

Election Time in Britain: is it the Brexit Election? Not really ...

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The British General Election campaign is off to a flying start. The election formally began with the dissolution of Parliament on the 6th of November and will be concluded on the 12th of December 2019. Needless to say, the 5 week campaign period as compared to the US is rather short (and much less expensive).

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While many were expecting (and hoping) for an election campaign solely centred on Brexit this campaign is already far broader addressing policies that the various political parties advocate for the future direction of the country. As a result, while Sky News has the headline “The Brexit Election” what we actually are witnessing is far more interesting. I expect an ugly and nasty campaign certainly (especially the use of red-baiting, divide and rule – especially the use of racist dog whistles – relating to immigration and absurd accusations of “rampant antisemitism” against the Labour Party; but it will be about far more than Brexit.

At the front and centre of the campaigns will be many issues, like the Environment and climate change, the NHS, housing, education, social care, and social and economic policy. So if the Tories, Brexit Party and Lib Dems were hoping that this is “the Brexit election” they are already in trouble.

Political campaigns in Britain depend on much more than advertisements on television, news coverage and billboards and debates between the party leaders. They are built upon campaigning and canvassing by members of the various political parties at the local level for each seat and support from members from other constituencies to bolster your campaign. In the absence of members in local constituencies raising money, knocking on doors, leafleting and setting up stalls as part of gotv, then campaigns will get nowhere here. This is a fascinating process of grassroots mobilisation by members of various parties. Registration to vote must be done by the 26th of November to participate in the General Election. Already voter registration has increased by 1.5 million people in the 2 weeks since the election has been called:

“Among these people, more than 110,000 were under the age of 34, with 67,000 under the age of 25 alone, representing the highest number of under-25s applying for voter registration during any single day in the election campaign so far.” [\[1\]](#)

There is a lot at stake in this general election; specifically the future of the country on many different levels.

More than Brexit

Where the various political parties stand on Brexit is very clear at this point:

Tories: Leave on Boris Johnson's hard Brexit deal on 31 January 2020;

Labour: renegotiate deal for a softer Brexit and then a second referendum on their deal (their position on whether to vote remain or accept the deal to be decided at special conference);

SNP: Remain, Second Referendum;

Lib Dems: Remain: if they win – they will revoke Article 50; if they do not win – they will support a second referendum;

Greens: Remain, Second Referendum;

Plaid Cymru: Remain, Second Referendum; [2]

Brexit Party: Leave; clean-break Brexit;

Democratic Unionist Party: Support Brexit, but not Boris Johnson's deal as they will not have a veto over the customs agreement with the EU (and the EU will not give them a veto; they have insisted that a majority decision by all political parties in Stormont which is the devolved North Ireland Assembly).

However, what is far more interesting is given those positions, what else are they articulating for the future of the country? What is also rather interesting is the reception that various political leaders are getting from the populace. So while the Tories have pinned their hopes on their hard Brexit position (they have sensibly not run on a no-deal Brexit which is the Brexit party position) and are campaigning in traditional Labour heartlands which voted to leave, the question is whether they can win these seats in the Labour heartlands?

The **Brexit party** (led by “man of the people” Nigel Farage) has agreed to not campaign in seats which were won by the Tories in the last election; however, they are competing against the Tories in Labour held seats. This may actually backfire on both parties. The Tories desperately need to take currently Labour held seats if they actually want to secure a majority government. Moreover, they do face the threat of Tory Remainers voting for the Lib Dems or former Tory MPs running as Independents (and there are many seats in which competition is between the Tories and Lib Dems, for example in Devon and Cornwall). Ruth Davidson (the former Tory leader in Scotland) has stepped down from both the Scottish Conservative party and its leadership; the Scottish National Party is campaigning hard to get those seats. If successful, that will be disastrous for the Conservatives nationally as those 13 seats will make getting an overall majority that much more difficult. [3] That means that it must win seats away from Labour.

However, if the **Tories** and the Brexit Party split the leave vote in Labour heartlands and Labour voters support their parties, the Labour Party stands a very good chance of holding onto its seats. An additional problem is the Tories themselves.

For some bizarre reason, **Tory** members seem to think that Boris Johnson can sell well in areas that voted Brexit. The problem here is that Boris Johnson is like every nasty upper class arse that has been the bane of generations of working class people; his mien is that of an upper class toff – his inability to articulate even a basic level of sympathy with those facing horrific flooding in the North

of England is impressive. The refusal of the government to declare a national emergency immediately (a Cobra meeting only happened 5 days after the flooding started) and the Tories' lack of funding for flood prevention and insufficient funds for rescue efforts has not endeared him to the locals as an understatement; his fumbling and bumbling attempts of meeting with the victims of floods has done nothing but anger those that he has attempted to speak with and he has been met with heckling and derision.

