

# Johnson's victory, Corbyn's defeat, and the battles to come

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A DECADE OF political crisis, the last half of which saw three general elections, two referendums, and three Tory prime ministers, has ended with Boris Johnson in Number Ten. A long time Telegraph journalist where he retailed 'politically incorrect' i.e. the sexist, racist, homophobic, 'jokes' that pass for wit amongst his party's rank and file, he is not ashamed to be seen as the British Donald Trump. More remarkable is the fact that, since December 12, 2019, a shameless liar and clown is backed by the biggest Tory majority since Margaret Thatcher in 1987.

Johnson won it with a lightweight manifesto but a powerful message; 'Get Brexit done' for an electorate exasperated by three years of wrangling Brexit which left them none the wiser as to what it entailed. Of course, he also benefited from overwhelming mass media support and the dark arts of Dominic Cummings and Lynton Crosby. In the red corner he faced a genuine conviction politician, Jeremy Corbyn, with a radical and detailed manifesto reversing austerity, tackling climate change, extending public ownership in transport, housing, education and health.

But Corbyn went down to a crushing defeat. The immediate causes of this were a confused and contradictory strategy on Brexit and bad parliamentary tactics, on top of a foul assault on him by the media, liberal and reactionary alike, endorsed by various Labour MPs and veterans. In the longer term, however, Corbyn suffered from the same crippling disease as all left reformists; a commitment to a strategy that requires a parliamentary majority and, therefore, a refusal to countenance a break with the right wing who are more directly supportive of the interests of British capital.

The hopes of millions for a radical Labour government, especially amongst the young, have thus been dashed. Corbyn is finished as Labour leader and the Corbyn movement is in retreat and disorder. Even if Rebecca Long-Bailey is able to fend off the challenge of Keir Starmer, all the problems of Corbyn's tenure will endure. As a result, a Johnson-led government holds out the prospect of a dark decade; the Thatcher era reborn but with the party and the trade unions far less ready for it than they were forty years ago. After the high hopes, too high, of 2015, we face an acute crisis of leadership, which has at its root a crisis of strategy, of programme.

## The road to defeat

How did this come about? The 2010s witnessed mounting disaffection by large sections of the population based on decades of stagnant wages, years of austerity budgets which ran-down the welfare state, and the growing recognition that areas of the country have been 'left behind' with higher unemployment. Because austerity was started under Labour and then continued with vicious rigour under the Tories and the Liberal Democrats, the right wing's near monopoly of the popular media was able to divert indignation onto the empty signifier of 'the establishment', focussing on the MPs. During the Brexit referendum

campaign itself, then the three years of fitful negotiations and parliamentary gridlock and worsened by the 2017 election, the carnival of reaction, predicted by revolutionary socialists, unfolded; anti-European and anti-refugee racism, and a white British nativism, borrowed from across the Atlantic, all flourished.

The levels of disillusion with politicians from 'the Westminster establishment', gave rise to unprecedented levels of populism and demagoguery. Social media platforms were used to create a 'people' for the cyber-populists. Bots, automated accounts which mimic human behaviour online, were used to amplify narratives or drown out opponents. Nor was this limited to the Tories; the Labour right used 'evidence' of trolling and harassment to smear Corbyn and his prominent supporters.

Indeed, after the election, the Labour Party right and the centre right, were quick to grab for control of the narrative of a 'historic defeat' and 'we lost our working-class heartlands', blaming Corbyn and the left for it. Such claims are the height of hypocrisy considering it was the Blair-Brown right wing who neglected the left behind areas, decimated the party's membership and lost the 2010 election. And it was the so-called centre left, under Ed Miliband, which saw the obliteration of the party's real red fortress, Scotland, and saw catastrophic losses in 2015, despite Blue Labour style pandering to the media on immigration and welfare.

Throughout the 2019 election campaign, figures from the Labour right went to both liberal and Tory media to help in monstrosity Jeremy Corbyn, thereby reinforcing their denunciations of him ever since he was elected Leader. They targeted his very best quality, his internationalism. He was pelted with media filth because of his opposition to Britain's imperialist wars in Ireland and the Middle East, on both of which he turned out to be nearer to the truth than any of his opponents. Attacks on his lifelong defence of the Palestinians against Israel's deliberate and repeated acts of ethnic cleansing culminated in the fraudulent campaign to indict the whole left as antisemitic. His response, however, not to denounce his critics for their craven support for imperialist policy in the Middle East but to accept the legitimacy of the charges and even to apologise for any perceived offence, not only encouraged more attacks but appeared to justify them.

The Parliamentary party's slanders and sabotage undermined Corbyn's leadership and cruelly dashed the hopes of half a million party members and ten million Labour voters. Fighting them is part and parcel of fighting the Tories. The real criticism of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership is, firstly, that he made half a revolution, failing to empower the half a million and more party members to sweep out the right in the PLP and Labour groups by a process of speedy democratic reselection. Under McCluskey, Lansman and the Labour Leader's Office, Momentum was also deprived of any internal democracy or independent agency.

Secondly, after the referendum, he surrounded himself with Lexiteer advisers derived from the Unite/Morning Star stable and adopted a policy of destructive ambiguity. With this they frustrated the anti-Brexit majority of party members and voters in the hope that they could woo the misnamed 'heartlands/red wall' into staying loyal. For this they were handsomely paid. (Seumas Milne £101,855 p.a. and Karie Murphy and Andrew Fisher both £90,704.) Finally, yielding to the 2019 annual conference's pressure for a referendum, but without dropping the pledge to negotiate a 'customs union' Brexit, Labour went into the election facing both ways, having joined the Liberals in a final month or so of parliamentary frustration of any decision. Then, to cap it off, they allowed Johnson to call an early general election, falling into Cummings' 'Get Brexit Done' bear trap. Whether 'continuity Corbynism' can recover from this must under Rebecca Long-Bailey, at the very least, be open to doubt.

Class struggle socialism

In the aftermath of such a defeat, mayhem within Labour is inevitable. In that fight, all those who recognise that socialism and internationalism are inseparable must regroup themselves around a strategy drawn from understanding a world wracked by capitalism's crises and threatened by inter-imperialist war. We must

recognise that all those who parrot Blue Labour talk of national culture or identity as features of the working class, whether they are from the Stalinist left or the Blairite right, are no socialists: indeed, they slander the very idea of socialism.

The central lesson that needs to be drawn from the experience of the last five years by those supporters of Jeremy Corbyn who see themselves as socialists, is that our rulers will never tolerate even a mild, reformist programme, that is, a programme which addresses some of capitalism's evils but makes no pledge to a fundamental transformation to establish a socialist society. As long as the labour movement sees winning a parliamentary election as the centre of its strategy, it will fail again and again. Pledging to play by the rules and seeking to please all but the very richest tax evaders and hedge fund parasites will not dissuade the whole ruling class (and its agents in our own ranks) from forming a broad phalanx to defend the system.

The starting point for fighting capitalism with the weapons of the class struggle has to be a rejection of all its rules, moral and legal. We should look beyond Labour's ranks to the spirit of rebellion that young people in Britain and all over the world are showing against the environmental and social depredations of a capitalism locked in a systemic crisis. In the trade unions, we will need to shake off the bureaucratic timidity that uses the anti-union laws as an excuse for inaction. The big majority of unorganised workers need to be recruited into the unions by mass campaigning and a democratisation that puts power into the hands of the rank and file and creates around the unions a massive social movement of youth, women and the racially and socially oppressed.

All these organisations and movements need to come together on a war footing; the class war. We must not accept having to wait five or ten years to drive the British Trump from power.

The Tory programme

Brexit will not be what Johnson calls a Golden Age. His false promises and outright lies will begin to undermine the faith that deluded former Labour voters placed in him. This will weaken the supposed legitimacy of a government with a huge parliamentary majority but elected by a minority of the voters. Moreover, we can anticipate serious ruptures within the constitutional framework of the UK; A revolt in Scotland where a majority who voted to Remain are now to be denied the right to decide if they wish to remain in Brexit Britain, reactionary disturbances by Orange bigots who believe they have been severed from the UK by the creation of a customs border in the Irish Sea.

While we can anticipate that the SNP, the Ulster Unionists and EU negotiators will make the most of these issues, there are also serious, even fundamental, divisions within the British ruling class itself. Though the stock exchange initially leapt with delight at Labour's defeat, Boris Johnson plus Jacob Rees-Mogg's European Research Group (ERG) still represent a minority of the ruling class, made up of parasitic hedge fund billionaires and media moguls. Their collusion with Nigel Farage's Ukip-then-Brexit party and advisors from Donald Trump and the US Alt-Right allowed them to win the Brexit referendum against the wishes of the majority of the owners of the big banks and industries. Johnson and the ERG seized control of the Tory Party from the old grandees and expelled them.

Taking Britain out of the European Union and into the camp of Donald Trump in a world increasingly riven by fierce competition between the great capitalist blocks; America, China, Europe, and Russia, will embroil Britain in Trump's trade wars with Europe and the rest of the world. In short, for all Johnson's large majority, the economic damage of Brexit, plus the next recession and an unprecedented political crisis of the Union in Scotland and Northern Ireland will soon be shaking the country to its depths.

Boris Johnson, Sajid Javid, Dominic Raab, and Priti Patel aim to 'do a Thatcher' on the working class.

