

Why Labour lost the general election: the far right versus social democracy

Shorter version

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This is a summary of a long paper I have been writing on the election. This has deeper analysis and arguments. It will be available on my blog in late February.

Abstract

After Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party in 2015, the party for the first time took a stance against austerity. The new leadership developed a programme to raise investment and productivity; nationalise some utilities; end privatisations; improve trade union rights, wages and conditions; a Green New Deal creating a million jobs; a rise in taxation of capital and the rich, to fund a 10% rise in revenue spending on public services and benefits; consequent reopening of closed services, improvements in services, better wages and conditions, some services made free; large scale council house building, and re-regulation of private renting. This programme goes no further than governments in the postwar boom; but after forty years of neoliberalism it is a radical turn to the left. The party, however, came up against a counter offensive by the far right to engineer Britain's exit from the EU and thus deepen neoliberalism, using xenophobia and anti-state ideology to gain popular support; the 2019 election marked a victory in this project. This article looks in detail at British politics since 2015, including key decisions taken by the Labour leadership. These decisions were highly constrained by the inheritance of neoliberalism, particularly in popular consciousness, and the nature of the far right offensive, and can only be judged in this context. Accordingly, this article explores this context, and thus some strategic questions for the left in fighting the far right:-

- * what long term features of British capitalism were influential here?
- * how has popular consciousness changed over forty years of neoliberalism?
- * what are the aims of the far right in Britain in relation to capital, and what are the contradictions in those aims?
- * what are the roots of xenophobia and anti-state ideology among working people?
- * what are the barriers to people understanding macro-economic issues and policy?
- * how can a left party win support for a programme which breaks with neoliberalism?

The article concludes with by considering opportunities for the British left in 2020 arising from the contradictions of the far right project.

1. The vote

The Tories won the election with 43.6% of the vote to Labour's 32.2%. The Tories took 57 seats off Labour, all Leave seats in the Midlands, North and Wales, and have a majority of 80 seats. Labour received a roughly equal share of the vote in each social class (A – E), as did the Tories, so the class basis of the parties' support changed. *However*, the vote is not as dire as many think. Labour's share of the vote was higher than in 2015, 2010 and 2006. But the spatial distribution of Labour votes (concentrated) and Tory votes (diffuse), combined with the first-past-the-post system, gave the Tories a disproportionate number of seats. The social democratic vote, including the SNP, PC, Greens and SDLP, totalled 39.7%. The Conservative vote increased only a little from the 2017 election, while Labour's fell by 2.6 million; many former Labour voters did not vote. There was a huge age divide in voting: Labour was supported by the majority of people under 50 and the Conservatives by the majority over 50. People aged 18-24 voted 60% for Labour and 18% Tory, whereas for people aged 65 and over the proportions were the reverse.

In the crucial Leave constituencies, people failed to vote Labour for three main reasons:-

- (i) support for Brexit, and a wish to 'get it done';
- (ii) contempt for, or hatred of, Jeremy Corbyn;
- (iii) some, but fewer, people were not convinced of the feasibility of Labour's economic programme (Helm, 2019).

Implicitly, the *benefits* of Labour's economic programme were not perceived as sufficiently strong to outweigh these negatives. A very common view encountered by canvassers was *indifference* to the election: a belief that the government/ state/ politicians can do nothing, or that 'they're all the same' (Chakraborty, 2019a). This article is focused on unpacking these views and explaining their origin.

2. The Conservatives' record

Coalition and Conservative governments since 2010 have presided over the worst recovery from the 2008 financial crash of any major country. Productive investment has been very low; productivity growth has been the worst since the industrial revolution. Wages have not increased and conditions have worsened. Taxes on business and the rich have been reduced, while public services and benefits have been slashed. The Tories systematically fomented xenophobia and racism, and sentiment against the poor and people with disabilities. Boris Johnson, as a journalist, 8 year mayor of London, and leader of Brexit, is an atrocious individual. A party with this egregious record of economic and social failure, attacks on human rights and rule of law, and a five year internal split, led by an incompetent liar, should have been a sitting target for the Labour Party; yet it triumphed.

3. Explaining the election result

The right and centre of the Labour Party and associated commentators have used two arguments to explain the result:-

(i) Mistakes and incompetence of the Corbyn leadership. But it is absurd to attribute to a few individuals complete responsibility for a major national event. The leadership's actions were highly constrained by deep internal divisions within the party, a forty-year neoliberalisation of the economy, social life, popular consciousness and politics, and a Brexit offensive by the Tory Right which was backed by important sections of capital and most of the press. What we need to unravel is the *dialectic* (mutual construction) of this hostile external context and the decisions of the party.

(ii) The manifesto being too left wing. As we have seen, some people did not vote Labour because they thought the programme unfeasible, or that they would be taxed more. But the majority vote for Labour of people under 50 was motivated, overwhelmingly, by the manifesto. Scepticism about the manifesto does, however, raise questions about its presentation (see section 8 below).

