

2019 General Election – what happened?

Hasty conclusions on the scale of Labour's general election defeat and preordained 'solutions' are worthless. Sweeping generalisations are being substituted for a careful examination of what happened. Talk of the loss of 'labour heartlands' and 'the north', for instance, ignores the fact that Labour heartlands such as Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds, Sunderland held onto its seats. Many of those lost were in smaller towns which had their economies devastated by Thatcherism, some of them having not much recovered since then. Fifteen of the seats lost were in Yorkshire and Durham, many ex-mining communities. We need a thorough-going analysis which will take time. Here are just a few initial observations after examining the results in some detail.

In stark numbers the General Election results saw Labour lose 2,582,011 votes and the Tories gain an extra 329,881 in the UK. The Libdems gained 1,324,558 and the Greens 340,032. The Brexit Party, standing for the first time, collected 644,257 votes. To say that these were Labour's worst results since 1935 is only partly true. It was the worst result since 1935 in terms of the number of seats won, but by no means so in terms of votes. The 10,295,912 Labour votes were higher than 2015 under Miliband (9,347,273 and 30.5%) and 2010 under Brown (8,609,527 and 29%). In the 1983 election Labour's vote was down to 27%. This is not to console ourselves but to reject exaggeration which has a political purpose which is to abandon everything associated with the Corbyn leadership in favour of 'moderation' and the 'centre ground'.

The lower number of seats won was accentuated by the First Past the Post system. The loss of so many in this election was in large part the result of the Brexit Party acting as an auxiliary of the Tory Party and withdrawing its candidates from the Tory seats where it might have split the vote and allowed Labour to win some more. It concentrated its fire on Labour and it was successful to a large degree. Farage worked for a Tory majority.

The 2.58 million votes Labour lost were split between the Tories, the Brexit Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. There has been some debate about the proportions of each. The statistics suggest that the move of ex-Labour voters to the Tories has been somewhat exaggerated. In the seats Labour lost to the Tories its vote declined by 280,000, an average of 5,177 per constituency. The increase in the Tory votes in these 54 seats was 95,000 compared to Brexit Party's 121,000 votes (the first time they stood) and an increase in the vote of the Libdems and Greens of 40,000 and 27,000 (see Table below) compared to 2017. In some areas abstentions were also a factor, up to a fall of 10% turnout. In 15 constituencies that Labour lost to the Tories the turnout was down 3% or more.

It appears that there was some movement of people who had voted Tory last time, for whom the prospect of Johnson remaining in Downing Street, was sufficient for them to vote Labour.

Look at the seats the Tories gained from Labour and we see this:

- In 18 seats the Brexit vote was greater than the Tory majority.
 - in 2 more the Brexit vote was close to the Tory majority.
 - In 8 seats the Libdem increase on 2017 was larger than the Tory majority.
 - The loss of Kensington by the margin of 150 votes was as a result of a big increase in the Liberal vote (ex-Tory Sam Gemiya).
 - In 5 seats the increase in the Green Party vote was more than the Tory majority.
- The Green Party stood in a number of seats that they did not stand in in 2017.¹

¹ Blaming the Greens for this is somewhat churlish considering that in some places their candidates stood down to try and improve Labour's chance of defeating the Tories, yet Labour could not even bring themselves to stand down to give Caroline Lucas a free run.

- The loss of the Stroud seat was largely as a result of the increase in the Green Party vote whose candidate was supported by the Libdems standing down.
- In only 13 of these seats was the increase in the Tory vote more than their majority
- In Ashfield the Tory vote *fell* by 1,613 though they still won owing to a heavy vote for an independent.
- In five of the seats that the Tories took from Labour their vote *fell*.

The electoral agreement between the Greens and the Libdems was also a factor, as exemplified by Stroud.

In the seats that Labour hung onto or gained (some of them were seats of MPs who had left the Party) they lost 916,000 compared to 2017. In 102 of the seats Labour won the Tory vote *fell*. Although there were some big swings to the Tories in some of these seats, overall the Tory vote marginally *fell* in them by 35,000. In six of the seats they took from Labour their vote increased by less than 500.

Alienating both sides of the polarisation

From the results it seems clear that Labour's position on Brexit was untenable. *It was the worst of both worlds insofar as it alienated people on both sides of the polarisation.* According to the Ashcroft poll the average fall of Labour's vote in Leave voting areas was 11% and in Remain areas 6%. However, from statistics it seems clear that Labour lost votes from both sides, *in all areas of the country*. Even in the seats that it retained or gained, its average vote fall was 4,448. The Libdems gained 276,000, the Greens 142,000 and the Brexit Party took 490,000 in these seats. Some of the Brexit Party votes may have come from ex-UKIP voters in 2017, though according to the Ashcroft poll most of those voted Tory. Clearly a significant number of Labour voters switched to Brexit.