Consistent with their use of divide and rule, the Home Office minister of the Tories, Priti Patel, has said that they will reduce immigration overall (but not maintain Cameron's tens of thousands pledge) using an Australian based points-system which will let in those "whose skills we need" – honestly, how could they run the NHS without immigration as it relies on workers from not only the EU but other countries; but note that that requires an assumption that they want to keep the NHS running.

There is an additional issue that the Tories will have to address (perhaps legally as it has been referred to the Police by Labour's Lord Falconer and Scotland Yard has confirmed that they are examining the accusations) which relate to offers of Peerages to Brexit Party Candidates if they step down. Not a particularly clever idea on the part of the Tories and if they expected either Nigel Farage or Anne Widdecombe (both of whom, unfortunately, enjoy the limelight far too much) to keep shh about the offer that was quite delusional. That's a big oops and it is illegal, so stay tuned for further developments.

In Scotland, there is a very good possibility that the **Scottish National Party (SNP)** will wipe out the Scottish Tory seats which have been propping up the Conservative and Unionist numbers in Westminster; remember that Scotland voted remain strongly in the Brexit Referendum and that Ruth Davidson – the Scottish Tory leader who was behind their revival has stood down.

According to the BBC [\[4\]](#), their campaign will probably be stressing 5 points (their manifesto is not out yet):

"But here are five policies that are likely to feature in it:

- Hold another referendum on Scottish independence in 2020
- Keep Scotland in the EU, the single market and customs union - options include a referendum with Remain on the ballot paper if needed
- Greater powers for the Scottish Parliament
- Bring an end to austerity
- Introduce an NHS Protection Bill to block UK governments from using the NHS in trade talks."

The SNP have said that they will try to support a progressive alliance; Jeremy Corbyn's agreement that he would support another Scottish Independence Referendum (but has clarified that LP will not support it until after the next Scottish Parliament elections scheduled for 2021). Whether they will agree to a confidence and supply arrangement with Labour, if Labour wins the highest number of seats but doesn't secure a majority, remains to be seen – one does not bargain until the results are known. However, both the Tories and Lib Dems will oppose a second independence referendum.

Following their choosing an anti-democratic position on Brexit at their party conference (their policy "if they win" is to revoke Article 50 thereby ignoring the referendum result rather than have a second referendum on any deal negotiated), the **Liberal Democrats** have compounded this bad decision by calling for a permanent budget spending surplus of 1% (meaning spending would be lower than incoming tax revenues) which essentially means that we will be living in permanent austerity. John Maynard Keynes must be turning over in his grave (yes, he was a Liberal); with an

economy almost stagnant, the worst economic decision that could be undertaken is a permanent government budget spending surplus. They are really earning the epithet “yellow Tories” since they have decided that after at least a decade of austerity, with wages still lower than they were in 2007-8, with welfare services and public spending (for example, on healthcare and education) slashed to the bone, the only spending beyond tax revenues will be on capital investment. If you think that the benefits freeze imposed by the Tories should be abandoned, then don’t vote for the yellow Tories as they have demonstrated their commitment to neoliberal economic policies irrespective of a stagnant economy where the working class have borne the brunt of austerity, especially the disabled and women. Commitment to austerity with an economy teetering on recession is ridiculous; let’s be real, it is bad economics.

The Lib Dems have also set up a Remain alliance with the Green Party and Plaid Cymru agreeing not to run against each other in certain seats, there are 60 seats included in the pact including those of prominent Remain Tories like Dominic Grieve. [5] However, that alliance has already run into problems with the Green Left bloc of the Green Party rejecting the pact with the Lib Dems saying that they will not run against Labour as their Green New Deal must be supported – politically the Greens are closer to Labour and Brexit is not the only issue that this general election is being fought over. Moreover, the Greens have already pulled out of the contest in Chingford and Woodford Green in which there is a fierce battle between hard-right Tory Iain Duncan Smith (the architect of Universal Credit) and Faiza Shaheen (the Director of CLASS – the Centre for Labour and Social Studies). The Greens have also pulled out of the marginal seat in Ealing Central and Acton and Calder Valley.

Even more significant, a few Lib Dem candidates (for example, Canterbury) have said that they will not run against Labour candidates and enable the Tories to win those seats. Rather than take this point on board, the Lib Dem leadership are looking for another candidate, but the local Lib Dem’s oppose running against Rosie Duffield (a strong Remain Labour MP) who won the seat from the Tories at the last election (if they bring in someone from outside the constituency they may not get crucial support on the ground in the campaign). In the highly marginal seat of North Bury, the Lib Dem candidate has told voters to support Labour. By centring the pact on Remain, they have created a problem for themselves and the pact is already facing problems.

Even though the **Labour Party (LP)** manifesto has not yet been released (it comes out Thursday 21 November following a weekend of tough negotiations within the leadership of the party and with affiliated trade unions), some very clear policies have already been released (here are the [press releases](#) so you can see what has been advocated), but, e.g., part-nationalise broadband services and tax tech giants to offer free broadband for all by 2030 (which Boris Johnson has called a “crazed communist scheme”), a £10/hour real living wage, on employee rights, Labour supports empowering trade unions and eliminating Zero Hours contracts and supports the introduction of a 32 hour work week. They also support free dental check-ups, money provided for free further education (both vocational and university) for adults, and nationalisation of the rail network, water, energy grids and the Royal Mail. There is, of course, the issue of the NHS which has faced gross underfunding and privatisation through the back door under the Tories and the ConDem government; Labour has promised an end to privatisation and a £26 billion real-terms spending boost with increases in annual funding of £40 billion over 5 years of the Labour government if it wins; this includes capital expenditure and the expansion of public health services.

The centre-piece of Labour’s policies relate to their Green New Deal; this is a set of 9 general policies that recognise the class nature of climate change and which put social, political and economic justice at the centre of the struggle against climate change and saving our planet. [6] This is a game shifter; fighting climate change is more than decarbonisation by 2030, it is about just transition to well-paid, green union jobs, phasing out fossil fuels, investment in renewables,

expanding public democratic ownership, green public transport systems, housing for life, provision of universal basic services, and the recognition of climate refugees and welcoming their migration and preventing further displacement of people.

Coming out of the LP women's conference in 2019, there were motions on eliminating Universal Credit and ensuring access to healthcare for migrants; these should be in the LP manifesto as both motions passed at the Autumn LP conference unanimously. Alternatives to Universal Credit were proposed in the motion, but we need to wait for the Manifesto to see what has been adopted as policy.

There clearly have been debates in the leadership and trade union affiliates on the issue of free movement of people; Unite the Union's leader, Len McCluskey, launched an attack on the free movement of people pledge that came out of the recent Labour Party conference. [7] Even though the conference committed to free movement of people; it seems that some of the trade unions have insisted on a shift away from free movement of people. Rather than make the progressive political points of guaranteed national living wages for all workers in Britain and trade union membership being carried across countries, McCluskey has fallen into the trap of blaming immigrants for capitalists undercutting workers' wages. [8] We will need to wait to see what the Labour Party Manifesto says on this issue; we can only hope for some leaks in advance of its formal unveiling on Thursday.

Conclusion

Like in the US, national polls are incredibly unreliable and often useless; Britain has a first-past-the-post election law (whoever gets the highest number of votes wins the seat) in a general election. A national poll can tell you trends but will not necessarily give you clear answers as what happens depends upon how many come out to vote on Election Day. Exit polls have proven far more useful; although we do know that people do not always tell the truth. In the 2017 election, Theresa May was way ahead in the polls and wound up losing the Tory majority; the Labour Party manifesto with its excellent policies and their ground campaign shifted votes significantly leading to no overall majority and the dependence of the Tories on the 10 seats won by Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

A winter election will affect the numbers of voters on the day; this is one major reason why they are not a common occurrence as getting voters out is important for all parties. What will happen depends on whether the Tories are successful in making this "the" Brexit election or whether this is actually an election decided more generally on the future of the UK. The Labour Party has already pushed the discussion beyond the issue of Brexit; with the release of their manifesto (which is expected to be further to the left than the last manifesto), the British people will have a clear choice over clear issues on where to cast their votes. In Scotland, the SNP is a major player; the voices of Scots are incredibly important in this election and can strongly influence what happens in Westminster.

Predictions at this point of the campaign will certainly be useless and I will not make one; but this is proving to be a very exciting general election campaign. The Tories currently are ahead, but don't count out Labour, or the possibility of a minority government led by either of the main parties. Politics in Britain is very interesting indeed; with each party fighting tooth and nail for seats.

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P.S.

- Daily Kos, 18 November 2019, "Anti-Capitalist Meetup: It's Election Time in Britain - is it the Brexit Election? Not really ...":
<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2019/11/17/1900143/-Anti-Capitalist-Meetup-It-s-Election-Time-in-Britain-is-it-the-Brexit-Election-Not-really>

Footnotes

- [1] *The Independent*, 13 November 2019 ["General election: More than 1.5 million people apply for voter registration in fortnight since poll called"](#).
- [2] For all parties in Wales see *Nation●Cymru*, 31 October 2019 ["General Election 2019: Where do Wales' political parties stand on Brexit?"](#).
- [3] *The Spectator*, 29 October 2019 ["Can the Tories hold on to their Scottish seats?"](#).
- [4] BBC News 14 November 2019 ["General election 2019: A simple guide to the Scottish National Party"](#).
- [5] *The Independent*, 7 November 2019 [General election: Full list of 60 'Remain alliance' seats as Lib Dems, Greens and Plaid Cymru agree pact](#).
- [6] Labour for a Green New Deal ["The Green New Deal explained"](#).
- [7] *The Guardian*, 13 November 2019 ["McCluskey sparks Labour backlash over tough line on free movement"](#).
- [8] See *Socialist Resistance*, 14 November 2019 ["Union leaders shouldn't make excuses for racism"](#).