

Britain : Labour and left responses after Hartlepool

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How does Labour recover from its poor showing in the May 6th elections ?

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Blair and Mandleson say go right and reinvent Blairism 2.0. Corbyn and McDonnell argue for a return to their radical manifesto policies, harder opposition and bigger vision. Starmer has ordered a policy review and will tour the country listening to voters. Glassman, the Fabian Society and others have raised the blue labour flag. The Preston model and other local community based approaches have been put forward. Paul Mason has argued against a narrow focus on the so-called red wall voters and recommended an alliance with the Greens. Neil Lawson and Compass are for Proportional Representation but framed essentially as a step to linking up with the Lib Dems. Confused ? Dave Kellaway will try and make some sense of it from an anti-capitalist perspective. Let's start with the Starmer leadership.

Starmer not so calm and forensic

'I take full responsibility for the results' - these were Sir Keir's noble words both before and after the polls closed. But the main news story from Saturday was not an analysis of what went wrong but the fact that he was sacking his national campaign manager, Angela Raynor. Remember she played a full part in the leadership team's attacks on the left - saying she would expel thousands if necessary. She has not objected to Starmer's dumping of the ten Corbynesque policy pledges that helped him win the leadership.

Nevertheless to single out the working class woman from the north was still vindictive - no criticism was made of Jim McMahon MP, the man leading the campaign on the ground with his St George flag posters. I recall people from Keir's Camden Labour party during the leadership campaign recounting how Starmer can play quite dirty when he wants to. What emerged was that there was already bad blood between Raynor's team and the leader's office. She was piqued at the way Keir had tried to control her involvement. It even came down to angry criticism of her for wearing inappropriate dress. Apparently Starmer's people saw her, probably correctly, as wanting to develop a profile for a leadership challenge down the road. Raynor herself allegedly leaked comments to journalists about

these differences.

Whatever the sordid details, Starmer betrayed his relatively short political experience. In the days of social media you have to handle reshuffles very carefully. You would have thought the Tom Watson clash with Corbyn might have taught him something. Raynor, like Watson, was elected by the membership so she has a base from which you cannot be sacked. The whole mess had a bad look. Both the Corbynist left and people who backed Starmer, who perhaps consider themselves soft left, came out loudly in support of Raynor.

In the end the whole reshuffle was delayed as the two blocs haggled over a resolution. The attempt to slap her down led to her position being strengthened as she won a number of more prominent posts – she's gonna need a bigger business card. What is politically significant is that the leader has come out of the reshuffle weaker than he started. Even his vaunted calmness and presentation skills were found wanting as he appeared genuinely shaken in public. Whereas a few months ago the bookies were taking bets on how long Johnson would last now it is Starmer they are taking money on.

Worse still for him is the loosening of support from the right and its captive media as both Blair and Mandelson questioned his capacity of sorting out the left and realigning Labour.

He is going to find it more difficult to keep together the coalition that gave him the leadership : members, MPs and councillors who are either ex-Corbyn supporters, identify as soft left or do not want a return to Blairism. All these people thought he was the electable one that would unify the party and keep some continuity with Corbyn's progressive policies. After Hartlepool they are not so sure he is capable of meeting any of those three promises.

A reshuffle putting Blairite Rachel Reeves as shadow chancellor, a policy review, a summer listening campaign and bringing in Mandelson acolyte Deborah Mattinson to do more focus groups have been decided. All this may not quite cut through to save Starmer's political project.

The 'King of the north', Andy Burnham, is already circling above Manchester ready to take on the North London barrister. He denounced the Raynor sacking, criticised Labour for being too London centric and emphasised the need for Labour's emotional re-attachment with its people. Maybe he is tainted by his support for the Iraq war. He may not be ready to leave his mayoral post early to try and win a leadership facing what looks like an unwinnable election in 2023 or later.

Starmer could have brought back the Blairite old guard - Yvette Cooper or Hilary Benn - but he did not. He knows this would not necessarily boost his support among the membership or the trade unions. Why give potential challengers any more political space ? Angela Raynor knows there is support for a woman leader and her sacking has paradoxically increased her profile and threat. The remnants of the Corbyn left in the Socialist Campaign Group do not really have a viable leadership candidate. Their best people are getting too old to take on the task and the younger people do not yet have the stature. An outsider like Clive Lewis who is popular amongst the membership and supports an alliance with the Greens may be a danger. If there is to be a race at all it is unlikely to open unless Labour loses Batley this summer.

The results were not so bad... were they ?

Another response from Labour factions is to try and relativise to a degree the defeats in Hartlepool and the Teeside or West Midlands mayoralty elections by pointing to successes in Wales or the other Mayoralty contests. It is possible to work out national swings that show Labour has not done as

badly as 2019. However everyone knows that unless it can win back in the West Midlands or the North East there is no way it will get a majority nationally. Some on the left of Labour have even exaggerated the 'socialism' of people like Burnham or the Welsh Labour Party to make themselves feel better. True, Drakeford had supported Corbyn, speaks more left and he certainly held on to more Labour leave voters.

The performance of these winners in the pandemic and the soft 'nationalism' of Drakeford in Wales were more important in practice than any radicalism. People obviously liked the fact that Burnham was standing up a bit more to Johnson than Starmer ever does. By definition the metro mayors are elected in the big urban areas where Labour is already strong, boosted by younger graduate workers.

Similarly the Preston or Salford models where local councils have engaged better with local communities through supporting insourcing of service and using local companies have been hailed as the way forward. Certainly the left supports many of these policies and it gives Labour a different profile and identity in those areas. But the big national political issues cannot be resolved just by piling up a number of local experiences. These models clearly do not challenge the interests of capital in the way that some of the Corbyn manifesto pledges could have done. It is no use having a greater number of such experiences if it does not impact on the central political battle between Starmer's politics and a socialist alternative. Labour activists burrowing away in food banks is not necessarily a bad thing but remember what one Hartlepool voter is reported as saying in an approving way - that the Tories had brought the area more food banks ! We have to work at changing people's minds politically not just with social work.

Nevertheless it is perfectly possible for a soft left approach of this sort allied with greater links to the community and the workplaces to eventually win a general election. Wales shows that the simplistic Red Wall analysis does not apply to all former industrialised areas. The SNP have won over nearly the whole Labour vote in Scotland's industrial heartlands with policies that are mainstream Labour. Given Starmer's performance and the failure to overcome the longer term shift in the Labour vote a Labour election victory is looking more unlikely - unless the Tories went into a big crisis. Some pundits have suggested that Johnson's political project of Brexit Keynesianism could break up due to contradictions between levelling up expenditure and the eventual need to tax Tory voters.

How has the Corbyn left reacted ?

Jeremy Corbyn has responded promptly and confidently with media interview and an article in the Independent. Certainly it was not the response of somebody wanting to cajole the leadership into giving him back the whip. A key point he made was that the constructive opposition line had not worked. If you do not criticise Tory policies strongly people do not see a reason to vote for you. He argues for the strongly redistributive policies in the 2017 manifesto to be reasserted. His vision is clear :

« We deserve, and desperately need, wages people can live on and rights at work, safe and secure housing, transport, broadband and energy, properly funded healthcare and education, in an economy that puts the planet before profit, and the needs of the many before the greed of the few. »

Unfortunately Corbyn is less accurate and overly optimistic about the actual political relationship of forces inside Labour. So he absorbs Mark Drakeford, Welsh leader as well as the Preston model into a deep resilient left wave in the labour movement He states " there is a consensus on these policies across the Labour Party". Really ? Everything the Starmer team has done and the upcoming policy

review will prove that there is no such consensus even if many of the 2017 policies are popular among members. It is almost as if Jeremy believes Starmer's honesty about the ten pledges. John McDonnell echoes this sort of attitude by asking the leader to adopt these policies and bringing left wing people into the shadow cabinet. Yes we should argue that radical policies should be adopted and can win votes as in 2017 but let's not present any illusions that the current leadership is going to do this. McDonnell skirted the question of whether Starmer was the person to lead Labour, saying he was more of a loyalist than the MPs who harassed Corbyn. Even Jeremy managed to say that it was up to Keir if he wanted to carry on.

