What are the Lessons of the UK Election?

written by Rohini Hensman | February 7, 2020

There have been many articles attempting to explain the crushing defeat of the Labour Party in the UK election of 12 December 2019. Some of them are very insightful, and list reasons that undoubtedly played a part in that defeat. However, I have not come across any which highlight two factors that are important, namely insufficient internationalism and a failure to uphold democracy strongly enough. Let me explain – but first, a brief summary of other viewpoints.

Reasons for defeat

Kim Moody's excellent analysis of the UK election results suggests that the most mistaken conclusion to draw from Labour's defeat is Joe Biden's allegation that Jeremy Corbyn failed because he went too far to the left. As Moody points out, the centrists in the election fared even worse, and this has been true not just in Britain but in many other countries, where voters have deserted centrist parties to vote for parties further to the left or the right. In such a scenario, for a party challenging the far right in the UK or elsewhere, moving to the centre sounds like a recipe for defeat. Moody and other commentators also point out that most of the individual items in the Labour Party manifesto were popular; it was the haphazard presentation of them that made it look as if the party was promising new freebies every day without properly costing them, leading to scepticism that they could deliver on their promises.[1]

Another major reason for defeat, according to Moody and many others, was Corbyn himself, and this is supported by anecdotes from Labour campaigners who were told by prospective voters that they could not vote for the party while it was headed by him. Corbyn supporters counter that he faced a concerted campaign of vilification from the media and his opponents within and outside the party, and this is certainly true. Surveys showed that as a result of repeated allegations of antisemitism, many people thought that a third or more of Labour Party members were accused of antisemitic remarks or attacks when in fact it was fewer than 1 per cent. As Rivkah Brown observed, selective targeting of the Labour Party for antisemitism, when all evidence points to antisemitism being far more prevalent on the far right, left Jewish leaders bewildered when, soon after Johnson's victory, which they clearly favoured, South Hampstead Synagogue and several shops in the locality were daubed with antisemitic graffiti by neo-Nazis.[2]

However, Corbyn's failure to respond adequately to the media campaign against him even when he had a chance to do so on TV interviews was also part of the problem. Moreover, Moody points out that the decline in Labour votes in the constituencies of the North and Midlands that went over to the Tories had been going on for a long time, partly due to a decline in local grassroots organising. In addition, it is likely that Corbyn's Brexit policy – crafted not by the party as a whole, not even by the shadow cabinet, but by a group of advisors and officials around him – played an important role in

the Labour defeat. Weaknesses in foreign policy also contributed.

The Brexit debacle

An internationalist position on Brexit would require explaining to working-class voters in deindustrialised regions that the cause of their misery was not the EU or immigrants, as the far right had been telling them, but British government policies (including attacks on employment conditions, privatisation of utilities, and running down of public services), and changes in global capitalism, including technological changes.[3] This is of course a much more complex message than the anti-immigrant message presented by the far right, but conveying it is crucial to finding realistic solutions to the problems being experienced. Given the changes capitalism has gone through since the latter part of the 20th century, even a social-democratic programme cannot be achieved in one country: 'The world is more globalised, more integrated and joined up than ever before. There is no going back. There are no national solutions to our economic and social problems.'[4]

This is exactly what Jeremy Corbyn argued in a thoroughly internationalist speech during the run-up to the 2016 referendum: 'In the coming century, we face huge challenges, as a people, as a continent and as a global community. How to deal with climate change. How to address the overweening power of global corporations and ensure they pay fair taxes. How to tackle cyber-crime and terrorism. How to ensure we trade fairly and protect jobs and pay in an era of globalisation… All these issues are serious and pressing, and self-evidently require international co-operation. Collective international action through the European Union is clearly going to be vital to meeting these challenges. Britain will be stronger if we co-operate with our neighbours in facing them together… Over the years I have been critical of many decisions taken by the EU, and I remain critical of its shortcomings… Europe needs to change. But that change can only come from working with our allies in the EU.'[5] He reiterated this conviction as late as October 2017, which shows that his personal stance was unchanged even if the party position had shifted,[6] and this undoubtedly played a major role in winning enough votes and seats for Labour to eliminate Theresa May's majority in the 2017 election.

However, a factor underemphasised by Corbyn was the racist underpinnings of Brexit. According to Moody, 'The primary motivations for many of those who voted in favour of leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum were informed by English nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment, but in 2019 these were reinforced by the argument that a democratic decision had been made, the people had decided.' While anti-immigrant sentiment was ostensibly directed against EU citizens, in practice it also extended to Black and Asian immigrants, especially Muslims, as the significant rise in racist attacks since the referendum shows.[7] Hostility to refugees was revealed in a UKIP poster, which had an eerie resemblance to a Nazi poster, depicting thousands of Syrian and other refugees whom Britain would allegedly be compelled to admit if it remained part of the EU.[8] Anti-Muslim bigotry was stirred up, for example by allegations that Turkey was about to be admitted to the EU, and millions of Muslims from that country would then migrate to Britain.[9]

These were the themes hammered out 24/7 by the far right, but this hate campaign was not counteracted strongly enough except by a few Labour MPs like Jo Cox, who opposed Brexit, supported immigrants and refugees, took action in solidarity with democracy activists and humanitarian workers in Syria, and was murdered by a neo-Nazi.[10] If Labour had launched a powerful anti-racist campaign depicting immigrants as friends and neighbours, teachers, doctors, nurses and care workers, people whose work benefits society and whose tax and National Insurance payments contribute to Britain's economy, if it had promoted compassion for refugees and attempts to help them in their home countries, it might have been able to attract many of those who had not voted in the referendum as well as new young voters, and perhaps even Leave supporters who were

not hardcore English nationalists.

Instead, as in earlier avatars of the party, anti-immigrant sentiment was appeased rather than being combated. Even if one concedes that in current circumstances it would be suicidal for a party seeking to be elected to power to take a fully internationalist position supporting open borders, there is absolutely no excuse for seeking to close borders that are already open, or take away rights that immigrants already have, which is precisely what Brexit entails. For anyone who claims to be an internationalist, that should be a red line: a line that was crossed by Corbyn when he refused to make a commitment to campaigning for Remain in any future referendum.

By 2019, the Labour Party's Brexit position seemed designed to alienate Leavers and Remainers alike. Corbyn's proposal for a soft Brexit encountered the criticism that although creating less economic disruption than a hard Brexit, it would leave the UK subject to EU rules in which it would no longer have any say, thus resulting in a loss, not gain, of control. In addition, Labour Leavers impatient to get Brexit over and done with were offered the prospect of yet another period of negotiations with an uncertain outcome. On the other side, the position offered nothing to Labour Remainers. The debacle was amplified by Labour MPs who voted in parliament for the Tory Brexit deals, leaving Labour Remainers in their constituencies – probably the majority of Labour voters even in predominantly Leave constituencies – with no one to vote for.

Then there were Corbyn's advisors who opposed a confirmatory referendum or People's Vote on the grounds that the result of the 2016 referendum embodied 'the people's will'. It is entirely in accordance with the politics of the far right that they would represent the result of the 2016 referendum as embodying 'the will of the people'. What is astonishing is that so few challenged this. According to the electoral commission, 72.2 per cent of the electorate voted in the referendum. Of this, 51.9 per cent – i.e. 37.4 per cent of the electorate – voted to leave, and 34.73 per cent of the electorate voted to remain. So, the leavers were a minority of the electorate as a whole even at the time of the referendum, since 27.87 percent did not vote. In this referendum, above all, 16- and 17-year-olds should have been allowed to vote, since the results would have the longest-lasting impact on them, but they were not. Saying that Brexit represented 'the will of the people' amounts to saying that 34.73 per cent of the electorate who voted to remain, 27.87 per cent who didn't vote, and the 16- and 17-year-olds who were not allowed to vote are all non-people. This is a common tactic of the far right – 'only those who agree with us are part of "the people"' – but should have been challenged vociferously by anyone who believes in democracy.

In addition, there were the multiple ways in which the Leave campaign acted illegally, including breaching spending limits.[11] A whistle-blower who was formerly an employee of Cambridge Analytica commented that if it had been an election, such irregularities would have invalidated the results and made it necessary to rerun it.[12] Brexit is arguably more important than an election since its results define the future for much longer, yet even among Remainers, hardly anyone made this point. Evidence of Russian meddling in the Brexit referendum created an even stronger argument for a People's Vote. Indeed, the involvement of Donald Trump's then campaign manager and chief strategist Steve Bannon as well as Russian state media and oligarchs close to Vladimir Putin in providing material assistance to the Brexit campaign suggests that the referendum result represented anything but the will of the British people.[13]

Yet Corbyn's advisors as well as some Lexiteers, rather than making these points, opposed even a confirmatory referendum until the 'Brexit-embodies-the-people's-will' propaganda was too entrenched to challenge. In fact, their position throughout was a weaker version of Johnson's 'Get Brexit Done'. Their contention that Labour lost because it supported a People's Vote is contradicted by the fact that Labour lost over 2.5 million votes while the Tories and Brexit Party picked up just 335,000, and Labour lost almost twice as many voters to the Liberal Democrats, Greens and Scottish

National Party as the 700,000-800,000 they lost to the Tories and Brexit Party. In January 2019, officials from Hope not Hate and the TSSA union had presented Corbyn with polling evidence that in the event of an election, Labour would get a lower share of the vote in every seat in the country with a pro-Brexit position than it would with an anti-Brexit position, but the warning was dismissed. Corbyn's U-turn from his original position destroyed his credibility, and his personal rating slumped to -50.[14] Can you trust a leader who in 2016 argues cogently that Britain should stay in the EU and a few years later changes his tune? The advisors who recommended such a shift played a significant role in trashing Corbyn's reputation, because it convinced many progressives – precisely the people who were less likely to be swayed by the right-wing media – that he was untrustworthy.