The election result was partly caused by political processes in the narrow, conventional sense, including:-

(a) Corbyn weakened and undermined by the inheritance of New Labour politically and institutionally within the party.

(b) The massive imbalance between the parties in the media, the social media. Massively unequal funding. The Tories' threats to the BBC and C4. The refusal of Johnson to take part in TV debates.

(c) The Tories' stringing out of the negotiations with the EU, creating impatience to 'get Brexit done'; Johnson presenting himself as having no connection with the previous Tory party.

(d) Multiple illegal actions by the government and by the Leave campaign.

(e) The successful characterisation of Corbyn as anti-semitic by the Labour right, without evidence; the inability of Labour to communicate the real racist policies, actions and propaganda of governments 2010-9, the Tory party, and Johnson, which have materially affected millions.

In this piece, however, my focus is different: the popular ideas, feelings, cultures and ideologies that underlay the vote. I examine knowledge of and ideas about: the economy (Britain's economic relationship to the EU; Labour's economic programme); immigration; British and EU policies and structures; and the views and strategies that people consequently

adopt. Popular understanding a social democratic programme, and combating xenophobia, are major problems for left parties and movements in all countries of the world, given the dominance of rightwing populism. Accordingly, these are the central concerns of this piece.

A fuller explanation of the referendum and election votes would start with some very long term structures: how capital-labour relations and the limitations of the state in capitalism depoliticise workers; how Britain's role as prime imperialist power shaped class relations and consciousness; and the long history of British working class conservatism. But no space here.

4. How neoliberalism has shaped popular consciousness

Since the 1970s the political economy of Britain has been dominated by neoliberalism. This has shaped all aspects of everyday life, and thus the ability of people to participate in collective organisations, and their feelings, ideas and ideologies (Raymond Williams's notion of culture as 'structure of feeling'). There is only space for a crude account here. But it will hopefully suggest the importance of thinking about ideology; this is absent from most accounts of the election defeat that I have read. You can doubtless flesh out this account yourself.

Neoliberalism is a strategy of capital to restore the rate of profit, by moving capital from low- to higher-profitability sectors and by increasing the rate of exploitation of labour. In Britain this has resulted an enormous decline in manufacturing employment and mining, including of large workplaces. There has been large decline in trade union membership in the private sector. People in a neighbourhood seldom now work in the same workplace or industry. Changes in the housing market, and the need to move for work, have eroded neighbourhood ties. People's time and energy for direct social interactions and politics have been eroded by the intensification of work, anti-social working hours, declining provision of public services, unhealthy consumption and travel modes, and erosion of physical and mental health. People who care for children and older dependents usually have no time or energy left for anything else.

New goods, services and consumption spaces, including home making and tourism, provide powerful compensations and distractions. But given stagnant incomes, many people have had to borrow to afford these, or even to buy essentials. Many older people, in contrast, have taken the Methodist path of living within their means.

These changes have led to increased individualism and a decline in notions of collective good. Social and cultural life has become increasingly competitive and antagonistic. This encourages a strategy of competition with members of other ethnic or 'racial' groups. Yet paradoxically, in reaction to the insecurity of neoliberalism, people also seek non-class collectives in which they feel safer and cared for: real or imagined white communities, the British or English nation with its glorious past: 'collective narcissism'.

The state has become widely discredited as a vehicle for economic and social improvement. State intervention into industry and labour markets are seen as ineffective or inefficient. Most people have become convinced the only way to revive private investment is cuts in business taxes and cuts to spending on services and benefits. There is little understanding of how the modern capitalist economy (here Britain, the EU) relies on durable cooperations between firms, labour and the state, as emphasised by Keynesianism. Thus neoliberal ideas have become increasingly dominant in the population (Elliott, 2019).

Perceptions of parliamentary politics and politicians have changed. Chronic economic failure has led to the view that politicians are useless and mendacious. People look to ‘strong, decisive’ individuals to ‘sort things out’ - party leaders rather than governments and parties; paradoxically, while all politicians are discredited, one politician comes to be regarded as the saviour.

The nature of social and political discourse and conversations have changed. Sound bites and isolated facts (whether true or false) dominate, something amplified by the social media, reinforcing the empiricism characteristic of capitalist society. Sustained, substantial and deep discussion of social processes, particularly of the economy and economic policy, are squeezed out. People are anyway constantly distracted by their screens.

These aspects of consciousness indicate that austerity does not necessarily result in anti-capitalist consciousness; the opposite may be the case, particularly if there is weak *collective* resistance. This explains why in 1935, in the depths of the depression, the Conservatives gained their largest ever majority. The rest of this article will explore how these popular ideas have been the foundation for political events since 2015.

5. The inheritance of New Labour

The record of New Labour in office 1997-2010 produced increasing disenchantment with the party. Aside from some improvements to public services (Sure Start, nurseries) and introduction of a (low and unpoliced) minimum wage, the government pursued a neoliberal path. It was hostile to the trade unions and workers’ struggles, and left Thatcher’s anti-union laws intact. It did not reverse the huge rise in inequality under the Conservatives. It practiced repressive policing of protests and demonstrations. Its industrial strategy privileged the City of London and media and cultural industries: its Regional Development Agencies were too weak to prevent the decline in manufacturing. It used PFIs for new public sector investments, and failed to tackle tax evasion and avoidance; both of these worsened pressures on public spending. The government’s bail out of the banks after the 2008 crash was not blamed on the financial system; Cameron was therefore able to blame the government debt on ‘Labour’s extravagance’, with lasting effects on people’s view of Labour.

In opposition in 2010-5 Miliband pursued austerity-lite, thus providing no alternative to neoliberalism. He instructed his MPs to abstain on the Universal Credit bill so as not to be seen as siding with benefit scroungers. When the demolition of local government, corruptly

targeted on Labour authorities, began in 2010, the party failed to organise any coordinated resistance; Labour councils therefore became seen as purveyors of cuts. Thus the Labour leadership from 1997 to 2005 reinforced neoliberal ideas and failed to develop social democratic and collectivist ideas.

The party itself was increasingly tightly controlled from the centre. Blairite London apparachiks were parachuted into Labour seats in the Midlands and the North, where they generally had little interaction with the voters. Disenchantment with Labour was reflected in declining election votes from 1997 to 2010 (Chakraborty, 2019b). This was the difficult starting point for Corbyn's renewal.

6. The offensive of the far right from 2015 to 2020

The offensive of the far right from 2015 to 2020, via the 2016 referendum, its takeover of the Tory party, and its victory in the 2019 general election, is a new stage in the neoliberal 'class war from above'. As we have seen, Cameron and Osborne in 2010-5 ratcheted up exploitation and austerity, freed capital from constraints, and promoted xenophobia and racism; but the Tory Right wished to go further on all these fronts. Its project has had two linked aspects (see further Gough, 2019).

(i) Brexit for capital

The Tory Right has opposed Britain's EC/EU membership since the 1970s, disliking its social democratic aspects. The base of the Tory Right has been in finance, property and imperial corporations operating overseas, rather than in manufacturing (reflecting a long-standing split within British capital).

For the far right Brexit is intended to abolish legal and political constraints protecting ecosystems, workers in the workplace, and consumption. It avoids the moves by the EU towards increased coordination of corporate taxation; clamp down on tax havens (including Britain and its overseas dependencies); and increased regulation of banking. It ends Britain's net contribution to the EU budget. Note that ending immigration from the EU is *not* an aim of the far right.

Brexit is, however, contradictory for capital. Exit from the Customs Union will severely undermine manufacturing and farming within Britain, and possibly some sectors of finance. The car industry, for example, is completely dependent on just-in-time imports from the continent and exports to the EU. (Ironically, this structure was created by Thatcher, who offered foreign-owned transnationals access to the EU market, using a relatively cheap and numerically-flexible workforce.) The representative bodies of capital have protested, but these protests have (so far) been ignored by the Tory Right. My interpretation is that (i) much British-owned or headquartered capital does not produce within Britain but operates abroad outside the EU, and is therefore indifferent to EU membership: speculative finance, fossil fuels and mining, large scale construction, imperial agricultural corporations. (ii)

Manufacturing within Britain is carried out overwhelmingly by transnational corporations, which already have other manufacturing sites within the EU, and the same is true for the retail banks. Transfer of production from Britain to the EU is therefore not too difficult. Opposition from capital to the Brexiteers has therefore been muted (see further Gough, 2019).

(ii) Winning working class support for Brexit, and hence for neoliberalism

The Brexiteers could not win popular support by presenting its real aims. Learning from Thatcher's war in the Falklands, they have therefore used xenophobia and nationalism. The Leave campaign made two promises: end immigration from the EU (and implicitly from elsewhere); and end meddling by the Brussels 'bureaucrats' in British affairs – 'take back control'. From the Leave campaign through to the 2019 election, negotiations with Brussels were presented as a war against an enemy; MPs who tried to soften the withdrawal agreement were accordingly 'traitors'. The tendency of neoliberal life to reinforce British nationalism (section 4) was weaponised. During the election campaign, the Brexit party produced an ad: picture of Merkel, waving, arm raised; 'We didn't win two world wars to be dictated to by a Kraut'.

These messages were stunningly successful. They powered the Leave vote in 2016, and the Tories' election campaign in 2019 centred on 'get Brexit done'. But these ideas are not a product of rightwing propaganda alone: they arise spontaneously through *workers' daily life in a capitalist society*, particularly in a period of economic stagnation and neoliberalism. This is analysed in the next section.

7. Why people voted Leave in 2016

As many people have observed, the form of the referendum campaign was woefully inadequate for a rational debate. The economic relationship of Britain to the EU, and the institutions and policies of the EU, are enormously complex, and the vast majority of people had no prior knowledge and understanding of them. Most Leavers *and* Remainers therefore voted on the basis of a single aspect which they (thought they) understood. In contrast, the referenda on abortion and equal marriage in Ireland used citizens' fora to discuss the issues in depth. This would have been an improvement - though the fora would have had to run for long periods to adequately tackle the issues.

A second major problem was that there were only two options in the ballot. Almost no one was aware that there were many different possibilities for Britain's relationship with the EU after Brexit (varieties of soft, hard, and no deal).

In the referendum, there were two main reasons for voting Leave, each with important differentiations (see Gough, 2017). These derive from the ideologies developed by neoliberalism (section 4).

(i) Xenophobia

This took two forms:-

(a) Material: 'immigrants' seen as competitors for jobs, services and housing.

Neoliberalism, and apparent impossibility of social democracy, meant that jobs, housing and public services are fixed by 'markets'. Workers have to compete for them. For British-born people, whether white or BME, an 'obvious' form of this competition is to attempt to exclude 'immigrants'. In some localities, this inter-ethnic competition is visible in employment, housing and use of public services.

(b) Symbolic: Neoliberal deprivations can make people yearn for strong neighbourhood ties. For many older, British-born people, this puts a high value on white community ('collective narcissism'). This can be a nostalgic, rose-tinted memory. Immigrant cultures symbolically threaten this.

I hypothesise that these feelings were strongly differentiated by age group and type of locality:-

Large cities. In these, the competition for jobs, housing and public services between British-born people and 'immigrants' is not *visible* because the numbers of jobs, housing units and public service units are very large and spread across the city, and geographical linkages between residence and work are complex. The large cities largely voted Remain.

Large and medium towns and rural districts with large BME populations. e.g. South Lancashire, West Yorkshire, Leicester, Luton, Dagenham. Have had large BME populations since the 1960s. Employment, residential areas and social life now strongly divided by ethnicity. White working class people are likely to resent BME people for both material and symbolic reasons. Agricultural areas in East Anglia with large Eastern European populations are similar. All these towns/ districts voted strongly for Leave.

De-industrialised small towns, former coal fields, and rural areas in the Midlands, North and Wales. Very small number of BME and Eastern Europeans; the populations are overwhelmingly British-born and white. These localities are poor because the working class jobs have disappeared and young people have moved out; large numbers over 50 and retired. Anti-immigrant feeling is largely for symbolic reasons.

These differences in xenophobia by locality were also enormously important in the 2019 election.

(ii) Anti-state ideology

Neoliberalism has developed the popular view that the state, at whatever spatial scale, is ineffective in meeting people's material needs, and is in certain ways tyrannical, particularly

in its taxation and ‘bureaucracy’. Given the opportunity to decide whether to have a certain level of the state (here, the EU), people may then vote not to have it. For older people, this may be reinforced by British nationalism versus the EU ‘controlled by Germans’.

To counter these views the Remain campaign, including the Labour Party, and backed by business organisations, argued, correctly, that leaving the EU would have bad consequences for investment and jobs within Britain. The Leave campaign claimed, falsely, that trade with the EU could quickly be replaced by new trade agreements with non-EU states.

The Remainers’ dire predictions were not believed (‘Project Fear’) because they were not *understood*. The great majority of people are ignorant of the economic structures of the EU: the Customs Union, the Single Market, EU agricultural, industrial and regional policies, and EU industrial-technical collaborations. Underlying this: most people do not understand the economic geography of modern capitalism: economies of scale enabled by concentration of production in space; specialisation of production by workplace, firm and territory; the consequent international division of labour; thus trade in inputs and final products in manufacturing and some services; the importance of *qualities* of goods as distinct from price. In consequence, there is no understanding of the importance of the Customs Union.

Underlying this ignorance of economic geography: in capitalism, working class people (the 90%) have no say in decisions on investment and production, and therefore no practical knowledge of them; economic knowledge is limited to the markets in which workers participate day-to-day: jobs, housing, consumer commodities. This is a key part of my argument here. The result was that in 2016 most Leavers, and even many Remainers, had no appreciation of the serious long-term damage that exit from the EU would inflict on investment and employment within Britain, and this remained the case in 2019.

I now consider how the Labour Party campaigned on its policies from after the referendum through to the 2019 election campaign. The party faced acute difficulties because of the ideological inheritance of neoliberalism, popular lack of understanding of the (macro) economy, the referendum result, and the domination of parliamentary politics for over three years by Brexit. These were compounded by the issue of Corbyn’s leadership.

8. Presentation of Labour’s economic and social programme

Labour’s programme offered some substantial benefits to firms producing in Britain: the National and Regional Development Banks; increased building work; regulations benefiting small business; improved worker training. But business disliked increases in corporate taxation, democratisation of corporate governance, state ownership of utilities and phasing out of PFIs, and so offered little support.

However, to the 90%, the programme offered very substantial material benefits, dignity in employment, the home and service use, and potential for active involvement and empowerment in economic and social life. But we have seen that in capitalism people are

systematically ignorant of macro economics, and that 45 years of neoliberalism have discredited social democratic policies, posing a massive task for Labour.

The difficulty of this task, however, varied considerably by policy area: some are easier to understand than others; some conflict with neoliberal ideas more than others; some require understanding and knowledge of the meso- or macro-economy, some not; in some the benefits are immediate, in others indirect. Notable are:-

- * labour market policies: easy to understand, but subject to objection that they will harm business.
- * policies to increase productive investment: requires knowledge of patterns of investment and productivity, which very few have.
- * nationalisation of utilities: a popular policy. Everyone has experience of poor services. But use of profits and investment under private and public ownership not well understood. Subject to objection from older people that nationalised services had their failings.
- * new distinction between revenue and investment spending, funded respectively by taxation and borrowing: a crucial part of the programme, but hardly anyone understands it.
- * increased taxation of corporations and the rich: media coverage has always presented all taxes as the same (bad), with no distinction between business and people. Many people therefore assumed that Labour's tax rises would fall on them. This may have been particularly strong among the retired on fixed incomes. This was the biggest single problem in communicating Labour's programme.
- * increased taxes on business: diversity of mechanisms confusing. Some open to neoliberal objections. Increased taxes on the rich: popular.
- * spending on public services: an easy sell. Spending on benefits: 'deserving/ undeserving' problem. Spending on free services: problem of whether beneficiaries really need it; envy.
- * increased borrowing for investment: at very low interest rates, this was a pretty easy sell, though some neoliberal objections retained credibility.
- * council house building and regulation of private renting: outcomes popular, but some have objections on economics of supply. Council renting rather than owner occupation conflicts with a deeply established cultural preference.

Despite the popularity of some policies, the lack of understanding of economic mechanisms, and neoliberal objections, meant that Labour had a hard sell. This could not conceivably be done during an election campaign. It should have begun in earnest in 2016. But through what media and fora? I return to this problem in the conclusion.

We can hypothesise that the appeal of the programme was sharply differentiated by age. Some differences already mentioned. Younger adults would benefit from the reformed labour market, housing policies, and university fee abolition; probably greater supporters of the Green New Deal. In contrast, people over 50 in employment may not expect that it will improve before retirement. People over 50 including the retired likely to have settled housing. Older people more likely to have the Methodist attitude of living modestly, resenting hand-outs to the undeserving, and seeing government borrowing as contradicting

their belief in saving. For older people, the main benefit of Labour's programme would be in the NHS and social care, but this appears to have been overridden by fear of taxation. These differences by age reflected in the 2017 election, where Labour's huge surge in popularity was centred on younger voters, and dramatically in the 2019 election (section 1).

The problem of convincing (especially older) people of Labour's economic programme was made worse by the party's election campaign. Lack of a compelling slogan and concise presentation of main policies; lack of a dossier on the Conservatives' and Johnson's record, and lack of attack on this record; reliance on attacking government's hypothetical deal with the US; lack of focus on the planned taxation of capital and the rich (perhaps the major single failing of the campaign); no explanation of the overall spending plan, instead a spaced succession of promises, therefore appearing profligate; the carefully planned balance of tax and spend upended by an extra £56bn to women's pensions; the financial planning of utility nationalisations upended by the free high-speed broadband promise. This produced scepticism about the feasibility of Labour's programme, and weakened the positive reasons that people might vote Labour (see section 2). A symptom: opinion polls showed that the Tories were 'more trusted' with the NHS than Labour; this can only have been due to voters believing that Labour's programme was *not feasible*.

9. Labour's ecological programme

In the last two years or so, multiple ecological disasters worldwide, the school strikes and Extinction Rebellion have effected a large shift in public opinion in Britain on the climate emergency. This doesn't seem to have changed personal decisions (SUVs, air holidays,...) much as yet. But it should have produced more support for collective solutions such as Labour's Green New Deal. Reinforced by the Tories' atrocious ecological record and evident indifference during the election campaign. Likely to have been a stronger motivation for younger rather than older voters.

10. Labour's stance on Brexit

In the 'debate' before the referendum, Labour argued for Remain on the basis of its economic necessity. Corbyn attempted to deal with the xenophobia which was inclining people to vote Leave by arguing that the problem of immigration was due to poor wages and conditions, weak unions, and a lack of effective policing of employment law (minimum wage, etc), all of which a Labour government would ameliorate. ¹

The result of the referendum posed an unavoidable dilemma for Labour. The six most strongly Remain seats had Labour MPs, as did the six most strongly Leave seats. The majority for Leave was very narrow, and the Leave campaign was known to have cheated in various ways. The leadership could have continued to argue for Remain. But it decided to support Brexit while remaining in the Customs Union and with a close relationship to the Single Market (free movement of people and capital), thus also avoiding a new divide on the border in Ireland. This was motivated by a desire to avoid arguing with Leave voters about

the legitimacy of the referendum; Leavers' votes in the 2019 election suggest the wisdom of this stance.² The key point is that Labour's dilemma, right up to the election, did *not* mainly lie in the Remain/ Leave split among its base, but in (a) the strength of Leave voters' belief that the main issue was immigration, and (b) the weak understanding amongst all voters of the dire consequences of leaving the Customs Union (sections 6 and 7).

With a policy *either* of Remain or soft Brexit, Labour had a huge task of explaining the logic of its policy: to save production in Britain from collapse. Over three years, Labour in parliament, alongside other parties, attempted to get May to incorporate at least part of its policy into the withdrawal agreement, unsuccessfully. But there was no systematic campaign to change public understanding of the economic effects of hard Brexit or no deal. An effective tactic could have been a collaborative campaign between Unite, the GMB and Labour to 'save the car industry'. Because of the likelihood of a hard Brexit, in 2018-9 all the major car companies delayed or cancelled investment plans, cut production, or switched investment in new lines to the continent. Here was a dramatic, concrete demonstration of the importance of staying in the Customs Union. Events outside or around the factories could have had media impact. But this didn't happen, presumably because the union leaderships have been passive since the 2008 crash, Unite's opposition to Remain, and the Labour leadership focusing on parliament.

In September 2019 Labour conference voted for a new stance on Brexit, a compromise agreed between Remainers and Leavers: elect a Labour government, negotiate a better withdrawal agreement (i.e. Labour's existing policy on the Customs Union and Single Market), then hold a referendum to decide between this Brexit and Remain, allowing Labour MPs to campaign for either, with Corbyn not declaring his opinion. We do not know how many Remainers voted for Labour as a result of this change, who would not otherwise have done (I suspect not a large number). But we do know that for many people in Leave seats this was *the major* reason for not voting Labour (section 1). The proposed second referendum was seen as Labour abandoning its commitment to Brexit. Over three years people's reasons for voting for Brexit remained largely unchallenged. Moreover, the vote for Brexit became a thing in itself, independent of its original motivations or content. This was the only time that voters had been consulted on such a major issue, so disregarding their view was insulting. Moreover, Brexit embodied British national pride, so reversing it was unpatriotic. The depth of this feeling was evidently not appreciated by Remain MP and party members in London and the south. Trickett and Lavery, two Northern MPs, warned on this, but their 36 page document was ignored by the leadership (Stewart, 2019). The change in stance on the EU was a major mistake.

11. The Corbyn factor

Neoliberalism has produced a hugely increased emphasis on the qualities of party leaders (section 4); elections have become quasi-presidential. We have seen that strongly negative views of Corbyn were important in the election. This was not a product of Corbyn's individual characteristics, but constructed by the political circumstances. We should also see

it as a comparison with the popular and charismatic Johnson. The negative view of Corbyn seems to have arisen from:-

(i) Labour's position on the EU changing from Remain to soft Brexit in 2016 and to a second referendum in 2019. This made Corbyn appear indecisive and weak. In contrast, from 2015 Johnson stuck to his hard Brexit position. Corbyn's handling of anti-semitic statements by Labour members was seen as weak leadership, even by people who did not believe him to be anti-semitic. The continuous undermining of Corbyn by Blairite MPs made him appear weak – 'he can't even control his own party', whereas Johnson has been completely ruthless with MPs who differed from him.

(ii) The Tories' massive social media attack on Corbyn certainly told lies about his lack of patriotism (e.g. that he is a member of Hamas). But it is true that he has a long history of opposing British imperialism (Ireland, the Middle East); he has sometimes been critical of actions by British soldiers; and the manifesto has some anti-imperialist policies. Opposition to British imperialism has been weak in the working class over centuries; neoliberalism has led to increasing pride in Britain, particularly among older people (section 4); and the Brexiteers have mobilised British nationalism, including military themes (section 6). It was practically impossible in the election campaign, or even in the years before, for Labour to win voters to anti-imperialism: not enough communication bandwidth. It was therefore easy to portray Corbyn as unpatriotic, a hater of Britain, a supporter of terrorism.

(iii) Corbyn's debating skills are undoubtedly weak. The campaigning that Corbyn had done all his life was speeches to the converted, very different from debate with the right. This was seen as a further mark of weakness.

(iv) Corbyn's decision to 'go high, not low' in debate with the Tories added to the impression of weakness. (The phrase was taken from Clinton in her contest with Trump: a bad omen.) He refrained from criticising Johnson's record, integrity and grasp of policy. In contrast, Johnson has always thrown slander and lies in his opponents faces, read by many voters as a sign of 'strong leadership' (compare Trump).

(v) Johnson's constructed personality as our mate 'Boris'; as sexually promiscuous, careless about his children, thus macho; as a plain speaking, bar room, politically-incorrect loud mouth; as a shameless liar; and as undertaker of daft, expensive projects, rather than counting against him, were seen by many voters (especially male?) as a sign of his strength as a leader (compare Trump).

Of these aspects, Labour could only feasibly have changed (i) (not changing Brexit positions) and, more directly, (iv). The rest was fate.

12. Weaknesses in Labour's campaigning

From Corbyn's election in 2015, there were weaknesses in the party's campaigning.

