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Britain

British politics in utter turmoil

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British politics is in utter turmoil as a general election looms. We face either a Labour government, possibly as the biggest party with the support of other left parties, most notably the Scottish National Party, with a radical left agenda; or a reactionary Tory Government driven by racism, populism, and English nationalism, with a race to the bottom economy and a strategic relationship with Donald Trump's America First USA. This could determine the shape of British politics for a long time to come.

Having taken over as Prime Minister from Theresa May via a Tory Party leadership election, Boris Johnson, with no electoral mandate or Parliamentary majority – not even with support from the Democratic Unionist Party – since he expelled 21 Tory MPs is pledged to take Britain out of the EU on 31 October, ‘deal or no deal’ and is prepared to ‘die in a ditch’ to do it. [1] He is using the cover of fake negotiations with the EU and defying Parliament, in the form of the Hillary Benn Bill, which rules out leaving the EU without a deal and instructs the government, in the absence of a deal by 19 October, to approach the EU to request an extension of the negotiating period. [2]

Having outrageously closed down Parliament for five weeks in order to do this without Parliamentary ‘interference’ Johnson’s received a major set-back (on 24 September) when Britain’s Supreme Court unanimously found that his closure of Parliament had been ‘unlawful’, and that Parliament should reassemble and resume its proceedings as soon as possible. [3]

When Parliament reassembled next day, Johnson’s long cultivated ‘amiable buffoon’ persona (to the extent that it still existed) had vanished, revealing the right-wing populist demagogue underneath who was lying through his teeth, Trump style, in order to whip up English nationalism and xenophobia by any scurrilous means necessary. He ridiculed women MPs who have received death threats directly as a result of his words, while anonymous Cabinet supporters briefed the media predicting a ‘violent, popular uprising’ if he does not get Brexit through. [4]

Johnson called for a general election but the opposition parties – Labour, the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, the Greens (with one MP), and the Liberal Democrats – refuse to agree to this before a no-deal Brexit is taken off the table because they fear (quite rightly) that Johnson would use the suspension of Parliament required for the election to force a no deal Brexit through on 31 October. What is clear now is that a general election when it comes is likely to be the most divisive and violent in Britain for a very long time.

Although Labour is well behind the Tories in the polls – though less so than at the start of the last election which ended up depriving the Tories of a parliamentary majority – it is hard to read much into them. Politics is swilling around under the impact of events and tabloid hysteria and daily attacks on Jeremy Corbyn from every angle that can be found. Many major factors that could affect voting intentions are still unclear, for example whether an exit takes place from the EU by the end of October, under what conditions and with what effect. The role of the Brexit Party and its relationship with the Tories is also unknown.

The Tory electoral strategy is to whip up the Brexit debate to the level that it will drown out Labour’s radical programme that was so effective last time, and make it a purely Brexit election which they think will give them the advantage. This is an approach that failed in 2017, when a radical Labour manifesto transformed the election campaign and gave Labour an unexpectedly good result. Whether it will be effective today in a more extreme form is difficult to predict. And while the 2017 result was a very credible one for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, a further election which left the Tories in power would be a strategic defeat and one which would put into question not only Corbyn himself but the whole project to significantly move the Labour Party to the left.

The Labour Party conference

What can be said is that Labour's response, from its conference which was taking place in parallel with the Supreme Court hearing, has been absolutely right: to meet the Tory shift to the right with a radical Labour shift to the left. With the lessons of 2017 no doubt in mind, the conference produced an even more radical agenda that can form the basis of its new manifesto as soon as an election date is clear. [5]

The conference voted, for example, to introduce a Green New Deal and to reduce Britain's carbon emissions to net zero by 2030. Pledges were made to boost renewable energy production and 'massively expand' the use of electric cars. The environment was given a higher priority than at any previous Labour Party conference with shadow chancellor John MacDonnell pledging to spend whatever necessary to beat climate change and Jeremy Corbyn making the environment central to his leader's speech.

On immigration the conference voted to 'maintain and extend free movement' of people. It voted to give EU citizens the right to live and work in Britain, and vice versa, even after Britain leaves. To abolish migrant detention centres, dismantle the Tories 'hostile environment' immigration policy, scrap limitations on migrants' access to public funds and extend voting rights to all foreign nationals who are resident in the UK.

