

Super Thursday elections (Britain): Disaster in Hartlepool - Starmer does worse than Corbyn!

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Dave Kellaway gives an immediate response to the first big result of the Super Thursday elections.

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Commenting on Labour's defeat in the Hartlepool by-election, Steve Reed, shadow communities minister, speaking on Sky News, said: 'It's hard to say Labour did better in 2019.'

Well, Steve, that's a pretty barefaced lie. Under Corbyn's leadership, they did much better. Labour held Hartlepool with a 3,500 majority in 2019. Yesterday, it lost by nearly 7,000 votes. There was a 16% swing against Labour as Tory candidate Jill Mortimer, a local farmer, hoovered up nearly all the 25% votes won by the Brexit Party last time. The Tories ended up with 52% of the poll, while Labour only managed 29%.

Starmer tried to bury Brexit as an issue. He refused to point out its negative impact and tells us all to move on. Following Corbyn's failure to have a coherent line, the lack of any line today has not impressed Hartlepool voters. Johnson may be an untrustworthy shit but he certainly has a political nose - the Jersey fish war was put on the front pages just before polling day.

According to canvassing reports from all parties, Labour is seen as the establishment in these areas. They have held the seat for 56 years and control local government. This political representation - including having a key Labour figure like Peter Mandelson as local MP for years - did not seem to make much difference to the lives of ordinary people. Although abstention was lower than usual for a by-election, it was still over 50%. Labour's programme (which is what exactly?) is not inspiring people alienated from politics to turn out.

A senior Tory politician was quoted as saying that in nearly 50 years of politics he had never seen anything like it. A government a year and a half into its mandate just does not win opposition seats. Indeed, he would expect such a government to lose easily its own safe seats. In fact, a sitting government has only won a by-election three times in the last 30 years!

A signal defeat for Starmerism

Starmer's team had total control over this campaign. They imposed the candidate instead of allowing the local party to choose. Their choice of a Remainer who had lost his seat in a neighbouring constituency was not very astute. They assumed his job as a doctor in a local hospital would compensate. Unfortunately, it turned out he had not really opposed privatisation plans there. Given the fact that people in neighbouring towns are seen as outsiders, this choice was not the best.

The Labour leadership also controlled the political messages and policies put out by the candidate. As Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Brighton Kempton Labour MP, tweeted, 'the suits and flag waving is working well ... or not?' Pandering to reactionary sentiments around family, white community, and the Union Jack fails to match Johnson's Tories, who are already supercharged in that area.

Early council results show Labour is not just doing badly in Red Wall seats like Hartlepool but have lost already (at 8.00am on Friday) 50 seats. Harlow, Nuneaton, and Thurrock are all in Tory hands. These are the sort of areas Labour has to win back if it is going to win a general election. Such results indicate that uber-Blairite Liam Byrne is going to struggle to win the West Midlands mayoralty. He has been seen on TV saying how Labour voters are coming home, dumping Corbyn, liking what they see.

Trump is said to have claimed he could go out and shoot somebody on the street and still get elected. Johnson is rapidly achieving the same Teflon aura. If somebody had been in a coma for the last year and were told that the Prime Minister had...

- callously and incompetently allowed one of the worst Covid death rates (150k plus) in the world
- managed one of the worst economic recessions of the main developed countries
- openly been shown to give government contracts worth billions to Tory friends and donors
- made great effort, in the middle of a pandemic, to get his party or its donors to pay for his wallpaper and furnishings
- generally been shown to have lied on numerous occasions
- been alleged to have said that bodies should be allowed to be piled high in order to reopen the economy for his business friends

... and still won a by-election, they might have thought you had lost control of your senses.

Obviously the so-called vaccine bounce has been a big factor in Johnson's electoral success, combined with a sense that the ordeal of the pandemic is coming to an end. It is only human for people to feel this way.

However, the bounce has been in his favour because Starmer has let Johnson hold onto the ball. For most of the pandemic, Starmer has paraded his credentials as a responsible leader of the opposition, focusing on issues of competence. No anger or passion, no pointing out the class, racist, corrupt, pro-corporate aspects of the government's management of the crisis. He allowed the government to present the pandemic as an unprecedented, historic, natural disaster. He let Johnson own the whole business, so when things begin to get better the government benefits.

