

Brexit and the Collapse of British Labour: A Post-Mortem on the UK Election

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Global Research, December 18, 2019

Region: [Europe](#)

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On December 12, 2019, the British parliamentary election gave conservative Boris Johnson a big victory, and leveled an historic defeat on the British Labour Party not witnessed since 1935. Johnson now has an absolute majority in Parliament and his quick march to a hard Brexit is now very likely.

Once the leading global capitalist economic world power, Britain is now doomed eventually to decline economically to a force in the global economy more or less equal to that of northern Italy in terms of GDP. Its last major role in the global economy, as a world financial center, will now atrophy as well, as finance capital exits Britain the aftermath of the election and Brexit to points elsewhere: to Frankfurt, Paris, Singapore, and New York.

It is important to understand why Boris won big, why Brexit is now on the fast track once again, and what are the likely consequences. One immediate consequence is Jeremy Corbyn has already announced he will not lead the party further after its crushing defeat. That means the 'moderate' interests will now ascend to control of the Labour party again and purge the progressives that were behind Corbyn. It also means the Scottish Nationalist Party will demand a second vote on leaving the UK. Its leaders have already so declared. The British Constitutional crisis is again on the agenda.

It is important not only to assess the short term failures or success of the Conservative vs. Labour parties' respective election strategies, but to understand the longer term historical forces at work that have been undermining Social Democracy and social democratic politics (and thus the Labour Party) in the advanced economies in recent decades. Those long term historical forces have been building and accumulating for decades. They have played at least as great a role as election strategy and tactics in Labour's now historic defeat.

There are no doubt several reasons why British voters handed Labour its defeat and opened the door again, now even wider, to Boris Johnson to leave the European Union. The election shows that a large number of voters still wanted to leave the EU, despite three and a half years of British Parliamentary maneuvering and delay. Another voter block that weren't so sure of leaving the EU perhaps probably voted conservative because they just wanted to 'get the damn thing over with'. Three and half years of debate and parliamentary maneuvers since the original 2016 Brexit vote have left many disgusted with the political efforts of the British elite to block the 2016 democratic vote of the will of the majority in the country. Another short term factor in the election outcome no doubt is that Johnson cleverly manipulated voter sentiment with promises he would protect-and even expand-social programs, add more government spending, end austerity, save the health service, etc. That's a cynical tactic directly out of the Trump playbook. Another factor probably was the slanderous business-media campaign to depict Corbyn and the Labour party as anti-semitic.

As in the US with Trump, manipulating the 'jewish vote' and painting Corbyn-Labour as discriminating, or even racist, played a role in Boris' victory. Corbyn and Labour fell for the ploy and spent too much time defending against it, instead of pushing their own proposals more forcefully. They were caught off guard and didn't know how to respond, and did so only after losing valuable time. Of course, having the capitalist media and press running interference on the issue on behalf of Boris and the Conservatives didn't help either. As in France in support of Macron, British capitalists rallied and united together against Corbyn, terrified that if he and Labour won it would mean the re-nationalization of industries long privatized under British Neoliberalism since the 1980s. Finally, Labour's strategy was itself equivocating at times and on a number of fronts insufficiently differentiating from the Conservatives. In many voters minds, especially youth, Labour was viewed as still the junior partner in pro-business Neoliberal policies and not to be fully trusted. The legacies of Blair and Gordon continue to haunt the part (just as Clinton and Obama do in the USA for the Democrats).

But there's more than just electoral strategies and tactics that explain yesterday's vote outcome and Labour's historic defeat in the British Parliamentary election.

In Britain, as well as in the USA and Europe and elsewhere, the capitalist system has clearly entered an era of 'nationalist reaction' to the declining growth prospects of global capitalism. Nationalism is the ideological reaction to that decline. More prescient and clever members of capitalists, and political class that represents them, have grabbed on to nationalist appeals and policies and are riding that horse into office on the backs of growing economic discontent. Brexit thus represents a nationalist response to Britain's economic decline. "Its the fault of those Europeans and the EU. If only we can leave the EU, Britain will return to its glory days of economic power". So goes the political refrain-in the UK and elsewhere.