Raaab and Patel were major contributors to a manifesto of the New Right, Britannia Unchained, which takes aim at the 'rights culture' which turned Britain into 'a nation of idlers'. Boris Johnson's claim to be a one nation-conservative is no more than triumphant jeering at having duped old, former Labour voters into self-harming. In reality, he heads the most neoliberal cabinet since 1983, when Thatcher purged the 'wets'. No wonder the free market think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs, was cock-a-hoop when Johnson first announced his ministers, in what a Telegraph commentator called a, 'revolutionary fighting cabinet'.

Its immediate tasks are to repeal 'free movement' and the rights that European workers forced out of the EU over decades, and to complete the harsh rule of market forces over public services with a massive reorientation to US corporations. Johnson wants to fetter the unions that still show fighting spirit, like the RMT, with even more brutal anti-strike laws. If he is imitating the deified Thatcher, we, too, need to learn the lessons of forty years ago. That was the time when our movement, despite having 13 million union members and 317,000 shop stewards and when 85 percent of all employees were covered by collective union bargaining, lost the huge gains it had made in the preceding decade. It was the time, too, when the Labour Left's forward march, led by Tony Benn, was still in full swing.

In the first four years of Thatcher's reign opportunity after opportunity to turn her and her government into a pile of scrap metal and bring a workers' government to power was squandered. By 1987, chronic political weakness, punctuated by actual betrayals, the inability or unwillingness of the union leaderships to use the enormous industrial muscle of the movement for political ends, allowed the Tories to pick off section after section; steelworkers, carworkers, dockers, miners, nurses and printers.

The main prongs of Johnson's attack will be integrally related to Brexit itself and to the 'fantastic trade deal' he will try to strike with his great friend Donald Trump. 'Regaining control of our borders' means a much harsher immigration system enshrined in British law. Recruiting an additional 20,000 police officers will provoke black youth with increased racist stop and search powers.

The protections of workers' rights that Johnson promised to lure Labour MPs into voting for his original withdrawal bill are themselves to be withdrawn. Likewise, the stingy promise to raise the national living wage to £10.50 an hour within five years, now has 'provided economic conditions allow', attached to it. In fact, those gullible enough to believe the promises that austerity will end will soon discover otherwise as the economic dislocation of Brexit takes hold, automobile and aeronautics firms move to the continent and the oncoming world crisis intensifies frictions over trade deals.

Last, but not least, will be attacks on Palestinian solidarity. A new bill would stop public institutions, including councils and universities from declaring boycotts or sanctions against foreign countries and those who trade with them. This is centrally targeted at the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

A fighting strategy

The activists and the young people mobilised by Corbyn in 2015 and by a range of progressive causes, with climate change in the forefront, can take the lead in the resistance to Johnson. But, to be effective, they have to work to a new plan beyond electoralism and cultish devotion to even a left leader. Instead, we need a strategy, a programme for action to address the series of linked crises that face the labour movement and all progressive forces in the country:

' Brexit: how to oppose every reactionary measure necessary for its implementation and every element of a trade deal with Trump. Our aim must not be a return to a neoliberal fortress Europe but to rebuild a powerful alliance with the militant workers and youth there and, together with them, replace it with a socialist Europe.

' Climate change, which will bring ever more desertification, extreme weather events, and extinction of

species and will become irreversible if fundamental changes to production and consumption are not completed in the next decade. Austerity, the remorseless real term cutbacks and privatisation of social provision in healthcare, education, the care of the elderly, the unemployed and the homeless.

? The oncoming recession, which will bring not only cyclical unemployment but the mass displacement of labour due to the application of AI to the service sectors.

? The plight of refugees from the regions and countries afflicted by Nato's and Russia's proxy wars and displaced by the first effects of climate change, adding to impoverishment, and the dictatorial regimes and reactionary social forces they generate.

? Racist demagogues in power in the imperialist heartlands and fascists on the streets, targeting immigrants, building walls, detention camps and threatening mass deportations.

? Global economic chaos and the threat of war as the rival power blocks clash in trade wars, new cold wars and regional wars.

All these challenges result from a system that cannot meet the most basic needs of humanity because it is owned and controlled by a tiny parasitic class driven by internecine competition towards a barbaric destruction of human civilisation. To address any one of them means that, in the coming months and years, those who produce all the material and cultural necessities of human life, the world's workers and farmers, will have to adopt anticapitalist solutions, in short, a socialised economy, planned to meet and overcome these challenges. In Britain, it means the 70 per cent of industries and services presently owned by 10 per cent of the population need to be taken out of their hands, put into collective, social ownership and management and mobilised to meet these dangers. The reason for this is simple; you cannot direct or control what you do not own.

The first task is to step up the struggle to drive the pro-capitalist elements out of Labour and transform it into a weapon for class struggle not class compromise. This means a party whose tactics are centred on the direct action and mass mobilisation of the working class, youth and socially oppressed, whose objective is to sweep away the bosses' regime and install a workers' government, accountable to the democratic organs of working class struggle, and therefore able to open the road to socialism, in Britain, Europe, and worldwide.

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