

Britain: No future: the English Left in retrospect

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What do you do with a defeat that is so crushing that there is no arguing with it? The [electoral mauling](#) of Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party, one year ago, posed this question vividly. After a year of bleak pandemic, government debacles and ham-fisted efforts by new Labour leader Keir Starmer to discipline his left-wing opponents, is the Left any closer to answering it? No.

The Left [won](#) the Labour leadership in 2015, in the person of Jeremy Corbyn, despite its inherited weaknesses. Its parties were shrinking. Its publications were mostly poor quality and not widely read. Its intellectuals were isolated in the media and academia. It had some support in the trade unions, but they too were shrinking, and timid – strike rates were at historic lows. Its movements against austerity and tuition fees had been [defeated](#), having barely achieved liftoff. Yet, for the first time in Labour’s history, the leadership was won by [a radical socialist](#), with the support of hundreds of thousands of new Labour members, the biggest trade unions and the curious sympathy of celebrities. That reflected the weakness of the old right-wing party management. However, in part because this breakthrough was followed by further leaps – particularly when in 2017 Corbyn led Labour to [the biggest vote-swing](#) in its favour since 1945 – the Left grew hubristic.

So, how did it all come [crashing down](#), and what can the Left do with the aftermath?

“Defeat,” Perry Anderson once wrote, “is a hard experience to master: the temptation is always to sublimate it.” One can avoid confronting the brutal reality of defeat by diverting attention to more pleasing thoughts. One can claim that we “won the argument”. Which is true insofar as the Conservatives in government have repeatedly ripped off and parodied left-wing policies like borrowing to spend and a “Green Industrial Revolution”. But it is a sign of strength for a ruling party that it can incorporate and neutralise the ideas of its opponents. After all, the fact that a Conservative government is committed to spending a lot of money deprives the Left of its mainspring of public support: opposition to austerity.

We can claim that if it had not been for Brexit and those meddling Labour Party apparatchiks who always hated Corbyn, Labour would have won last year. This also contains some truth. But Brexit and the hostility of Labour’s old management were givens. It was the Left’s job to master those conditions.

We can descend into reactive, bitter scolding of media personalities who have treated us unfairly. If anyone expected fair treatment from the media, however, that speaks to inexperience.

We can grow sentimental about our fallen leader – sentimentality long being a weakness of the English Left.

We can delude ourselves that despite defeat, the Left can cling to some “influence”, retaining what was essential about the Corbyn experiment, through the new leadership. That was a more significant strain of left-wing thinking until Starmer took the unprecedented step of [suspending](#) his predecessor on spurious grounds, and his new general secretary David Evans began suspending members who criticised this.

These illusions bind the Left to its existing weaknesses, and blind it to new opportunities. Any way forward would have to be based on a convincing explanation of why Labour under Corbyn, despite its major gains in 2015, enjoyed only incremental success in Scotland. It would have to explain why Corbyn’s leadership dithered so badly on Brexit that in the 2019 general election, Labour’s actual policy was not announced until weeks into the campaign. It would have to explain why both the leadership and the grassroots were paralysed in the face of often nakedly cynical, grotesquely distorted [claims of pervasive antisemitism](#) in the Labour Party. It would have to explain why a leadership that was radical in many ways, was also profoundly cautious on issues like policing, immigration, nuclear weapons and foreign policy orientation – even after his political successes, Corbyn was allowed to secure control of the party apparatuses.

These problems all seem to be related. The basic conceit of the Left appeared to be that it could win by concentrating on “bread and butter” issues like austerity and public services. Whenever it was forced off this agenda, its perplexity was obvious. Yet the source of Corbyn’s success had been, not just a reaction against austerity, but a protest against the diminished state of British democracy.

The Left often talks about “neoliberalism” as though it were equivalent to the “free market”. But neoliberalism was always a comprehensive project for protecting markets by limiting the scope of democracy within the state. Absent that analysis, the struggle against neoliberalism could be reduced to a demand for higher taxes and spending.

Yet, the Scottish independence movement presented a democratic question in a constitutional form. It sought to free Scottish voters from a Westminster parliament dominated by voters whose social attitudes are so different from those prevalent in Scotland. Labour never seriously engaged with this constitutional question.

Brexit was more complicated, because Brexit voters wrongly blamed immigrants and European Union bureaucrats for Westminster’s failure. It would have been difficult to prove to those voters that an abstraction like neoliberalism was their problem. Yet, there was barely any attempt to grasp the issue in this way. The Corbyn leadership sought to defuse Brexit by offering a vague “jobs-first Brexit” holding position, hoping that the Conservatives would split over Europe. The grassroots Left deferred – despite its shallow pro-Europeanism – to the leadership. In 2019, as the situation demanded more specifics, that compromise collapsed.

In another way, arguments over racism and migration were also about democracy. In particular, who constitutes the demos? Migrants work, pay taxes and contribute, but may not vote. Minorities can vote, but are brutally policed, and have limited access to employment and public services. For some voters, the solution to this is to retreat to an all-white Britain (even as Britain spirals apart), or at least to get rid of recent immigrants.

The Left reacted to these issues either by treating them as a distraction or by reaching for the moral high ground. The moral high ground is a powerful currency on social media, but it proved completely useless when the Left was subjected to a campaign of vilification, claiming it was pervasively

antisemitic and had turned Labour pervasively antisemitic. This demanded a rigorous response.

The rise in global antisemitism may largely be on the right - think lone wolf shooters, for instance - but there is a fringe on the Left that is plainly drawn to conspiracist and sometimes antisemitic thinking. At the same time, much of this attack was driven by the attempt to disarm the Left's critique of British foreign policy, particularly its alliance with Israel. Here it was necessary for the Left to engage with the realities of both antisemitism and the state of Israel and its violent ethno-nationalist politics. It was also necessary to defend party members against a smear campaign. Instead, the Corbyn leadership tried to settle the issue with bureaucratic measures like inquiries and disciplinary procedures.

The "articulate" Left, meanwhile, sought to demonstrate its worthiness by promising to "walk and chew gum at the same time" - meaning broadly defend Palestinian rights while opposing antisemitism - without concretely explaining how. This persuaded no one. It looked evasive because it was.

In short, the Left struggled because it misunderstood the nature of the moment. It did not grasp the situation as a democratic crisis. It now faces a radically different terrain shaped by its defeat but also shaped by a terrifying pandemic. "Bread and butter" issues still matter, particularly given the looming recession and social crisis arising from COVID-19.

But if the Left is to do better than simply signing off on social distancing and lockdown restrictions and begging for a bit more government cash for workers, it needs to go beyond bread and butter.

There is one area of genuine creativity these last few years that can help it: environmentalism. Pandemics are ecological processes. The outbreak of zoonotic viruses and their pandemic spread are driven by the same agribusiness and trade practices that are helping carbonise the atmosphere, acidify the oceans, despoil the web of life and spark extreme weather patterns.

Powered by the [Extinction Rebellion movement](#) and [the school climate strikes](#), the Left did begin work on the idea of a Green New Deal, far more ambitious and internationalist than any other part of its agenda. There is no reason in principle why this idea cannot be adjusted to take account of the preventive measures that are needed to prevent future pandemics.

Yet to make the most of this, the Left must also understand environmentalism as a democratic issue. The weak democratic systems we have are unlikely to survive the coming privations and challenges without being radically reformed. And no serious climate project, which must protect the survival of the whole species by changing how we work, travel, consume and recreate - our whole way of life - can work without mass public involvement.

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