European election debacle for Conservatives and Labour

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The ruling Conservatives have suffered their worst ever election result, while Labour suffered a debacle almost as bad.

Coming fifth nationwide with just 9 percent of the vote and taking just three seats, the Tories were eviscerated, suffering the largest ever loss since the party was founded in 1834. Their previous worst national performance was in the 2014 European election when they received just 24 percent, more than double that just recorded.

The result comes amid an ongoing leadership election contest, following the announcement that Prime Minister Theresa May will resign on June 7. It will be seized on by frontrunners to demand a harder anti-European Union (EU) line including threatening a "no deal" exit.

The UK vote in its entirety was refracted through a pro- and anti-Brexit prism.

Tory party supporters deserted *en masse* to Nigel Farage's recently formed Brexit Party.

The far-right Brexit Party won the election outright, taking 32 percent of the vote and winning 29 of the 73 seats available. It came first in every region in England—North East, North West, East of England, Wales, West Midlands, East Midlands, Yorkshire & Humber, the South West and South East—failing to win only in London.

It sucked up almost all the pro-Brexit vote, including from Farage's previous vehicle—the UK Independence Party—which won the 2014 European elections. UKIP lost all 24 of its seats, taking just 3 percent of the vote.

The pro-EU Liberal Democrats, who campaigned as the only major party calling for revoking the Article 50 legislation governing the UK's exit, came in second with just over 20 percent of the vote (up from 13.4 percent)—at Labour's expense.

Seen as the most consistent Remain party, the Lib Dems were able to go from their worst ever European election result in 2014, where they took just one seat, to their best result (16 seats).

The pro-Remain Greens came fourth, with 12.1 percent (up 4.2 percent) and seven seats. Change UK, recently formed by eight Blairite Labour right-wingers and three Tories who defected from their parties in February, recorded a meagre 3.4 percent of the vote, not enough to win any seats.

Every attempt to tabulate the vote shows a deeply divided country on the issue of Brexit, as it was in 2016. A tally of those parties standing on a pro-Remain ticket—Liberal Democrats, Change UK, the Greens and Plaid Cymru—equated to approximately 38 percent of the vote. The two parties supporting Brexit, and specifically leaving the EU without a deal in place—the Brexit Party and UKIP—won 37 percent.

Labour saw a collapse in its vote to just 14.1 percent (down 11.3 percent), with both pro-Remain and Leave parties taking votes.

According to the *Financial Times,* "Labour's change in vote share against the results of the 2016 EU referendum shows that the party performed worst in areas at either end of the Brexit spectrum.

"Labour's vote share fell by an average of 15 percentage points in parts of Britain that had returned the highest Remain support in the referendum. But the party's vote share fell by 11 points—the second greatest margin—in areas that had most strongly backed Leave in the referendum."

In Wales, where Labour has won every national vote bar one for a century, it came third with just 15.3 percent of the vote, behind the Brexit Party and the pro-Remain Plaid Cymru. Wales voted narrowly to leave the EU.

In Scotland, Labour no longer has any MEPS, suffering its worst election result since 1910. Labour lost heavily, coming fifth with less than 10 percent of the vote, behind the Greens, Lib Dems and Brexit Party. The Remain-supporting parties won nearly 62 percent of the vote, with the pro-Remain ruling Scottish National Party winning on 38 percent.

In the North West of England, a Labour heartland that voted Leave in the 2016 referendum, Labour won 21 percent. The Brexit Party and UKIP took 34 percent of the vote. The pro-Remain parties—Lib Dems, Greens and Change UK—took around 32 percent of the vote.

In Manchester, Labour won 37 percent of the vote, while the Brexit Party (13.9 percent) and UKIP (2.4 percent) won a combined vote of just over 16 percent. Overall, the three openly pro-Remain parties won over 40 percent of the vote in the city which voted Remain in 2016.

In the UK's second largest city, Birmingham, Labour won with 35 percent of the vote (77,551). This was around 25,000 votes more than the Brexit Party at 24 percent (52,953 votes). The pro-Remain parties took a larger share of the vote than pro-Brexit parties. In 2016, Birmingham voted Leave narrowly by a margin of just 3,400 votes.

Pro-Remain parties also won more votes than the Leave parties in Sheffield, South Yorkshire (which voted narrowly to leave in 2016) and in Leeds, West Yorkshire, which narrowly voted Remain. As in so many places, the split Remain vote in Leeds meant that the Brexit Party still won, with Labour coming second.

Under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, Labour voted at its last conference to respect the Brexit vote, while seeking an alternative to the deal put forward by May ensuring tariff-free access to the Single European Market. But, in a policy described as "constructive ambiguity," failure to achieve this would lead first to a demand for a general election so that Labour could fight for its alternative Brexit or, failing this, other options, including a possible second confirmatory referendum on any deal, might come into play.

Following the election, the Blairites have upped the ante, declaring that Labour's vote collapse proves that Corbyn's declared aim to represent both the Remain and Leave vote has failed. Labour must now not only unconditionally endorse a second referendum, but also campaign to remain in the EU, they insist.

Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry declared even before the votes were counted, "We should have said quite simply that any deal that comes out of this government should be put to a confirmatory referendum, and that Remain should be on the ballot paper, and that Labour would campaign to remain."

On Monday, Blairite peer Andrew Adonis wrote in the *Guardian*, "The time has come to make a second referendum our clear and settled policy, and for Labour to declare that it will lead the remain campaign."

Corbyn's closest ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, immediately acceded to the first demand, tweeting Monday, "We must unite our party & country by taking issue back to people in a public vote."

He told the BBC, "We want a general election, but realistically after last night there aren't many Tory MPs that are going to vote for a general election. It would be like turkeys voting for Christmas."

Corbyn stated that he was "listening very carefully" to both sides. The party's preference was still general election but any Brexit deal "has to be put to a public vote."

Corbyn's failure to unite workers across the Brexit divide is not because this was a doomed venture. His real goal was not to secure class unity, but to maintain "national unity" in the interests of British imperialism. Despite his occasional rhetoric regarding the social crisis facing the working class, he offered no socialist alternative capable of unifying the working class against the entire ruling elite, however it is divided over Brexit.

Corbyn faced all ways at once. He could never take a stand against the nationalist sentiment whipped up by the Brexit wing of the bourgeoisie, because he shares much of their nationalist agenda—not only the view that the immigration associated with free movement of labour is a problem that must be curbed but the glorification of "parliamentary sovereignty" as the guarantor of social progress. He could never oppose the Remain wing's apologetics for the EU and its pro-austerity, pro-business agenda. His line was dictated by the dominant view of the City of London, which never wanted Brexit and insisted that, if it could not be prevented, then the UK must maintain access to strategic European markets at all costs.

Based on exploiting the sympathy he enjoyed among workers, Corbyn tried to assume the pose of national saviour—and ended up a national joke instead. In the run-up to the EU elections, he spent six weeks ensconced in talks with May hopelessly trying to secure a Brexit agreement that would pass in parliament while clinging onto the stinking semi-corpse of the Tory Party.

It is thanks to Corbyn that the Tories are still in government and busy electing a new leader. It is he who bears responsibility for continued divisions over Brexit that can only be overcome based upon a perspective for uniting British workers with their European brothers and sisters in a continent-wide struggle for socialism.