On health policy, the conference pledged to abolish prescription charges in England – in line with Scotland and Wales – and introduce free personal care for the elderly at an estimated cost of Â£8bn a year. This would be a part of a 'National Care Service' that would raise social care standards, introduce a new deal and higher wages for care workers, and bringing an end to 15-minute care visits.

It agreed to create a new publicly owned drug company to take on big pharma.

On employment rights, the conference pledged to repeal Tory anti-union legislation, re-establish trade union negotiating rights, abolish zero hours contracts, increase the minimum wage to Â£10 an hour and introduce a four-day week (32 hours) without loss of pay within 10 years.

The conference also voted for the abolition of private schools and to integrate them into the state system by scrapping tax breaks and seizing their assets. University tuition fees would be abolished.

The challenge is to what extent such a manifesto, even more radical than the last, will cut through, the determination of the Tories and the right more generally – aided by a mainly complaint media – to make this an election which focuses entirely on Brexit.

Brexit

Unsurprisingly, the biggest debate of Labour's conference was on Brexit. While the majority of Labour's members, supporters, and voters strongly support remain there has been a long battle to get Jeremy Corbyn and his leadership team to reflect this and end the ambiguity, in particular over a second referendum – or even to fully reflect the decision of last year's conference which was to keep all options on the table including a second referendum. It was an ambiguity that lost large numbers of Labour votes to the Lib-Dems in the European elections and infuriated large numbers of Labour members – particularly young members.

Labour, however, has radically (and crucially) strengthened its anti-Brexit stance in two ways. First, by taking the leadership of the opposition parties to stop a no deal Brexit. The fact that the opposition parties were able to take

control of the Parliamentary agenda and pass legislation making a no-deal Brexit illegal was down first and foremost to Labour. The decision of the opposition parties to refuse to fall into the trap of a general election before a no-deal Brexit is ruled out was also due first and foremost to Labour.

Secondly Labour is now unambiguously committed to a second referendum to validate whatever deal is put forward and by whoever, including itself. This has transformed the situation. By the time of the LP conference, the Labour leadership had fully endorsed a second referendum with an option to remain and said this would be in Labour's manifesto whenever the general election takes place.

When it came to the conference, therefore, Labour's NEC, supported by Corbyn, spelled out how Labour would deal with Brexit if it won the election in some detail. The NEC proposal to the conference puts it this way: 'A Labour Government would secure a sensible leave deal with the EU within three months, and within six months would put it before the people in a referendum alongside the option to remain.' The 'sensible leave deal' would be established via negotiations with the EU to establish the best or least worst offer they were prepared to put on the table. The decision on Labour's attitude to this in the referendum would be decided at a one day Labour Party conference in advance of the vote.

I think this makes sense, though I can understand the reaction of those who have been campaigning for the Labour to declare an unambiguous commitment to remain, since I have been with them all the way. For me, however, the big change is that Labour is now unambiguously committed to a second referendum on whatever proposal is made – including by itself. This is important because the only way to stop Brexit is by a second referendum, which is the only way of trumping the first referendum and the only way to get a second referendum is via a Labour Government.

When it came to the LP conference agenda there were three proposals on the order paper: The NEC statement; Composite 13, which argued for Labour stance in a future Labour organised in-out referendum to be decided now; and Composite 14; that was broadly in line with the NEC statement. The NEC statement and Composite 14 were agreed and Composite 13 was not.

It is not that the NEC statement and Composite 13 are entirely counterposed. In fact, they share a key demand regarding the need to have a credible leave option. The NEC statement puts it this way: 'A Labour Government would secure a sensible leave deal with the EU within three months, and within six months would put it before the people in a referendum alongside the option to remain', whilst Composite 13 puts it this way: 'The only way to resolve Brexit is through a confirmatory referendum with an option to remain in the EU, against a credible Leave Option, and calls upon the PLP (Parliamentary Labour Party) to propose or support any motion in Parliament for this.'

So, what is a 'credible leave option' all about? First because when it comes to the referendum having a defensible second question (to remain), negotiating the least bad option with the EU makes sense. It can be presented to Labour Lexiteers that this is the best on offer and we are putting it to the vote with a remain option. What are the alternatives to this: The May deal, which is already rejected, or a no deal Brexit which would be a disaster.