Those keen to leave the EU undoubtedly viewed Labour's policy as designed to frustrate the referendum result. In Gove's expression, the choice offered in a new referendum would be to remain, or EU-lite (remaining in the customs union or aligned with the single market). Remainers, meanwhile were not enamoured at Labour offering an opportunity to leave in a new referendum nor in Corbyn declaring his neutrality as an 'honest broker'.

Those who argue, from opposite corners, that the problem was that Labour should have either supported Brexit or else become a 'Remain' party, miss the essential point. **We were faced with an irresolvable contradiction.** If Labour had declared itself to be in favour of stopping Brexit and remaining in the EU, then the vote in leave areas would have been even worse. If they had accepted Brexit and not supported another referendum then even more 'remainers' would have refused to vote for Labour. You can argue until the cows come home what the 'correct' position should have been, but nothing could have resolved this contradiction.

In the areas of the so-called 'red wall', a misleading title if ever there was one², many people clung with determination to their desire to leave the EU, *whatever the consequences*. Sections of the population that have long held 'Westminster' in contempt, had a rare taste of their potential power. They had stuck one over on Westminster and *they were not going to have that victory taken away from them*. This was the foundation of the collapse of the Labour vote in some areas *where the old industrial working class no longer really exists*. In many of these areas the industrial base was decimated during the early 1980s when Thatcher executed her catastrophic monetarist policy. Many of them have been impoverished and the jobs that have been introduced are low paid and

² Over the past 50 years towns and cities which are generally regarded as Labour strongholds, have in fact changed political hands on a number of occasions. Rochdale, for instance, used to have Cyril Smith as its Liberal MP. In 1968 Liverpool had 79 conservative councillors, 34 Labour and one Liberal.

exploitative. A generation was demoralised.

This doesn't, of course, mean that in these areas there were not people who voted to stay in the EU. For instance, in Normanton and Pontyfract the Libdem vote increased by nearly 2,500, in Stockport by more than 3,000, in Leeds NE by 3,713, in Durham by more than 3,000, in Coventry South by 2,655, by nearly 2,500 in Bradford East.

The emotional spasm of some people on the left who have abused these people with labels like morons and so on, is an expression of their immaturity. *Once you blame the punters you are lost.* You cannot make people vote the way you want to by a voluntarist effort. The consciousness of different sectors of the population is the product of social and economic developments over many decades. The atomisation of the working class from the 1980s has denuded the very organisations on which their collective outlook and historical memory was based.

The Corbyn factor

The problem of Corbyn on the doorstep was real enough, though many of those who say it was the main reason for Labour's defeat don't go on to ask the question why was he so 'unpopular'? They are happy to scapegoat him for a collective failure. Was it all his fault? This was the same Leader under whom Labour secured an extra 3.5 million votes in 2017.

One Labour candidate in Swindon divided the reasons for his unpopularity, as expressed on the doorstep, into two categories. Those who repeated the slanders of the media, and those who did not trust Corbyn over policies, or could not see how the programme would all be funded. There were certainly issues in relation to the campaign, the manifesto and its presentation. Policies were unleashed late in the day like rabbits from a hat. There is a legitimate debate to be had on these things. For all the talk of radicalism it was a very conventional campaign. Vote for us and on average you will be x amount better off was an appeal to self-interest. This was not the 'new politics' spoken of.

Those who blame the 'remainers' identify the only difference between 2017 and 2019 as the change of policy in relation to Brexit, from accepting the outcome of the referendum, to supporting a second referendum. This was undoubtedly a big factor. However, another major reason for Corbyn's poor reception was the unceasing campaign of the media against him and the collaboration of sections of the Parliamentary Labour Party with it. Although the major media have always been hostile to Labour and its leaders (except Blair who they supported because of his neo-liberal programme) in the case of Corbyn we have had an unprecedented and unrelenting witch-hunt against him. The man who was supposed to be the deputy leader of the Party was always quick to find himself a spot on TV to attack Corbyn, and at various points to argue for his own policy, something he had no mandate for it.

