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Britain

Must Labour move right to secure its working-class base?

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In the wake of the Tory electoral victory, attempts to draw lessons are awash with lies and half-truths, as both the hard-right commentariat and the Blairite right try to crush the Labour left (here). [1]

Much of this debate revolves around a simplistic caricature - that the ultra-left London-centric forces of Corbynism 'abandoned' the working class in its northern and Midlands strongholds - and Labour paid the price in terms of defections to the Tories.

As the inimitable Tony Parsons put it in the *Sun*, there were just not enough 'avocado-munching Marxists' to get Labour over the victory line, although, since 10.5 million people voted Labour, we can assume that Mexican agribusiness has a profitable future. [2]

The same argument is repeated over and over. On 23 December, Wigan MP Lisa Nandy, at the behest of ITN, went walkabout in Ashfield to ask people why they abandoned Labour:

In a coffee shop, Ms Nandy meets Ken Taylor, a former miner himself. Mr Taylor is scathing about the Tories: 'I don't like Conservatives, never have liked Conservatives ... but I voted Conservative.' Mr Taylor also feels Labour has become all about what Londoners think and what students think, not about what northern, working-class voters think.

Talking to me in the pub afterwards, Lisa Nandy says all this is heartbreaking. She believes she can stitch Labour's traditional wings - often described as the workers and the intellectuals - back together. [3]

The Full Brexit

Chris Bickerton, a founder member of The Full Brexit [4], argues in more sophisticated vein:

Ideologically, Corbynism was a break from New Labour centrism, but sociologically, it was more Blairite than Tony Blair. As the Labour MP Jon Cruddas has argued, the Corbyn revolution in the Labour Party has narrowed its social base even further, making it the party of young, middle-class southerners, popular in London and some prosperous university towns. [5]

There is a consensus emerging in the Labour right and their media allies - Labour must move right to address again its 'traditional' base in its alleged heartlands. But this begs a number of crucial questions that need to be answered before we can make sense of the argument that the working class abandoned Labour:

- ▶ What is the working class today, and where does Labour find natural bases of support?
- ▶ What sections of working-class voters abandoned Labour for the Tories?
- ▶ What role did nationalism and racism play in the Leave referendum victory and the Tory 2019 election success?

- ▶ Is the working class socially conservative, or are parts of it sympathetic to conservative views on immigration and nationalism?
- ▶ And what conclusions should Labour activists draw about the political direction in which the party should go?

What is the working class today?

Simplistic arguments that 'the working class abandoned Labour' necessarily involve archaic definitions of the working class - stereotypes which envision a class mainly involved in manual labour, mainly white, and mainly permanently employed. But the working class has not been like this for 40 years. The reality, as Claire Ainsley explains, is very different:

The occupations of heavy industry, which formed the bedrock of the British working class for a century, have given way to a multitude of jobs in today's economy. Four in five jobs are now in the service sector. Many of those jobs do not pay enough for people to make a decent standard of living and meet their rising costs. And the people being employed to do them are different, too.

This new working class is made up of people living on low to middle incomes, employed as cleaners, shop workers, bar tenders, teaching assistants, cooks, carers, and so on. It is multi-ethnic and much more diverse than the traditional working class. It makes up nearly half the population. Despite significant social and economic progress in the last 40 years, it turns out that we didn't all become middle class. In fact, as wages and living standards continue to be constrained, it is entirely possible that this new working class will become yet more sizeable. [6]

As is well known, the decline of manufacturing industry has made things much more difficult for trade unions. Historic defeats like the 1980s miners' strike have combined with huge economic changes to undermine mass trade unionism.

While the habits of working-class solidarity may have declined, young people in the 'new' working class, concentrated especially in the big cities, are much more likely to have progressive social attitudes on multiculturalism and questions of gender and sexuality - reflecting age, gender, and ethnic diversity. They are probably much more likely to be sceptical of nationalism and its close cousin 'patriotism'. And much more likely to oppose militarism and war.

Though this might seem like ABC, we were told in Bury Momentum (in Greater Manchester), in all seriousness, that the majority in constituencies like Islington North and Hackney - which voted massively for Remain in the 2016 referendum - are 'middle class'. This is a laughable absurdity. As Kimberly McIntosh puts it:

Areas such as Hackney, Tower Hamlets, and Islington, which are also 'Labour heartlands', have some of the highest child poverty rates in the country. If 50% of children in your local authority living in poverty doesn't count as being 'left-behind', then what does? [7]

Most inner-city areas where the 'new' working class is especially preponderant did not abandon Labour in the 2019 election.

Which sections of the working class abandoned Labour, and why?

Evidently, the voters who shifted from Labour to the Tories in December 2019 were mainly older people, mainly white, and mainly concentrated in 'left behind' towns in the North and Midlands - and, of course, many of these places voted heavily for Leave in the 2016.

Because younger people often move away from these towns, many have more over 65s than 18-25-year olds. There are just 5.5 million 18-24 year olds in the UK, and less than half voted. By contrast, there are 11.8 million over-65s and 74% of them voted. The Tory victory was delivered by pensioners.

Only 17% of over-65s voted Labour, and this in the age group most dependent on the NHS, Labour's key campaign issue. Many pollsters found people saying hostility to Jeremy Corbyn was more important than Brexit in their decision to vote Tory. But it comes down to this: a section of older white workers in 'left behind' towns were won over by the reactionary barrage against Corbyn - his alleged over-concern for foreigners, his not being 'patriotic', his 'sympathy for terrorists', his refusal to push the nuclear button, and so on. And this supposedly reflects the concerns of students and Londoners.

In fact, the north/south or manual/white-collar divisions in the working class did not precisely align with voting Conservative. The three most radical working-class cities in Britain - Liverpool, London, and Glasgow - voted massively against the Tories. In Glasgow, this vote went mainly to the SNP, because of Labour's Neanderthal inability to move on the Scottish national question.

Lexiters argue that the Leave vote represented people's anger at the 'elite' ignoring them when they have been mired in poverty for decades - and their desire to strike back against the establishment. All this is probably true, but it does not explain why their rebellion took the form of voting Leave and Tory - and being won over by the reactionary media anti-Corbyn mega-blitz.

The explanation is that the tradition of working-class solidarity have been declining in many 'left behind' areas for decades, that 13 years of New Labour government did nothing to address fundamental concerns, and that deep wells of racism and xenophobia already existed in the British middle class and sections of the working class, reserves that could be drawn upon in the reactionary blitz of both the 2016 referendum and the 2019 general election. Already, in the 2009 Euro elections, when UKIP won 17% of the vote, the potential was clear. [8]

These obvious facts are resisted by many on the Lexit Left, who recoil at any attempt to put the terms 'racism' and 'working class' in the same sentence.

In the past decade, many on the Left have exaggerated the acceptance of multiculturalism and predicted an irreversible decline of racism. In 2013, social theorist Sunny Hundal wrote in *The Guardian*:

It's official: 45 years after Enoch Powell made his 'rivers of blood' speech, the fearmongers have lost the war, while those who think Britain is stronger with a multiracial and multicultural identity have won.

Don't believe me? The former Tory chairman Lord Ashcroft did a representative survey of British ethnic-minority voters last week, and found that 90% think we have become a multicultural country, and a similar proportion say this is a good thing. A broader national survey found that 90% of all Britons also agreed Britain had become a multicultural country, and 70% were in favour of this development ... the continuous war waged by the right-wing

press against multiculturalism has utterly failed. [9]

Hundal had hit on definite trends, especially among the young, but overestimated how secure that acceptance of multiculturalism was. And note, even according to these figures, 30% of respondents - nearly all white, I suspect - did not think multiculturalism was a positive development.

The right-wing press and the political Right did not give up. Basing themselves on the racist minority, they fought back. The 30% of Ashcroft's respondents who did not welcome multiculturalism translates into about 40% of white people. A good base for starting the nationalist backlash that won the 2016 referendum for Leave.

Is the working class socially conservative?

The response to the election outcome from a wide spectrum inside and outside the Labour Party is to argue that Labour must now move rightwards to embrace 'the concerns' of its lost voters. This means stressing Labour's 'patriotism', and recognising that many of Labour's traditional base are 'socially conservative'.

As Kenan Malik points out, overall the trend in society has been for the victory of liberalism over social conservatism, including inside the working class:

... the key feature of Britain over the past half century has been not social conservatism but an extraordinary liberalisation. The annual British Social Attitudes survey, which began recording public attitudes in 1983, has tracked 'the onward march of social liberalism'. On a host of issues, from gender roles to gay marriage, from premarital sex to interracial relationships, Britain has liberalised to a degree that would have left the average Briton of the 1980s aghast. It's not just metropolitan liberals but society as a whole, including the working class, which has embraced this change. [10]

But the problem with this way of explaining things is trying to merge a series of social and political attitudes into a socially progressive/socially reactionary binary that obliterates the complexities of mixed consciousness. In the complexity of the real world, it is quite possible, for example, to have progressive views on gender roles, while being reactionary on issues of multiculturalism and immigration.

The central social issues on which the UKIP/Brexit Party/Tory Right have attempted to forge a bridgehead in the working class are those of multiculturalism, racism, nationality, and 'patriotism'.

When commentators argue for Labour to reposition itself politically to reconquer its alleged traditional heartlands, they mean moving on the issues of immigration and multiculturalism. They mean following the Tories to the right. In the Labour Party, this often takes the form of arguing in favour of 'patriotism'.

Former French President Charles de Gaulle once said that patriotism was when 'your own people' come first, while nationalism is when you hate 'all the others'. Even on this definition, patriotism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive. But in any case, the implication is that, if 'your own people' come first, then you at least discriminate against 'all the others'. There will be many people who deny being racists but think it is unfair that recent immigrants are 'ahead of them' in the queue at their local GP surgery.

But as Andy Stowe points out:

Anti-migrant views are the hallmark of racism all across Europe. They are now always expressed in terms of shortages of housing, hospital places, etc. Yielding to this way of thinking is one result of not understanding what political parties are for. Yes, they exist to win elections, but they also exist to change the way people think about things.

A Labour Party that doesn't frontally attack these racist ideas is one that will get dragged along behind them. Long-Bailey, or any future leader, who tries to wrap themselves in the Union Jack will always be running behind the Tories when it comes to jingoistic nationalism. It's a game socialist mustn't play, not just because it can't be won, but because it's fundamentally anti-working class. [11]

Triangulate or fight?

The December 2019 election showed a working class divided on key issues of nationalism, immigration, and the xenophobia currently undergoing rehabilitation as 'patriotism'. Militant socialists have to base themselves on the most advanced sections of the working class, and build out from there. Kow-towing to that section of the working class won over to fake arguments that caricature Corbyn and socialists as 'the liberal elite' will not get us anywhere. Against reactionary notions of patriotism, you have to conduct a political fight. Otherwise you end up surrendering ever more ground.

Labour's Brexit position got mangled because it tried to 'triangulate' between incompatible positions. It tried to unite the working class behind incompatible positions. Rebecca Long-Bailey adopting 'progressive patriotism' is a bad sign that this fundamentally bureaucratic attitude is still rife in the top layers of Corbynism.

There are very worrying signs that much of the Labour Left does not really understand what is being prepared by the party's Right. They want a top-to-bottom counter-revolution in the Labour Party. They want to drive out - bureaucratically or through demoralisation - hundreds of thousands of left-wingers. They will be aided by a renewed offensive on anti-Semitism, especially after the EHCR delivers its report on the Labour Party. The right-wing offensive can only be countered by fighting, not by capitulation and accommodation.

4 January 2020

Source [Mutiny](#).

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[1] Will Hutton, *The Guardian*, 29 December 2019, ['Neoliberal' is an unthinking leftist insult. All it does is stifle debate](#).

[2] *The Sun*, 15 December 2019 ["Labour got what they deserved for abandoning their traditional working class supporters"](#).

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[3] ITV News, 23 December 2019 ["Possible leadership contender Lisa Nandy asks former Labour voters why they backed the Tories"](#).

[4] A "network of activists, academics, journalists and policy experts committed to seizing the historic opportunity Brexit offers for restoring popular sovereignty, repairing democracy, and renewing our economy" [The Full Brexit](#).

[5] *The Guardian*, 19 December 2019 ["Labour's lost working-class voters have gone for good"](#).

[6] Labour List, 20 February 2019 ["To win power, Labour must understand the new working class"](#).

[7] *The Guardian*, 17 December 2019 ["Labour must remember that the 'Euro-traditional working class' includes minorities too"](#).

[8] Phil Hearse, *frontline14* ["Right-wing England - the social and political basis of UKIP"](#).

[9] *The Guardian*, 22 April 2013 [Multiculturalism has won the day. Let's move on](#).

[10] *The Guardian*, 22 December 2019 ["The idea that the British working class is socially conservative is a nonsense"](#).

[11] *Socialist Resistance* 30 December 2019 ["Actually, it is racist"](#).