Unfortunately, politics these days moves very fast – social media and the internet are partly responsible for this – so what happened six months ago is just forgotten by many people. The mass

media facilitate this with their normally non-reflective, sensationalist, 24-hour reporting.

Pork-barrel politics

Another reason for strong Tory support is their blatant pork-barrel politics. Nearly all the regeneration money for towns has gone to Tory seats, including the housing minister's. The message endlessly rammed home in Hartlepool was that down the road in Darlington or on Teeside, where the Tories now have political leadership, there was a lot of money and investment coming in – part of the levelling up policy.

If you fail to give a political lead with clear values and a vision, then most less politicised people will take a material, transactional attitude, choosing the candidate who might bring some development to the area. Corbyn did convince a lot of people – for a period and especially during the 2017 general election, before the Labour right really got their claws into him – that radical economic change was possible with a Labour government.

Wrapping yourself in any number of Union Jacks and being photographed with Army personnel is not going to trump people's perception that the Tories will bring some money to the town.

Voters know that Johnson is an untrustworthy toff, but they would rather have a cad who may bring jobs than vague promises from a Labour Party that has been in charge of a decaying town for decades. At the same time, Johnson's Bertie Wooster personality and ability to clown about with the average punter helps people leave all the other stuff on one side. Starmer posing woodenly with John Lewis wallpaper just does not cut it.

Early results show the Greens and the Liberal Democrats in some areas gaining seats. Some Labour voters disillusioned with the move to the right and the capitulation on Brexit are surely opting for a Green vote. It will be interesting to examine the London Assembly and Mayoralty results to see how many Labour voters split their votes in order to give a boost to the Greens. Following Scotland's loss and Red Wall voters going Tory, we now have the loss of people who feel Labour is abandoning progressive, even liberal, values: the destruction of Corbynism looks like Labour's road to oblivion.

Left response

Momentum, the main left-wing current in Labour, has been quick to call on Starmer to change track, claiming his attack on the left and Corbyn's legacy is not working. True enough, but passing a few more radical motions in local parties or at conference will hardly be a strategy for socialism. Labour was losing support in working-class areas before the Corbyn project. And the Corbynistas were, and are, notoriously thin on the ground in these seats.

The disaster in Hartlepool reflects the balance of forces between working people and the ruling class in Britain. We have been on the back foot since the defeat of the miners under Thatcher. There have been struggles and mobilisations, such as Black Lives Matter and the Kill the Bill campaign, but these have not so far been strong enough to significantly change the general situation.

Strikes are at an all-time low, even if we have seen a small uptick with the battles over hire and rehire. A lack of confidence leaves working people with little sense that they can change the system by their own actions. Forty or fifty years ago, in areas like Hartlepool, the sense existed that trade-union organisation and social-democratic politics could make a difference. Not any more.

A certain relish on the left at Starmer's difficulties is dangerous. It cannot be excluded that Johnson's luck, the vaccine bounce, and Brexit nationalism will not continue to shape politics in the period ahead, even when furlough ends and state spending is reined back. The moderate Starmer line could still win voters back in the context of Tory implosions. A common Labour left response is to say that Starmer is weakening Labour's electoral chances because, by driving activists away, he will not be able to win an election. Blair was quite happy to have fewer members and he won three times. Starmer knows he could win with a slimmed-down membership.

The left has to be much clearer and stronger politically in its opposition to Starmer. This must involve a strategy both inside and outside the party, building strong left mobilisations, and organising locally and in the unions. It must recognise that long-term a left that wants to change the system cannot coexist with a social-liberal bloc in the same party. We will have to go beyond Corbynism. An anti-capitalist resistance needs to be patiently but determinedly built.

Immediate reactions from people like ex-MP Alan Milburn showed the likely response of the Starmer team. He called for further change in the party, including of 'procedures'. Translated, this means a doubling down on the attacks on party democracy and on the left. Corbyn is not going to let back into the Parliamentary Party anytime soon.

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P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 7 May 2021:

- <https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/disaster-in-hartlepool>

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