Great Britain: what's at stake in the general election?

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The general election in Great Britain on 12 December will be the most important one in 40 years. Back in 1979, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, introducing neoliberal policies with a wave of privatisations and the breakup of the welfare state.

Despite heroic struggles in the 1980s, especially the year-long miners' strike, the defeats of the labour movement have had an enduring effect. This was most evident with the political change in the Labour Party with Tony Blair becoming leader and then Prime Minister for ten years until 2007.

Blairism was a continuation of neoliberalism with its privatisations, public-private partnerships, and its deep alliance with the USA leading Britain to join in the disastrous and deeply unpopular invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The shock-waves of the 2008 economic crisis and its austerity followed by those of the unexpected victory for Brexit in the 2016 referendum are now throwing up in the air all the usual political certainties.

The consequence of the shock-waves of the 2008 economic crisis was the collapse of Blairism and the deep-centre of politics and the election as Labour Party leader of Jeremy Corbyn in 2015. This was a return to a left reformist programme, which in the present conjuncture is a radical break from neoliberalism. His election led to a massive influx of members, bringing the Labour Party to over 500,000 members, two-thirds of which elected twice Corbyn as leader. These new members are young, and support Jeremy Corbyn and his policies summed up in the title of the 2017 general election manifesto "For the Many – Not the Few".

The 2016 referendum opened up the gates to racism and nationalism. Those who campaigned for Brexit, such as the Boris Johnson and Michael Gove of the Tory party and Nigel Farage of the UKIP/Brexit party, put forward themes similar to those of Trump: taking back "control" from Brussels, closing the borders, making Great Britain great again. Furthermore, the Brexit on offer was a deepening of neoliberalism with greater loosening of labour and environmental regulations. That's why sections of the radical left, including Socialist Resistance, argued for opposition to Brexit in that referendum without any illusion in the EU. The Labour Party's position was for "Remain and Reform". However most of the radical left coming from a Marxist tradition, such as the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party (ex-Militant) argued for a left Exit. The mainstream campaign for Remain was complacent, promoted the idea that the EU was progressive and played down its neoliberal aspects. It did not see the threat. The narrow victory of 52% for Brexit reflected the deep divisions in the country, with all but three of the major cities voting Remain, along with Northern Ireland and Scotland. It was also the young and the black and minority population who voted overwhelmingly against Brexit.

Since the 2016 referendum, the rise of the hard right in the Tory party and far right Brexit party

(previously UKIP) lead by Nigel Farage has been relentless. The Brexit party came first with 30.5% of the vote in the European Parliament elections in 2019, ahead of the Liberal Democrats, Labour, the Greens, and pushing the Tories into fifth place with just under 9% of the vote.

Corbyn's radical manifesto, along with his pledge never to launch a nuclear strike, have thrown into a rage the ruling class and the right wing including in the Labour Party. Nevertheless, these radical policies have proved to be popular and saw the Labour Party increase its share of the vote in the 2017 general election, and being in a position with other opposition parties to block the Tory government from pursuing a hard or no deal Brexit. This lead to Theresa May resigning as Prime Minister in July 2019 and Boris Johnson becoming leader of the Tory Party and Prime Minister.

Boris Johnson, who campaigned for Brexit in the 2016 referendum, is on the right of the Tory party and is prone to making racist comments. He opposed Theresa May's deals for a Brexit, arguing they were making too many concessions to the European Union. He has dragged the Tory party further to the right, by making concessions to the far right Brexit party with policies regarding migrants and security, and entertaining the possibility of a no-deal Brexit. He expelled from the Tory party its members of Parliament who voted against the hard-Brexit deal he negotiated after becoming Prime Minister. Michael Heseltine, a former deputy-Prime Minister under Margaret Thatcher and John Major,, accurately described the Tory party as having been taken over by English nationalists who in turn have taken over the government. Many of those expelled from the Tory party, as well as the former Prime Minister John Major, are now arguing to vote tactically to prevent a Tory majority delivering a hard or no-deal Brexit.

Brexit and austerity are the deep dividing lines in this general election, which is the most polarised for over a generation. Boris Johnson argues that he wants to "get Brexit done" without ruling out a no-deal Brexit at the end of 2020 transition period, keep taxes low, introduce tougher immigration controls, and maintain a neoliberal course. He has had to make a concession to Labour in declaring that it would protect the National Health Service. The Tories' campaign has been noticeable for its lack of policy announcements and has concentrated on attacking Labour and Corbyn in particular. They have portrayed themselves as those who stand by the people against Parliament and the London elites who are frustrating the decision of the 2016 referendum.

The Labour party has now come to the decision at its September national conference to hold another referendum, with an option to Remain, if it forms a government. This is the only democratic manner in which to resolve this crisis now that the implications of a Tory Brexit are clear. But Labour's election campaign is much more than just about resolving Brexit. This year's manifesto, "It's Time for Real Change", is more radical than the one for the 2017 general election. It offers a vision of a different type of society after 10 years of Tory austerity: increasing taxes on corporations, wealth and the rich to pay for rebuilding public services, in particular education, health and housing, bringing back into public ownership the railways, water and other services, a Green New Deal, raising the minimum wage, getting rid of zero-hours contracts and restoring trade-union rights.

No one seriously believes that the next Labour government is planning a major assault on British capitalism. In fact, much of the time John McDonnell, the Labour Finance spokesperson, frames the arguments for infrastructure and research spending as being good for business and restoring public services to the level of France or Sweden. The proposed tax rises on the richest are very modest and lower than they were for many in the Thatcher years. Labour is instead aiming to win the support of the public sector workers who have had a decade of pay cuts, workers in private sector who are on zero-hours contracts or forced to be self-employed, the parents who see that their children's schools are short staffed and crumbling, everyone who has to use a hospital or has an elderly relative in need of care. This is a programme which offers a radical break from austerity and gives hope for major improvements in the lives of the many and opens the possibility to push for more.

Whatever the outcome of the election on the 12 December, Labour’s new manifesto has radicalised and mobilised large number of people, in particular under the age of 35, who are actively helping the election campaign. A left social movement has been created which will not disappear. The recent large demonstrations and the school students strikes against climate change will intensify as the next COP climate summit will be in Glasgow in December 2020. And the campaign for independence for Scotland will continue as the Scottish National Party is on course to win a big majority of seats north of the border with England.

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