Symptomatic of the rage against the membership for having the audacity to elect Corbyn was the case of MP Angela Eagle claiming, erroneously, that Corbyn supporters had thrown a brick through her Labour Party office window. Call off the dogs she said. This was picked up by the Tory media to paint a picture of thuggish supporters. The fact that there was no brick through a Labour Party window was of no consequence and Angela Eagle never apologised for her slander. Likewise Watson never bothered providing any evidence of "anti-semitic thugs" in the Party. Even when faced with the absurd suggestion by three Jewish publications that a Corbyn government would represent an "existential threat to Jews" Watson and co did not even venture to suggest that this was exaggerated. The campaign to stop Corbyn getting into Downing Street was supported by the Labour Party affiliate the Jewish Labour Movement. Stop Corbyn even if it means a Tory government was their policy. It was, of course, constitutionally beyond the pale for an affiliate to oppose the election of a Labour government, yet nothing was done. When the RMT some years back supported another political party, the Scottish Socialist Party, it was deemed to have

excluded itself. Yet the JLM has not been excluded even though it opposed the election of a Labour government. This is unprecedented for a Labour affiliate.

From the very first day after he was elected sections of the PLP publicly predicted Labour could not win with Corbyn as leader and it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The majority of the PLP never accepted the decision of the membership even though they voted in Corbyn twice. Fundamentally there was a gulf between the aspirations and views of the membership and the majority of the PLP, rooted in its New Labour past.

Understanding the reasons for the electoral loss require a longer term perspective which will be the subject of a further article. Suffice it to say here that the election of Corbyn was a necessary step in attempting to break the Labour Party from the politics and philosophy of New Labour. The result of the 2015 general election showed that a slightly reworked version of New Labour was not a galvanising force.

A constructive critique of the leadership, including Corbyn, is necessary. I will examine that in a separate article. However, any debate on what is the purpose of the Labour Party and what governmental programme it should adopt has to be placed in the context of the global economic and environmental crisis. The global crash of 2008-9 was proof that New Labour's neo-liberalism was politically bankrupt because it supported the system which brought us the global crash and exacerbated the environmental crisis. Electoral strategy alone cannot open the way to an election victory. The task we face is not fashioning some strategy which will be 'acceptable' to a majority (don't frighten the horses), but developing a strategy which serves the needs of the majority and convinces sufficient people of what is necessary. A return to social democratic tinkering will do nothing to build such a majority.

One final point in relation to New Labour and any nostalgia for those great days. One of New Labour's historic achievements was the unprecedented decline in the turnout at the 2001 GE, just four years after its initial success. There was a 12% fall compared to 1997, to 59.4%. The scale of this fall is given context when you consider that in the previous 21 general elections the turnout was always above 70%. It was the first four years of the New Labour government which saw the disaffection of Labour supporters and this was even before the Gulf War. One of the great weaknesses of the Corbyn movement was the failure to make a thorough accounting for the politics of New Labour and its support for the status quo of globalisation which created the conditions for the global crash not long after Gordon Brown announced to the City of London that "we are at the beginning of a new Golden Age". Blair famously said that the founding of the Labour Party was an 'historic mistake' which 'split the Liberals'. His remedy was to turn it into a neo-liberal party. The working class base of support was abandoned. The economic and social decay of the old industrial areas was never addressed because New Labour's leaders believed that the decline of manufacturing and heavy industry did not matter. The 'knowledge economy' and the financial wizards of the City would turn the UK into a world-beater. The debate on Labour's future has to take account of the collapse of this perspective. It was a critical factor in Labour's decline.