Some Remain voters who had abandoned Labour drifted back after it announced its support for a People's Vote, but others did not. Some didn't vote at all. Leavers preferred to stay with Johnson's more consistent position. By contrast the SNP, which had a social-democratic programme and consistent Remain position, gained votes and seats at the expense of the Tories. If Corbyn had argued consistently for a confirmatory referendum on any Brexit deal and promised to campaign for Remain, it is entirely possible that Labour could have done the same.

Does any of this matter, now that the election has been lost and Britain has left the EU? It certainly matters to the future of the Labour Party that it should display solidarity with EU citizens who, like the Windrush immigrants, settled in Britain when it was perfectly legal to do so and now face an uncertain future, perhaps arguing for their right to UK citizenship. It is also important to highlight every job, grant, consumer protection and environmental protection lost, every problem arising from Johnson's Brexit, as well as work out an economic policy that takes account of global changes in capitalism, if Labour is to combat fascist assaults on immigrants and have a chance of winning the next election.

It is important to challenge the argument of the Labour right and Lexiteers that the working class supported Brexit and abandoned Labour. This presupposes an obsolete definition of 'the working class' as mainly engaged in industrial labour, mainly white, and mainly in permanent employment, whereas the new working class is mainly employed in the service sector, often on insecure contracts, and much more diverse in terms of ethnicity, age and gender. Many do not earn enough to support a decent standard of living. As Phil Hearse observes, these sections of the working class voted massively for Remain in the 2016 referendum, and did not abandon Labour in 2019. It was mainly a cross-class section of white pensioners in towns in the North and Midlands who were won over by the UKIP/Brexit Party/Tory right, voted heavily for Leave in 2016, and abandoned Labour in 2019. Hearse concludes, 'The December 2019 election showed a working class divided on key issues of nationalism, immigration, and the xenophobia currently undergoing rehabilitation as "patriotism" … Labour's Brexit position got mangled because it tried to… unite the working class behind incompatible positions… The right-wing offensive can only be countered by fighting, not by capitulation and accommodation.'[15]

A flawed foreign policy

In October 2016, commenting on the targeting of civilians by Russian airstrikes in Syria, Corbyn's spokesman suggested there was too much focus on Russian atrocities in Syria 'which sometimes diverts attention from other atrocities that are taking place,' implying that civilian casualties from US-led coalition air-strikes were comparable in scale. On the one hand, even if that were true, the remark shows little compassion for the Syrians being killed and driven out of their homes; on the other, a reality check showed that the rate of civilian deaths resulting from Russian airstrikes was 8 times the rate resulting from coalition airstrikes.[16] Most importantly, the absence of solidarity with a democracy movement in a developing country demonstrated a sad lack of internationalism.

The attempt by the Corbyn team to cover up the brutality of Russian airstrikes in Syria illustrates what I call their pseudo-anti-imperialism: opposition only to Western imperialisms while supporting non-Western imperialisms like Russian imperialism and Iranian regional imperialism, which share responsibility with brutal dictator Bashar al-Assad for over half a million dead and over half the population displaced in Syria.[17] Putin's is a far-right regime which has provided funding and other support to neo-fascist parties throughout Europe,[18] and to far-right politicians – including Trump – in the rest of the world. Evidence has emerged that it has supported Boris Johnson too.[19] One reason why it has bombed Syrian civilians and democracy activists in support of Bashar al-Assad is to entrench its power in the Middle East; but another is to support its neo-fascist allies in Europe by giving them an 'enemy' to demonise, namely millions of Syrian refugees fleeing for their lives.[20] It is disturbing that Corbyn's team would want to cover up the crimes of such a regime; equally disturbing is the implicit contempt for Syrian working people struggling against unemployment, poverty and authoritarianism.

This attempt to whitewash the Russian war on Syrian civilians made it possible to represent Corbyn's opposition to the US/UK war on Iraq as anti-Western rather than a principled anti-war position. Failing to condemn the Iranian state and its allied militias (including Hezbollah) for killing Syrian civilians, driving them out of their homes and taking over their land, while condemning the Israeli state for doing exactly the same to Palestinians, made it easier to portray Labour as antisemitic rather than a party that was taking a principled stand in opposition to crimes against humanity; similarly, failure to condemn the extreme right-wing Islamic Republic's barbaric treatment of political prisoners made it possible to misrepresent condemnation of the extreme right-wing Israeli regime's barbaric treatment of political prisoners as antisemitism rather than principled support for human rights, secularism and democracy. Support for Russian imperialism in Ukraine by neo-Stalinist elements of Corbyn's team[21] made it possible to misrepresent his support for the Irish struggle for freedom from British imperialism as anti-British rather than anti-imperialist. In short, the Corbyn team's incoherent anti-imperialism and selective solidarity with some struggles for national liberation and democracy but not others made it more difficult for Corbyn to defend correct positions he had taken in the past, and allowed the far right to demonise him.

