas in their own terms. Previous Corbyn-critic Ayesha Hazarika's moving mea culpa segues directly from 'Labour gained votes ... and seats' to the fact that Corbyn 'helped the Labour party rediscover its radical heart'. Leave aside historical quibbles over the existence of any such organ: here, literally overnight, radicalism tout court is being entertained. It is up to the Left to continue and accelerate this process, to push for the strongest and most radical positions possible. To stand opposed, in comradeship with Corbyn's project, to the crossing of political redlines, in the name of reasonableness and compromise.

There are many fights to come, and this integument of possibility will face forces committed to its merciless destruction. We might lose this moment, this momentum, this traction. But even as we fought for it, few thought we would attain it so suddenly, so soon - if at all.

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*'[A] most unexpected (unexpected at such a moment and in such a form) and downright unbelievably sharp turn in events. Like every sharp turn, it calls for a revision and change of tactics. And as with every revision, we must be extra-cautious not to become unprincipled'.*

— Lenin, 30 August 1917

With the stakes and potentiality so abruptly, giddyingly high, a brief moment of introspection. In the two years of our existence, Salvage has been committed, from an unflinching activist and revolutionary viewpoint, to examining Left nostrums, to theoretical humility, and to an unvarnished realism about the scales of the challenges facing us. This has led us to positions of political pessimism - though not, as we have repeatedly stressed, quiescence. This perspective was born out of an analysis of the sheer weakness of the Left, and was constitutively inflected by Sehnsucht - a utopian political yearning, very distinct from any surrender. This was a pessimism striving to proving itself wrong, instance by instance, and committed to honouring moments of political joy.

Our caution and girdedness in the face of the redoubled forces that Corbynism will continue to face remain undimmed. As does our scorn for the false obverse of our own position, the obligatory optimism of the cosplay Left, a disavowed cowardice that is neither convincing nor efficacious, and, to be extremely clear, *of which Corbynism is not one iota a vindication*. We have never (our detractors' claims notwithstanding) been committed to pessimism *a priori*, but to rigorous - rationed - hope, even optimism, and to helping bring about the circumstances that might justify them.

These are, suddenly, such circumstances.

We stand by our analyses of the concrete realities and excrescences of decadent and sadistic capitalism, and of the scale of the forces arrayed against us. But what we had not allowed for was how fast things can change.

We have long focused on the effects of neoliberalism on mass political consciousness. But real and



baleful as those effects are, consciousness is protean, and it can shift not only in unlikely ways (#grime4corbyn) but giddyingly quickly. As, at a mass level, it is now doing, as Project Fear becomes, at least for now, at least for many, dust, and the policing of horizons collapses.

*Salvage* hoped and worked for such a situation – and did not at all expect it to be here so soon. We take nothing for granted, including that the situation might not row abruptly back, as per our enemies’ aspiration – but we are overjoyed to have been wrong. To find joy not in a moment but in a tendency. To earn an optimism, as we earned pessimism before it.

It is not that the tide of history is ineluctably in one direction. We have said that there has not been a better time since the 1930s to be a fascist – and that remains true. But what is now also true, is that there has not for a generation been such a good time to be a radical social democrat, even a socialist, certainly in Britain. Capitalism remains sadistic and compelled by an accelerating death drive – but now there is a countervailing tendency.

‘Work’, the radical writer Alasdair Gray enjoined, in a moving and much-quoted phrase, ‘as if you live in the early days of a better nation’. What has been an honourable thought-experiment very abruptly feels like a concrete possibility.

We live suddenly in new country.

**The Editors, *Salvage***

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\* “Absolute: On the British General Election”:

<http://salvage.zone/online-exclusive/absolute-on-the-british-general-election/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] A coinage of the ‘Roch Winds’ collective <https://rochwinds.com/>.