Martin Wicks

Constituency	Tory majority	Labour + or -	Con + or -	Brexit	Greens + or -	Lds + or -	Turnout
Ashfield	5733	-9314	-1613	2501	276	136	-1.40%
Barrow	5789	-4505	1493	1335	328	747	-2.90%
Bassetlaw	14013	-13402	5463	5366		1182	-3.00%
Birmingham Northfield	1640	-5279	1028	1655	90	1004	-2.80%
Bishop Auckland	7962	-4703	761	2500		957	1.80%
Blackpool South	3690	-5004	1189	2009	222	374	-3.00%
Blyth Valley	712	-7042	1585	3394	228	204	-3.60%
Bolsover	5299	-7661	2926	4151	758	387	-2.20%
Bolton NE	378	-3489	2926	1880	332	531	-2.50%
Bridgend	1157	-4877	980	1811	815	1449	-2.80%
Burnley	1352	-4464	3241	3362	278	-2545	-1.70%
Bury North	5	-4128	352	1240	802	672	-2.80%
Bury South	402	-5533	834	1672	848	1250	-3.30%
Colne Valley	5107	-4439	1579	3815	176	1321	0.80%
Clw yd South	1239	-4019	1576	1468		765	-2.40%
Crew e	8508	-5732	3124	1390	975	1284	-2.50%
Darlington	3294	-4994	1500	1544	533	1066	-2.00%
Delyn	865	-4782	423	1971		1315	-2.50%
Derby North	2460	-4903	-348	1908	1046	1188	-5.40%
Dew sbury	1561	-4194	686	1874	36	1192	-0.10%
Don Valley	3640	-8372	427	6247	872	1051	-1.90%
Dudley North	11533	-6489	5067		499	970	-3.50%
Durham NW	1144	-6462	3474	3193	643	-567	-0.60%
Gedling	679	-4794	579	1820	582	1227	-2.60%
Great Grismby	7331	-6726	3170	2378	514	116	-3.80%
Heyw ood & Middleton	663	-6788	1492	3952	1220	986	-3.20%
High Peak	590	-2499	413	1177	1148	51	-0.70%
Hyndburn	2951	-6506	2260	2156	845	402	-3.20%
Ipsw ich	5479	-4751	1299	1432	443	1245	-1.80%
Keighley	2218	-986	1481	850		1347	-0.10%
Kensington	150	279	455	384	384	4588	3.90%
Leigh	1965	-7046	4473	3161		1301	-0.80%
Lincoln	3514	-2580	2472	1079	612	958	-1.10%
New castle Under Lyme	7446	-5085	2391	1921	933	737	-1.20%
Peniston & Stocksbridge	7210	-6329	2203	4300	3012		0.00%
Peterborough	2580	-3196	-9	2127	728	837	-0.90%
Redcar	3527	-8339	4673	2915	491	-831	-1.70%
Rother Valley	6318	-8169	2041	6264	350	1398	-0.70%
Scunthorpe	6451	-7061	2821	2044	670	321	-4.40%
Sedgefield	4513	-7106	3466	3519	308	1158	-0.50%
Stockton South	5260	-3598	2550	2196		1437	0.10%
Stoke on Trent Central	670	-3196	1371	1691	431	436	-0.40%
Stoke on Trent North	6286	-6584	1061	2374	-177	352	-10.80%
Stroud	3840	-2252	2275	1085	3541		-1.00%
Vale of Clew yd	1827	-3800	226	1477		805	-2.30%
Wakefield	3358	-5062	472	2725		829	-1.60%
Warrington South	2010	-3817	742	1635		1393	-0.40%
West Bromw ich East	1593	-7453	1853	1475	94	688	-3.30%
West Bromw ich West	3799	-5169	3090	1841	341	582	-1.40%
Wolverhampton NE	4080	-5640	3027	1354	121	390	-4.60%
Wolverhampton SW	1661	-2696	1150	1028		1257	-3.10%
Workington	4176	-5080	3096	1749	596	398	-1.40%
Wrexham	2131	-1954	-122	1222	445	582	-2.90%
Ynys Mon	1968	-2684	643	2184		-479	-0.20%
		-280454	95787	121801	27389	40444	
54		Average	Average	Average	Average	Average	
Increase/decrease		-5177	1780	2224	652	778	

2019 election	2019	2017	+ or -	Turnout	Seats 2019	Seats 2017
				-1.50%		
UK						
Con	13,966,565	13,636,684	329,881		365	318
Labour	10,295,607	12,877,918	-2,582,311		203	262
Libdem	3,696,423	2,371,861	1,324,558		11	12
Green	865,697	525,665	340,032		1	1
Brexit	644,257				0	
UKIP	22,817	594,068	-571,251		0	
SNP	1,242,380	977,568	264,812		48	35
Others					22	
Scotland				1.60%		
SNP	1,242,380	977,569	264,811		48	35
Con	692,939	757,949	-65,010		6	13
Labour	511,838	717,007	-205,169		1	7
Libdem	263,417	179,061	84,356		4	4
England				-1.70%		
Con	12,710,845	12,379,200	331,645		345	297
Labour	9,152,034	11,390,099	-2,238,065		180	227
Libdem	3,340,831	2,121,810	1,219,021		7	8
Green	819,761	506,969	312,792		1	1
Brexit	547,106					
UKIP		557,390				
Wales				-2.00%		
Labour	632,035	771,354	-139,319		22	28
Con	557,234	528,839	28,395		14	8
Plaid	153,265	164,466	-11,201		4	4
Libdems	92,171	71,039	21,132		0	0
Brexit	83,908					
UKIP		31,376				
Green	15,828	5,128	10,700			
Northern Ireland				-3.60%		
DUP	244,127	292,316	-48,189		8	10
Sin Fein	181,853	238,915	-57,062		7	7
SDLP	118,737	95,419	23,318		2	0
Alliance	134,115	64,553	69,562		1	0
UUP	93,123	83,280	9,843		0	0