There has been a tendency in sections of the left to define 'right-wing' simply in terms of neoliberalism and austerity policies, failing to recognise that right-wing politics are defined by ultra-nationalism, authoritarianism, racism and bigotry, and can coexist with state capitalism and/or neo-protectionism. If the far right has been gaining ground throughout the world in the past few decades, it is partly because a section of the left has been supporting it in the name of 'anti-imperialism' or opposition to the 'elite' or the 'establishment'. It is important that the Labour left, while continuing to be critical of Western imperialisms and their authoritarian allies, should be equally critical of non-Western imperialisms and their authoritarian allies.

For example, at this moment, when Syrian civilians in Idlib are being slaughtered by Russian imperialism in alliance with Bashar al-Assad,[22] it is important to express solidarity with the victims and with Syrian democracy activists now either in exile or facing imminent extermination.[23] It is crucially important to extend solidarity to the mass uprising of Iranian workers, women, youth and oppressed minorities opposing exploitation, discrimination, authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, misogyny and militarism, rather than implicitly or explicitly siding with the corrupt, theocratic, repressive, militaristic imperialist regime they are opposing.[24] In the wake of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, it is necessary, while criticising Trump for authorising it, to acknowledge that Soleimani was in Iraq as agent-in-chief of Iranian imperialism, which has reduced Iraq to the status of a colony;[25] that the majority of Iraqis (apart from the collaborators) want to be free of both US and Iranian imperialism;[26] and to support the Iraqi people's struggle for democracy and national liberation rather than endorsing the agenda of Iranian imperialism in Iraq.

In other words, recognising ultra-nationalism, authoritarianism, racism and bigotry as hallmarks of the extreme right and fighting against them worldwide with all the resources at their disposal should be a central part of the agenda not just of the Labour left but of all those who claim to be socialists. It is important that the Labour left – and indeed all socialists – abandon the simplistic notion that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend,' which has been used to support anti-Western tyrants and imperialists, and take a consistent position in solidarity with all struggles against oppression and exploitation. They need to be able to deal with complexity; to understand that it is possible to oppose military assaults on Iran and sanctions that hurt ordinary Iranians, and at the same time oppose the repressive, extreme right-wing Islamic regime; to acknowledge that prejudice against Jews is racist and antisemitic, but denying Palestinians the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is also racist, and campaigning for those rights is not antisemitic.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Corbyn was subjected to a barrage of right-wing abuse and vilification by the media, and that there were English nationalists among former Labour supporters, including a small section of the working class, who rejected him because he didn't share their hostility to immigrants. But to explain the Labour defeat by these factors alone ignores a host of other reasons. It is crucial to acknowledge that their confused and confusing message was outmatched by Johnson's clear and consistent message, however dishonest the latter might have been.

The Brexit campaign unleashed a wave of English ultra-nationalism and anti-immigrant hostility similar to the racist upsurge accompanying the 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech by Enoch Powell (who was also a Eurosceptic), in which he argued that immigration would erode the national character.[27] Like the Brexiteers, he claimed to be speaking on behalf of the people against a powerful elite, and referred to Black children as 'piccaninnies' as Boris Johnson did after him. At that time, he was countered by a powerful anti-racist movement in solidarity with immigrants, but a similar movement failed to materialise this time, despite Corbyn's record of anti-racism in the past. The Labour Party and non-Labour Lexiteers need to acknowledge that in building a wall against immigrants who had hitherto been free to enter the UK, Brexit in any form is a right-wing measure, and not all their valid criticisms of the EU could justify supporting it. It should have been opposed by a campaign of solidarity with all immigrants and refugees, which is now needed more urgently than ever.

Many foreign policy positions of Corbyn and the Labour Party under his leadership have been absolutely correct, opposing Western imperialisms and extreme right-wing regimes allied with them. But refuting attacks on Corbyn based on his past positions was made more difficult by lack of consistency in abiding by the principles underlying these positions. There is a need to forge a foreign policy offering consistent support to all struggles for democracy. As the courageous students of Amir Kabir University in Tehran affirm, 'The only way to escape the current crisis is to return to a policy based on people's democratic rights, a policy that will not rush into the arms of imperialism due to its fear of despotism, and one that in the name of resistance and fighting against imperialism will not legitimize despotism.'[28]

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