Overlaid on this ideological appeal in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is the curious counter ideological 'nationalist' appeal of the Scots, who employ Scottish nationalism as the justification for staying in the EU instead of leaving it. So we have two nationalisms-one countering the other-in the case of the UK and Brexit. Scotland will no doubt soon vote somehow again to leave the UK-becoming a kind of 'Catalonia Writ Large'. Unlike the latter, however, it is unlikely that members of the Scottish Nationalist party will be successfully charged with treason and jailed. Watch for Boris and his conservatives to try to cleverly structure some solution similar to the so-called Northern Ireland 'backstop' for Scotland in relation to the EU. Boris and buddies will try to keep Scotland politically in the UK by allowing it to economically remain in the EU. Or allow Scotland to keep all the North Sea oil and US trade revenue for itself, which is also what Scotland staying in the EU is mostly about.

Nationalism is undermining national unity in the UK-just as it is doing so in the USA...and in Spain, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe, and let's not forget India and Kashmir, and other locales in Asia. Capitalism in crisis always turns to nationalism as a shield to divert blame for its economic and social troubles on 'the others'. The extreme version of this nationalist 'blame it on the outsiders game' is called Fascism.

There's another longer term historic force also at play here in the Brexit phenomenon-apart from Nationalism and the short term electoral strategy and tactic failures. That's the decline and collapse of traditional Social Democracy and social democratic parties. That decline is

partly due to decades of mis-leadership by the social democratic parties' leadership who have aligned themselves with the Neoliberal policies of the business parties in their countries. By partnering with business interests, in the hope of obtaining some minor concessions, they have painted themselves with the consequences of those Neoliberal pro-business, pro-investor policies. Those policies for their social democratic constituencies have meant: declining job opportunities, stagnant wages, privatization and loss of social insurance and benefits, loss of retirement and pension guarantees, and destruction of their unions that once protected those war time and post-1945 gains of the early 20th century. Of course, social democracy party leaders personally gained by securing a junior role at the political table with business and their capitalist parties. The Tony Blairs and Bill Clintons are today multi-millionaires serving on corporate boards and as business consultants being nicely rewarded for their past services. But they traded that role and personal gain for the the living standards of their working class members.

At its extreme, and in the worst case, the collaboration of the social democratic parties over the last 40 years with their business party 'opponents' has meant allowing the mass reverse immigration-i.e. deportation-of tens of millions of industrial working class jobs from the UK, the USA, Europe, and Japan to emerging market economies. (Where their respective corporations also migrated for cheap labor, open markets, and indigenous local politicians on the make). Ultimately, that reverse immigration of jobs and deportation of living standards is explains in large part the collapse of electoral support for the social democratic parties in the 'West'.

Entire generations of workers in the UK, USA, and Europe—who are today condemned to part time, temp, gig, and precarious work, to small service company employment, and with no experience of belonging to unions—no longer see any affinity to the traditional social democratic parties. This development is not only relevant to the UK and the collapse of British Labour as an electoral force. It is true of that even weaker and lesser 'social democratic' party organization called the Democrat Party in the USA. As it is true for the Socialist Party in France that was recently defeated and has all but disappeared from the electoral scene. And as it is becoming as well for the SPD party in Germany, as it continues its partnership and collaboration with business parties and interests in that country. The Social Democratic parties in the west have been hollowed out by the deportation of their industrial jobs (aka offshoring or sometimes euphemistically called by the business media as 'supply chain relocation'). And parallel structural changes in western economy labor markets have chipped away at the margins of what working class support that remained for those parties by throwing many not deported into precarious and contingent work that fragments and de-politicizes the class.

The core industrial working class backbone of those parties has thus been shipped offshore in the Neoliberal era and otherwise captured by nationalist appeals or who see nothing in it for them to vote for anyone. Social Democratic party leaders in recent decades have thus participated in, and presided over, the destruction of their own organizations and their own erstwhile political-electoral base. And as they allowed the decimation of their own industrial working class, the atrophy and disappearance of the unions as an organized electoral support force followed.

Today neither the class nor the unions existed to deliver the vote for Labour (or for the Democrats, or the Socialist Party, or the SPD, etc.) in strategic contests like the recent British election and Brexit votes.

Corbyn in the UK represented a last futile effort to re-transform the British Labour party, trying to turn the clock back into what it was once. But the core and base for that reconstitution no longer exists. And that's also, at least in part, why Labour suffered the historic defeat yesterday. And why Nationalism is on the ascend once again.

And why, after the next crisis, even ascendant Nationalism as we see it today may not be sufficient for the continuation of late Neoliberal rule for global capitalism.

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Dr. Jack Rasmus is author of the just published book, 'The Scourge of Neoliberalism: US Economic Policy from Reagan to Trump', Clarity Press, January 2020, which is available from his blog, jackrasmus.com, and his website, <http://kykloproductions.com>, and publicly everywhere after December 20.

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