* Over four years, Labour failed many times to use issues in the news to attack the Tories and present Labour's alternative.

* In campaigning for a soft Brexit, Labour could have been more imaginative and direct (see my example of the vehicle industry, section 8). The Tories are more canny: during the election campaign Johnson visited a factory every day and had his picture taken with 'I love Boris' workers.

* Labour gave its support to Johnson in October 2019 to call an election, necessary for him to do so. This was foolish. The withdrawal bill had not yet gone through parliament, so Johnson could run the election on 'get Brexit done'. Labour was around 15% behind the Conservatives in the opinion polls, and Corbyn had a rating of -50%. The leadership evidently thought that Labour could repeat its surge in 2017. But that was against May, who had called an election which had no point, and who had none of Johnson's charisma. A deeper problem was that the leadership did not understand the depth of feeling over Brexit among working class voters outside London (section 10), nor the lack of understanding of the party's economic programme (section 8): the London bubble.

13. Summarising why Labour lost

My analysis has attempted to combine large scale and long term processes with consideration of people, and the Conservative and Labour parties, as active subjects. One could summarise the analysis as:-

Large scale and very long term processes

- * Politics once every five years
- * The complexion of British capitalism and imperialism over centuries.

The last forty years

- * Changes in the economy, employment, and social life under neoliberalism
- * The social media
- * Consequent change in popular culture (individualistic/ collectivist), understandings of the economy, and political culture
- * The record of the Labour Party under Blair, Brown and Miliband: reinforcement of neoliberal ideology, loss of working class support.

All this framed and constrained –

Conservative and Labour parties' strategies 2015 – 2019

The Tory Right launched an offensive to leave the EU and thus deepen neoliberalism and give greater freedom to (some) sections of capital. The ambivalence of many sectors of capital allowed the Right to take over the Tory party. The Brexiteers sought to win support for Brexit from the population by using xenophobia and British/English nationalism, despite these being antithetical to their economic aims. This support drew on people's own experience and interpretation of life under neoliberalism, particularly their understanding of immigration, of the state, and of Britain as a nation and culture. The understanding of immigration was sharply differentiated between cities, racially-mixed towns, and old industrial areas.

Labour was unable to find ways to educate the public on the economic implications of Brexit and different possible future relations with the EU. It was unable to convince a sufficient number of people of the logic and coherence of its economic programme, and that it would not result in tax rises or extra costs for them, and was thus unable to overcome their acceptance of austerity. On these issues, Labour had great success with younger people, and failure with older; and more success in cities than elsewhere. But given the presence of other social democratic parties, and the geographical distribution of votes, the Conservatives nevertheless won the election.

Change in political culture under neoliberalism made a strong party leader important. On this, Johnson scored heavily over Corbyn.

Labour's tactics

Some poor tactical decisions were relatively undetermined by history and circumstance:-

* The Brexit stance: Probably right to change after the referendum. Probably wrong to change in September 2019.

* The party's economic programme was not systematically or effectively campaigned for over 2015-9. During the election campaign the party did not make a priority of explaining its tax and borrowing proposals, and so succumbed to the objection 'Where's the money coming from?'. It exacerbated this problem by making additional promises during the campaign, reinforcing the impression that Labour was extravagant.

* The Labour Party should not have agreed in September 2019 to a general election. Caused mainly by lack of attention to working class opinion outside London.

* The record of the government since 2010, and of Johnson, were Labour's strongest suit. But Labour's criticism of them, throughout 2015-9 and during the election campaign, was weak. A strong attack would also have helped to ameliorate the public's perception of Corbyn as a leader.

Fate: handicaps that Labour could not avoid

Corbyn's anti-imperialism throughout his political life came up against longstanding working-class British nationalism. Given the issues that Labour had to deal with after 2015/6, namely Brexit and its economic programme, it is difficult to see how the party could have overcome this hostility.

During the 2017 general election campaign, Islamic fundamentalists carried out two terrorist attacks in Britain which killed dozens of people; during the 2019 campaign there was another. These may have stimulated fear of 'immigrants', thus reinforcing the Tory's campaign. Each attack stopped political campaigning for a week, significant because in both years Labour was coming from behind and progressively winning more support during the campaign. The attacks therefore harmed Labour's vote, very substantially in 2017, significantly in 2019.

These five levels of analysis are not distinct, separate reasons for Labour's defeat; each had causality, but within the context of the others. No one level led inexorably to the defeat. This shows that the arguments given by the right and centre of the party (section 3) are of zero use in understanding the reasons for Labour's defeat.

14. Lessons for social democratic parties

There are lessons here for social democratic parties in high and medium income countries.

1. The left needs to find more ways of *finding out and understanding* the feelings and views of working people developed through living in neoliberal capitalism, and particularly conservative or reactionary views. The left should not capitulate to these, but they should inform tactics for campaigning and organising.