Strategically it looks like the Corbynist left want to remake a coalition with the softer left forces and ex Corbynistas who went over to Starmer. The witch hunt against the left and in particular Corbyn's suspension is a big obstacle to any sort of new coalition. Word is that there is no way Starmer will let him back in the PLP. The labour left need another strategy which recognises the need to build an organised left alternative inside and outside the party that understands the inevitability of a rupture in the broad church of Labour. It needs to link its support for radical policies to building the forms of organisation that can actually implement the system change we need. Leadership campaigns and winning motions at conference are just one part of a process that requires patiently building an anticapitalist political culture with roots in the communities and workplaces.

Can Blairism make a comeback ?

Electoral defeat has spurred a rather coordinated intervention by the big beasts of Blairism. Baron Adonis was first off the mark calling on him to be replaced :

« I supported Keir to replace Jeremy. There was no one else credible and retrieving the leadership from the hands of the Marxist far left was the first step towards electability. I hoped that Keir, an effective ex-public prosecutor, might have sufficient leadership capacity and modernising social democratic vision to reshape Labour. Unfortunately, he turns out to be a transitional figure – a nice man and a good human rights lawyer, but without political skills or antennae at the highest level. » (Guardian Live Blog 7th May)

This neatly captures how the right saw the process with Starmer. Use him to put an end to Corbynism but the party needs a complete purge and policy shift. Mandelson then piled in with his accusation that it was still Corbyn who was losing it for Labour on the doorstep despite the fact that opinion surveys gave Starmer's leadership as a main cause of them not voting Labour. Indeed his popularity ratings were actually lower than those of the party. Alistair Campbell with his open letter to Starmer in the New European (12th May) appears to give Starmer a chance but wants him to embrace the flag more tightly and not defend 'woke' culture so much. But Blair himself penned a major article for the New Statesman picked up by all the mainstream press that called for nothing less than a deconstruction/reconstruction of the Labour party. He identifies the historic failure of Labour in its social democratic break with liberalism :

« For now, the Labour Party cannot fulfil its historic mission. Its limitations have been there from its inception, particularly its estrangement from Britain's great Liberal tradition – Gladstone, Lloyd George, Keynes, Beveridge. Except for the period of New Labour, it has never succeeded in being in government more than six years. » (New Statesman, 12th May)

So logically he argues for a political realignment of British politics with Labour bringing together all the progressives into one new movement. More concretely it means reaching out to build a new social liberal centre. At least he is honest about the incompatibility of a left with any class struggle tendencies being able to co-inhabit such a political formation. The difficulty he has is that this would

require Starmer chasing out all the Corbynista forces from Labour - not to be entirely ruled out but quite difficult since it would mean union opposition too. Blair's plan is also difficult to achieve under the first past the post system as we saw with the demise of the Social Democratic Party split in the 1980s and the Change UK experience a few years ago.

Blair and his cronies may be making more noise at the moment and their impact may push Labour more to the right but the residual strong animosity to his politics within the party makes it unlikely that a new political realignment is on the cards anytime soon.

The Blue Labour offensive

Another response to the electoral debacle has been Maurice Glasman (another Baron !), Blue Labour guru, and Andrew Harrop representing the Fabian Society which published a book edited by John Healey, MP called Hearts and Minds. They are saying that Starmer has not been explicitly patriotic enough and has not junked all that 'woke' political nonsense :

« Flying the union and St George's flags, celebrating the armed forces, and speaking with pride of the nation's past should be so much part of the Labour Party's culture that they are things barely worthy of remark » (New Statesman 10th May)

For them welfare must be firmly based on the 'contributory principle' and

'alarmist talk of zero growth, post-capitalism and the end of work puts Labour's real-world social democratic radicalism at risk' .

Class conflict of any sort is banished :

'creating crude divides between bosses and workers reflects neither social reality nor the party's electoral interests'.

In some ways this sort of talk has more chance of getting a purchase inside Labour than Blairism. Lisa Nandy , Raynor and others buy into this already and we could well see further adaptations. Of course the problem for Labour is that is being crushed in a pincer movement. If it moves to a more Blue Labour line it will lose more people than it is already to the Greens or even the Lib Dems. All the data show that the Greens, in particular, picked up progressive voters who deserted Labour because of disillusionment with Starmer. Peter Kellner pointed out in an article in the New European (12th May) the Greens averaging at 5% nationally hurts Labour. They got another assembly seat in London where many Labour people split their votes with the Greens.

Alliances with the Greens and PR ?

Paul Mason and Clive Lewis have both argued against any Blue Labour turn and for the need to build on the votes of the new working class in the cities or elsewhere in England who are voting for labour. We can now talk of a Blue Wall in the south where demographic changes in small towns are bringing anti-tory graduate voters into play. This explains both Green advances and Labour's surprisingly good showing in places like Worthing. They say correctly that we need a big economic programme to win back voters in the Red Wall seats but we should not retreat on progressive social and personal rights policies. In fact the whole debate around 'woke' incorrectly suggests that the younger graduate labour voters are mainly motivated by race, gender and identity issues. The material issues of job insecurity and access to reasonable housing are just as important in motivating

these voters against the Tories and towards Labour and the Greens. For Mason one idea is to build an electoral alliance with the Greens by agreeing on joint primaries in a number of seats. Seats like Laura Piddock's in the north east were lost by the margin of the Green vote in 2019. Even without PR this could be a progressive move for Labour.

Proportional Representation is put forward by people like Neil Lawson from Compass as a means to build an alliance with all centre left progressive parties including the Liberal Democrats. The left should not support such an argument in favour of PR. We can support it for making a Tory government with a minority of the popular vote unlikely but we should not forget that the Lib Dems have generally opted to go into coalition with the Tories. On the other hand PR would mean every vote really counted and give Labour a fairer number of seats. It would also mean the concentration on the particular concerns of voters in the marginal seats would be eliminated so a lot of the over emphasis on Red Wall voters would go. From the perspective of building a socialist alternative inside and outside Labour PR would obviously make it more viable since any split to the left would not mean electoral oblivion.

Building an anti-capitalist resistance

Election results are important. To a degree they express something about the political relationship of forces in the class struggle. The fact that Johnson's project of rightwing populism with deficit spending has worked well in these elections reflects the continued very low levels of struggles in the workplaces. Hire and rehire strikes have not safeguarded working conditions and in the private sector in particular union organisation is low. As commentators like John Harris from the Guardian has pointed out the long term effects of deindustrialisation and defeats are still working themselves out in the way Labour has lost these voters. Deindustrialisation does not just mean the decline of trade unions but also the hollowing out of a lot of community self- organisation and the emigration of younger people. For the left this means recognising the long term, difficult task of rebuilding solidarity and labour movement organisation.

Outside the workplace there are movements and campaigns - often disconnected from the Labour party but not entirely - such as XR rebellion, the Kill the Bill demonstrations, the feminist movement, Black Lives Matters or even the latest pro-Palestine actions - that show thousands of people who are interested in changing the system. Rebuilding an opposition to Starmer's leadership also passes through working alongside these activists.

Dave Kellaway

P.-S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 14 May 2021 :
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/labour-and-left-responses-after-hartlepool>
- Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, and a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.