It is argued that if Labour negotiated a least-bad option deal it would be obliged to recommend a vote for it in a referendum, but this does not make sense. It has long been normal, in the unions, to negotiate the best deal possible and then decide whether to support it or oppose it in a vote of the members. A rejection in principle in advance of negotiations would mean that there would be no negotiations.

Smoke and mirrors

Johnson's core argument, around which he is bitterly dividing the country, is that there has been, and is, a conspiracy in Parliament to stop the Brexit vote being implemented. The reality, however, is that Cameron went into the 2016 referendum without the slightest idea as to what kind of Brexit he would propose if the vote went that way. So confident was he of winning a remain vote that it was not even an item of discussion in government. In fact, civil servants were banned from even discussing it.

Contrast this with the SNP's approach to the independence referendum in Scotland. They published a book well in advance of the vote setting out exactly what kind of independent Scotland they were looking for. Apart from the arrogance of expecting to win, there was a very good rationale behind Cameron's stance, namely that the Tory party was fundamentally divided on the issue and as soon as they discussed specifics they would split.

It was the same with the Brexiteers. They ran a massively funded campaign but they never had a manifesto other than the cynical and dishonest slogan painted on the side of a bus, saying 'we send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead'. [6]

Cameron promptly resigned when the vote came through and Theresa May continued with the same subterfuge. 'We have a perfectly good plan for Brexit but we can't disclose it because the EU would find out and it would undermine our negotiating stance'. How ludicrous can you get? The idea that you can get a better deal out of the EU by ambushing them than by openly discussing with them is clearly a farce. Remarkably this approach is still being trotted out, without blushing, three weeks before the 31 October deadline.

Today we are being told by Johnson that negotiations are going on when the EU insists that they are not. We are being told that Britain has a plan to put to the EU at its summit on 16 and 17 October – 'but we can't say what it is because the EU would find out!'

In fact, there has been no such conspiracy. Many MPs continued to oppose Brexit and they have every right to do so. But what united a majority of MPs against the government was that it became increasingly clear that Brexit could not be implemented without a level of damage and destruction that had not been foreseen when the referendum took place.

One of the most important facets of this is in Ireland, where the North-South border would become the external border of the EU itself with the requirement to reintroduce a hard border between the two jurisdictions. This border will now be introduced if Britain crashes out on 31 October. Leaks on 30 September suggested that 'a string of customs posts perhaps five to 10 miles away from the frontier' had been floated by the UK. This was subsequently denied by Johnson in a BBC interview on 1 October, but he clearly accepted that the concept of having more checks will be part of the proposal he puts to Brussels. [7]

Meanwhile, we may have not yet seen the highpoint of the constitutional crisis. Johnson continues to insist that he will both obey the law, in the shape of the Benn Act and take Britain out of the EU without a deal on 31 October – which is a seemingly impossible conundrum. There is much speculation that he has found a way to circumvent the law but will not reveal it. More likely he will simply defy the law and challenge anyone to stop him – which might see the issue back in the Supreme Court with the opposition parties once again taking control of the Parliamentary agenda. It is impossible to predict the future – and no one could have foreseen where British politics would be today – but spelling out the political forces at work is essential in having any chance of defeating the deeply reactionary trajectory which Johnson is spearheading.

PS:

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[1] Wikipedia "[2019 Conservative Party leadership election](#)"; *The Independent*, 5 September 201, "[Boris Johnson lost his voice, then his backdrop collapsed. Next comes the P45, and this one won't be from a prankster](#)".

[2] BBC News, 3 September, 2019 "[Brexit: What does the no-deal bill say?](#)".

[3] *The Guardian*, 9 September 2019, "[Boris Johnson to prorogue parliament on Monday night](#)"; BBC News, 24 September 2019, "[Supreme Court: Suspending Parliament was unlawful, judges rule](#)".

[4] *The Guardian*, 26 September 2019 "[Boris Johnson's brutish parliamentary performance defied all democratic dignity](#)".

[5] Labour List "[Policies announced and motions passed at Labour conference 2019](#)".

[6] *The Independent*, 4 July 2017, "[Brexit: Vote Leave chief who created Â£350m NHS claim on bus admits leaving EU could be an error](#)".

[7] BBC News, 1 October 2019, "[Boris Johnson: Irish customs checks will be 'reality' after Brexit](#)".