

UK general election result confirms protracted death of the Labour Party

Chris Marsden
19 December 2019

Analysts have pored over the results of Britain's December 12 general election to account for the victory of Boris Johnson's Conservative Party and the massive losses sustained by Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party.

About 32 million votes were cast, with a turnout of 67.3 percent—a 1.5 percent fall on the 2017 general election. The Tories won 365 seats and 45 percent of the vote, or 13.9 million. Labour won just 203 seats, losing 60 with a 32.2 percent share, or 10.3 million votes. This is Labour's lowest MP total since 1935.

All analysts identify the one extraordinary feature of the election—the fact that Johnson was able to capture a swathe of traditional Labour seats in the north of England, the West Midlands and Wales marking the collapse of Labour's "Red Wall."

This northern collapse was the most extraordinary single event of the election. In the north-east, north-west and Yorkshire and Humber, 26 seats switched from Labour to Conservative—many associated closely with mining. Labour lost at least nine seats it had had held without interruption since the Second World War, as well as Bolsover, held for 49 years by the octogenarian Dennis Skinner.

The higher the share of Leave voters in the 2016 referendum on European Union membership, the greater the Tory gain—rising from a two-point swing in seats with a Leave vote below 45 percent to an eight-point swing in seats where 60 percent plus voted Leave. This left Tory Brexiteer Michael Gove to boast that the Durham Miners' Gala and the Notting Hill Carnival would now both take place in Tory-held constituencies.

Its first loss was in Blyth Valley, where the Tories last held power in 1935. Pro-Leave seats lost include Don Valley (Labour since 1922), Redcar (never Tory), Rother Valley (Labour since 1918), Stoke-on-Trent Central and Stoke-on-Trent North (both held since 1935), Leigh in Greater Manchester (Labour since 1922), Bassetlaw, Bishop Auckland (never Tory in its 134 year history), Great Grimsby, Workington, Darlington, and Sedgefield in County Durham, Tony Blair's former constituency and Labour since 1931.

In London, Labour held its ground by securing its sole gain from the Tories in Putney, but losing Kensington, where Grenfell Tower is located. In Wales, Labour still dominates but lost six seats—all to the Conservatives. In Scotland, Labour lost six of its seven remaining seats and won just 18.5 percent of the vote. The Scottish Conservatives lost more than half the seats they gained in 2017, leaving the Scottish National Party with 48 out of 59 seats.

The central fact, however, is that Labour haemorrhaged support across the UK and among all sections of workers, young and old, from the north and south, those in favour of leaving the European Union and for remaining.

According to some analysts, the Tories beat Labour in every social grade, including the working-class grades C2 skilled manual workers (50 percent to Labour's 30 percent) and DE semi-skilled, unskilled and unemployed labour (43 percent to Labour's 37 percent). In 2017, Labour had a majority in the DE category (46 percent to the Tories' 34 percent)

and was equal to the Tories in taking the same as the Conservatives in the C1 category of supervisory, clerical & junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations (both 41 percent). One exit poll still gives Labour a meagre three point lead over the Tories in the DE category.

This rout can only be understood as a negative verdict on Corbyn's declared project of pushing the Labour Party "to the left" so that it could provide a political alternative to austerity, militarism and war. This revealed a deep alienation of the working class from Labour that has been decades in the making.

Corbyn was advanced by Britain's pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy as proof that the rightward lurch of the Labour Party, beginning in the 1970s, encompassing Neil Kinnock's betrayal of the miners' strike of 1984-85 and culminating in the New Labour government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown could be reversed.

Corbyn promised an end to austerity, Thatcherite free-market nostrums and war crimes such as Iraq in 2003. The enthusiasm generated saw Labour claw back in the 2017 election some of the 5 million votes lost under Blair and Brown between 1997 and 2010. But this recovery has collapsed, amid growing disenchantment among those who backed Corbyn and abstention and a shift to other parties by workers who see no reason whatsoever to remain loyal to Labour.

Labour lost fully eight points nationally and over 10 percent in Leave areas. This means that one in four Labour Leavers, 700,000, switched to the Tories, but hundreds of thousands more did not vote at all.

Lord Ashcroft, a former deputy chairman of the Tory Party, surveyed over 13,000 people on the day of the election who had already voted. He found:

- Labour won more than half the vote among 18-24 year-olds (57 percent) and 25-34 (55 percent), but the Tories were ahead among those aged 45-54 (43 percent), 55-64 (49 percent) and 65+ (62 percent).
- The Conservatives won among all socio-economic groups by margins of between 6 points (DEs) and 20 points (C2s).
- Labour lost 9 percent of its vote to the Tories, 7 percent to the Liberal Democrats, 2 percent to the Greens and 1 percent to the Brexit Party.

The most striking loss of all is the fall in Labour's share of the national youth vote by 10 percent, matching the losses suffered in northern constituencies. Labour's total of 57 percent of 18-24 year-olds compares with the 67 percent who backed Corbyn in 2017. Labour lost most ground to the Liberal Democrats (who almost doubled their youth vote to 12 percent) and the Greens.

Dr Stuart Fox, lecturer in Social and Political Sciences at Brunel University, noted that voter registrations among the under-35s had surged by 2.8 million between October and December this year, but many did not vote. At 67 percent, overall turnout fell by almost two-points on 2017 and abstention was highest among young voters. In the 20 constituencies with the highest proportion of 18-35 year-olds, average turnout was 63 percent, compared with 72 percent for the 20 constituencies with the fewest 18-35

year olds.

Datapraxis also stressed that Labour nationally lost 1.1 million votes to the Tories, but lost more still, 1.3 million, to the Lib Dems and Greens. Nearly half of Labour's seat losses can be attributed to losing Remain voters to other parties.