2. The left in every country has a huge task to explain (a) why (and not just that) the neoliberal economy fails to meet human needs, (b) why nationalist and xenophobic policies of the far right offer no solution, and (c) why a social democratic programme of government would improve things *and is feasible*. This task is extremely difficult because the economic processes involved are hard to understand, and are mystified by the very processes of capitalism itself. It is also because the left lacks effective means of communication with the public, given the domination of the media and social media by the right in most countries. We need to think how to develop new forms of communication and conversation about aspects of the economy, and how this can link into trade union, eco, housing and public services struggles.³

3. At the level of tactics, in parliamentary elections the left needs to find ways of simplifying and sloganising its message. One effect of neoliberalism is that people do not want to listen to political discourse; and the rise of the social media has reduced people's attention span and ability to engage with extended and complex arguments. The left needs to permanently educate, especially on economic issues, and a mass left party needs to permanently campaign

on its programme. It needs to attack the opposition head on, to explain the bankruptcy of neoliberalism and dramatise its dysfunctional and cruel results. In an election campaign, it needs a succinct central message (probably embodied in a five-words-or-less slogan), and three or four key arguments, which it then goes all out to convey. Given that the left's arguments are extremely hard to convey, they must be consistent and repeated over and over again.

15. Postscript: Opportunities for the British left in 2020

In this period of left gloom, it is important to recognise the positives since Corbyn was elected to lead the Labour Party, even in the election itself. We should also understand the multiple contradictions which already threaten to unravel the Tory Right project.

* The vote for social democratic parties was 40%, within 4% of the Tories. Labour got a majority of the vote of people under 50, and among 18-24 year olds Labour out-pollled the Tories by three to one. Half of voters, then, would have preferred a Labour government. This provides a basis for Labour to win greater support for its policies in coming years, and for building struggles against the government and business.

* From 2015, the Labour Party developed industrial, labour market and fiscal policies which directly challenge neoliberal orthodoxy and set out a feasible plan for government. This strategy was poorly communicated from 2016 onwards and badly presented during the election campaign. But Labour's manifesto, together with its costing in the Grey Book, provides an example of how a social democratic government of a high-income country might roll back neoliberalism. The Labour Party can and should now resource a long term campaign of education, through multiple media and spaces, and in association with trade union and community campaigns, to communicate this programme. The government's continuation of austerity will over time expose as insubstantial and illusory the promises it made in the election, giving a stronger audience for Labour's alternative.

* The Johnson government is replete with contradictions. The project of the Tory Right is to free capital to flow internationally, but has sold itself to the working class on the basis of nationalism. It wishes to continue the unproductive path of the economy, to further worsen wages and conditions, and to further weaken public services, but has sold itself by promising a revival of the national economy. It wishes to intensify the rule of financial capital, but faces opposition from capital and workers in production. The Tories' promise to radically reduce immigration is flatly contradicted by the need of business in Britain for both skilled and non-skilled workers from the EU; yet the government cannot allow substantial immigration without antagonising those who voted Leave and for 'getting Brexit done' precisely to end this immigration. The government's preferred hard Brexit would mean the collapse of manufacturing and farming, which account for 70% of exports, and the removal of much of the City of London to the continent, reducing service exports. The balance of trade, chronically in deficit, will worsen.

* Brexit is not done: the negotiation of the substance of Britain's future relationship to the EU and to non-EU countries is just beginning. Johnson says that he rules out regulatory alignment with the EU on labour conditions, ecology and state aid. The EU is clear that this rules out free trade with Britain, and 'equivalence' (i.e. right to operate freely in the EU) for the City of London. This gives both a responsibility and an opportunity to the Labour Party to campaign to stay in the Customs Union and have a close relationship to the Single Market, that is, the party's position from 2016 until September 2019. In this, it can ally with the trade unions and other social democratic parties. This campaign could also be supported by sections of capital, which no longer have the excuse of avoiding a Corbyn government; but Labour should not however allow capital to limit its campaign. This campaign can prise open a key contradiction of the Tories.

* The government's fiscal policy has massive contradictions. Before the election the Tories (Javid) promised to balance the government's books ('current' or revenue spending) by 2022. But he is promising to splash out on goodies for the North and Midlands. These two things can only be achieved by taxing the rich or the corporations; but this will be fiercely resisted by capital and from within his own party. This contradiction resulted in the sacking of Chancellor Javid on 13 February. Labour can use this incoherence to promote its own, coherent, fiscal and economic strategy.

The Labour Party is presently preoccupied with electing a new leadership, and the current leadership is demoralised. But the party and the wider movement can and should go on the offensive.

Notes

1. The allegation that Corbyn did not campaign strongly for Remain is empirically false.
2. The far left in Britain has objected to the EU's neoliberal restrictions on state aid to industry and firms. These are emphasised by left Brexiters. Corbyn shared these criticisms, and this may have inclined him to soft Brexit rather than Remain. Left economists have argued, however, that in practice Britain could have finessed these rules, as other states have repeatedly done.
3. I would like to discuss this with comrades interested in economics education.

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