To paraphrase the old saw there are statistics, damned statistics and lies. The emphasis placed on these extraordinary shifts and the conclusions drawn in official circles are bound up with efforts to use Labour's collapse to steer British politics ever further to the right.

The Tories coined the term "Workington Man," after the former mining town, to represent the older, Brexit supporting white voter from the north. The brainchild of the Onward thinktank, it is now commonly used to supposedly epitomise the working-class constituency lost by Labour because Corbyn was "too left wing," and did not oppose immigration and champion law and order with sufficient enthusiasm.

This slanderous caricature is now being adopted by a broad swathe of Labour's purely notional left and right-wings, backed up by saturation media coverage. The New York Times is only one example of the newspapers who despatched reporters to the north of England like Christian missionaries to "Darkest Africa." Reporting that the "people of Bolsover" viewed Corbyn as a "Marxist" and "terrorist sympathizer," it declared this was why the Tories had "replicated the success of President Trump in breaching the so-called Blue Wall in states like Michigan and Wisconsin in 2016, exploiting a combination of anti-immigrant messaging and dissolving class allegiances to take seats thought to belong to the Democrats."

This is a lie. Corbyn's betrayal of the working class was not that he did not throw himself behind the right-wing, anti-immigrant and nationalist agenda of the Tory right and Nigel Farage on Brexit. It was that his shift was to the pro-EU Remain agenda of the dominant sections of big business. In doing so he also betrayed the majority of young people, often the most exploited "precariat", and the many sections of workers who supported Remain because they were repelled by the narrow nationalism of Brexit.

The only way Corbyn could have not betrayed the working class was to oppose both reactionary factions of the ruling class and call for working class unity in struggle against big business in Britain and throughout the continent for a socialist Europe. This was something Corbyn could never do. It would have set him against the Blairite right in his own party and his political masters in the City of London.

The deep divisions over Brexit could only be fostered and then exploited by the Tories because Corbyn's actions since taking office in 2015 have confirmed that Labour's "left" is just as hostile to the working class as the Blairite right. Brexit played its part in Labour's northern debacle, but the seeds were sown over decades by the party and the trade unions presiding over the evisceration of northern towns and cities and their transformation into industrial wastelands.

Generations of workers who looked to Labour and the trade unions to oppose the Thatcher government's decimation of the mines, steel works and engineering factories were instead abandoned to their fate. In 1997, Blair came to office and continued Thatcher's agenda of privatisation, corporate tax cutting and de-industrialisation--leaving millions without work and many of those in work on poverty pay, zero hours contracts and with no social care network to look after the victims of unrelenting social warfare.

Nothing changed under Corbyn, who instructed Labour councils to impose whatever cuts were demanded by the Tories and opposed all moves to remove the Blairites from the party.

The reality of Labour's hostility to the fundamental interests of the working class is the real connection between the collapse of Labour's Red Wall before Johnson and the Democrats' Blue Wall against Trump. It enabled the Tories to exploit social discontent and a sense of abandonment

despite their being widely hated and even amid a rising wave of strikes and protests worldwide that are all animated by opposition to endemic social inequality.

Labour lost support for the same reasons in the south of England and in its major urban centres. The youth who once chanted Corbyn's name, who wanted a socialist alternative, instead got one political retreat after another on all the issues they cared about.

Labour long ago ceased to defend the interest of the working class in even the most limited sense. The 2019 general election signifies that broad sections of the working class have now seen through Corbyn's pretence otherwise. Rather than dictating a new agenda for Labour, he offered a rhetorical fig-leaf for what remained a right-wing party of big business and imperialist militarism. He provided the trade unions with an invaluable means to excuse its suppression of the class struggle by holding out the prospect of a left government. Even during the general election campaign, strikes by postal workers, rail workers and higher education workers encompassing over 140,000 workers were sold out or suspended.

The bitter price paid by the working class for the last four years of intellectual and political charlatany under Corbyn's leadership is the election of Johnson.

To wage a successful struggle against Tory government intent on completing the "Thatcher revolution" at the expense of jobs, wages and vital social services, workers and youth must now draw the fundamental conclusion from the political shipwreck of the Labour Party.

The Socialist Equality Party warned from the very beginning of Corbyn's push for party leadership in 2015:

"No one can seriously propose that this party—which, in its politics and organisation and the social composition of its apparatus, is Tory in all but name—can be transformed into an instrument of working-class struggle. The British Labour Party did not begin with Blair. It is a bourgeois party of more than a century's standing and a tried and tested instrument of British imperialism and its state machine. Whether led by Clement Attlee, James Callaghan or Jeremy Corbyn, its essence remains unaltered."

The claim made by the Socialist Party and others that Corbyn's victory would be a step towards Labour's re-founding "as a democratic, socialist, anti-austerity party" has suffered a devastating rebuttal. On the day of the general election, the SEP explained:

"Our criticism of Corbyn and his backers is based on the realities of contemporary capitalism. Advances in science and technology have enabled the development of globalised production, ripping the ground from under the feet of the outmoded national labour organisations and their programme of economic regulation to suppress class antagonisms. It is this, and not the merits or otherwise of this or that leader, that has led to the transformation of social democratic parties and trade unions into the direct instruments of their own ruling classes in imposing savage exploitation on the working class to secure global competitiveness."

We concluded, "Whatever party has secured a majority on December 13, the election will prove to be a staging post in an escalating class struggle." The Labour Party confronts the working class as a hostile force. The SEP must now be built with the aim of unifying the British, European and international working class in the struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact