



Mayism without May? The crisis of the Regressive Alliance and the challenge of Corbynism

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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Compass is the pressure group for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build alliances of ideas, parties and movement to help make systematic political change happen. We don't just want a bit of change - we want a lot of it. That demands a hegemonic project and must therefore start with analysis of the dominant bloc that determines the common sense of our society. Despite its current weaknesses that is still the right. If we are to build a countervailing political bloc then it is the strength and weaknesses of the right that we must understand. Future publications will examine issues around progressive political strategy based on this Gramscian analysis.

FOUR PROPOSITIONS

This think piece starts from the premise that it is important to understand political adversaries not only when they are thoroughly dominant, but also when they have suffered a significant reversal. Such an understanding will have implications for the strategy of Labour and the wider left to move beyond the current stalemate, and achieve a future election victory. This paper's analysis can be reduced to four major propositions:

- The Brexit era continues to dominate UK politics, but the balance has changed and a new era may be dawning.
- The Tories and Regressive Alliance are in deep crisis, but they will try to adapt.
- Corbyn's Labour has achieved a great deal, but will have to develop a progressive 'combinational politics' to reach out across different social groups in order to win the next general election.
- The progressive bloc has to be led by Labour, but its sustainability will be based on a new alliance-based politics, popular mobilisations and local civic participation of the 'open platform'.

THE BREXIT ERA CONTINUES TO DOMINATE UK POLITICS, BUT THE BALANCE HAS CHANGED AND A NEW ERA MAY BE DAWNING

The Conservative strategy has been to create a wider Regressive Alliance centred around Hard Brexit, which would allow them to draw on UKIP votes. The opinion polls leading up to the 2017 election suggested that this strategy was working as the Tories polled in the upper 40s and UKIP's share of the vote dived. However, the outcome of the general election and Labour's surge may have reshaped the direction of Brexit. The period of right populism in England may have passed its peak and a new progressive anti-austerity era may be dawning.¹

MAYISM WITHOUT MAY? THE TORIES AND REGRESSIVE ALLIANCE ARE IN DEEP CRISIS, BUT THEY WILL TRY TO ADAPT

The Conservatives have formed a weak government and the Regressive Alliance, defined more narrowly as the Conservatives and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), is in disarray. While Theresa May is isolated and

living on borrowed time (hence the term 'Mayism without May'), the Tories may try to delay a leadership contest and certainly avoid a general election for as long as possible. The Conservative's unstable equilibrium continues for now with the support of the DUP and the 'full fat Brexiteers' in order to find space to adapt. The Cameron–Osborne modernisation and Mayism as the new Tory nationalism were both political adaptations and the Tories will try to use the interregnum not only to elect a new and more communicative leader, but also to attempt another adaptation. They may seek to move away from a Conservative version of 'Blue Labour' and neoliberal austerity towards a more open and cosmopolitan politics, with an offer of sorts to young people. Any political shift of this sort will be strenuously resisted by those on the right, who will put forward their own candidate (such as David Davis); therefore, the adaptive process could be very conflictual and unconvincing. There is also a longer-term crisis of conservatism – demographic, cultural and now economic, with a renewed decline in living standards.

CORBYN'S LABOUR HAS ACHIEVED A GREAT DEAL, BUT WILL HAVE TO DEVELOP A PROGRESSIVE 'COMBINATIONAL POLITICS' TO REACH OUT ACROSS DIFFERENT SOCIAL GROUPS IN ORDER TO WIN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION

The winning of 40 per cent of the vote, which involved the mobilisation of young people and the transfer of some UKIP votes, has been a significant achievement. However, Labour cannot simply replay this strategy for the next election. The party will have to up its game through developing a 'combinational politics' by forging an internal alliance within the Labour Party to harness a wide range of talent, creating a more coherent Brexit position that articulates the concept of the 'progressive national interest', and projecting a much more publicly understood transformative economic strategy. These steps will be necessary to create a socio-political alliance between the insurgent young and urban voters, working-class voters previously won by UKIP, and sections of the older voter bloc, a precondition for breaking through to form a sustainable progressive government. At present, unfortunately, Labour appears reluctant to undertake the necessary expansion of its politics.

THE PROGRESSIVE BLOC HAS TO BE LED BY LABOUR, BUT ITS SUSTAINABILITY WILL BE BASED ON A NEW ALLIANCE-BASED POLITICS, POPULAR MOBILISATIONS AND LOCAL CIVIC PARTICIPATION OF THE 'OPEN PLATFORM'

Arguably the most exciting long-term outcome of the 8 June 2017 general election was the realisation that all over the country people (and especially the young) were working for a progressive victory, not only by getting involved – the notion of the 'pop up' progressive alliance of local groups working together – but by also making political sacrifices. The smaller parties, in particular, collaborated in different localities in order to clear a path for Labour candidates, with no fewer than 40 local progressive alliances emerging. This made an important contribution to the Labour tally, but its symbolic difference was potentially more significant. It signalled that the politics of the future are underpinned by not only popular mobilisations, but also a collaborative and open spirit that truly represents a long-haul progressive hegemonic politics.

PART 1

MAYISM WITHOUT MAY? CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL HEGEMONY IN FLUX

THE 2017 GENERAL ELECTION AND A CRISIS OF TORY POLITICAL GOVERNANCE

Never has a political defeat for Labour tasted so much like a historic victory. In April when Theresa May called the 2017 general election she and her advisers envisaged winning a substantial majority and even possibly destroying the Labour Party. But this turned out to be a huge miscalculation and the Tories went on to lose seats and their majority in the House of Commons. Conversely, Labour added 32 seats to its tally and increased its share of the vote to 40 per cent. The Conservatives have since formed a government with the support of the DUP, thus adding a new dimension to the Regressive Alliance. But this looks toxic for the Tories, and Theresa May's leadership appears increasingly fragile.

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In late June 2017 we have something resembling a stalemate, which is causing a crisis not only for Theresa May and 'Mayism', but also for Conservative political hegemony more broadly. And this is despite having won nearly 43 per cent of the popular vote and re-established a notable presence in Scotland, an electoral achievement that would in the past have delivered a landslide win.

In the cold light of day and taking into account wider international events, the outcome of the election adds to the view that the right populist tide is ebbing. The Conservatives banked on leading a Hard Brexit electoral bloc by harnessing the Leave vote and milking the support of UKIP, which had amassed nearly four million votes in the 2015 general election.

While they reduced UKIP to a zombie party, forcing its leader Paul Nuttall to resign, a small but significant proportion of UKIP support transferred back to Labour, successfully captured by Corbyn's radical social programme. The Hard Brexit bloc suffered a severe reversal by the 2017 election and with it the mainstay of the Regressive Alliance. In France, Macron's new centrist party dominates the French parliament and the National Front has been shattered. In the US, Trump is mired in scandal and cannot operationalise his right populist agenda. It may be that what we have been witnessing over the past year has been a right populist impulse rather than the beginning of a right populist era. But in the UK the fact remains that the Conservatives are still in government (albeit extremely weak and unstable) and Labour remains in opposition. While they are wounded, the Tories are already thinking about their next move and how to regroup and renew. What follows here, therefore, is an analysis of their powers of adaptability, which may be on display again very soon as they try to restore politics as usual and attempt to cement their continued leadership of the Brexit process. The Conservatives will be forced to move from Theresa May to a new leader and ultimately to fight another general election, but the question is when.

But in the UK the fact remains that the Conservatives are still in government (albeit extremely weak and unstable) and Labour remains in opposition. While they are wounded, the Tories are already thinking about their next move and how to regroup and renew.

As stated in *The Osborne Supremacy*,³ when you have been defeated on the field of battle it is important to think about not only what you have done wrong, but what your adversary did right. In the new political context, this dictum should now be changed to something more nuanced – when you have made progress on the field of battle, it is important to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the adversary and how you can further advance your position.

This think piece therefore begins by analysing the strategy of what remains the dominant force – the Conservatives and 'Mayism'. It is an attempt to understand the anatomy of the renewal and the reformulation of Conservative political hegemony following the Brexit vote, starting with the premise that a careful assessment of a dominant adversary is a crucial analytical and political act and a precondition of any successful counter movement.

At the same time, the contradictions of Conservative political hegemony have been laid bare by the general election result. At the time of writing (July 2017), Theresa May is struggling to maintain control and new fault-lines are appearing within the Tories in relation to Brexit, austerity, and who might be the leader to reconnect with different voter blocs, old and young.

This 'political bloc' analysis should also suggest ways of building a progressive counter movement capable of supplanting the Tories and bringing about the necessary social and economic transformation of the country. And by 'country' I am referring principally to England. While the Conservatives have won seats in Scotland and to a lesser extent in Wales, their political bastion remains whole swathes of England, forming the basis of the Westminster domination of the UK as a whole.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF BREXIT

It is important to appreciate the extent to which Brexit opened up a new political era in the UK and the new socio-political geography that has helped to coalesce a 'new Tory nationalism'.⁴ While London, some large English cities, Northern Ireland and Scotland voted Remain whole swathes of England and Wales voted

Leave. This new socio-political geography has been cast in class terms between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’,⁵ feeding a new right insurgent discourse, which has sought to polarise the ‘people’s will’ against ‘political elites’. The reality of the Brexit vote was socially more complex, however, comprising an alliance of the ‘northern poor’, socially conservative sections of the working class and the ‘southern middle classes’.⁶

Brexit has succeeded in redrawing politico-ideological frontiers with people identifying themselves not only by political party, but by whether they are a Brexiteer or a Remainer. The new Tory nationalism has attempted to harness the redrawing of these boundaries, not only in England and Wales, but also in Scotland around a related issue of Scottish nationalism. The effects of Brexit on the nature and language of political life will be with us for years, because of the fraught negotiations to come with the EU, and its widespread economic effects and the ways in which it frames national political identities. Pitched against this analysis of shifting national identities has been the revelation of the general election and the ways in which different voter blocs, spanning the Remain and Leave divide, appeared to support Labour’s radical social justice programme and contributed to its electoral surge.

MAYISM AS ‘RED TORYISM’ – ANOTHER STAGE IN CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL EVOLUTION

In her pre-election speeches and during the election campaign itself, Theresa May signalled a break with the Cameron–Osborne Conservative modernisation. Following the exhaustion of Thatcherism and three consecutive election defeats, ‘Cameronism’ (2005–2010) initiated a Conservative renewal with attempts to present a more socially liberal image and the building of a more socially representative parliamentary party.⁷ Following the 2008 Crash, however, the Conservative social modernisation project gave way to the neoliberal policy of austerity, which became overwhelmingly associated with the political scheming of George Osborne, as the Conservative Party focused on building its economic competency credentials and its political base with older voters. The narrow Conservative majority in the 2015 general

election suggested that this strategy had paid off. It was then broadly assumed that Osborne, who had assiduously cultivated support across the Conservative Party, would succeed Cameron as leader and prime minister. But Brexit changed all of that.

Following the Brexit vote of 23 June and the resignation of David Cameron the Conservatives swiftly chose Theresa May as the ‘unity candidate’. May had not backed Brexit but, having kept her powder dry during the referendum campaign, was willing to champion a new settlement epitomised with the slogan ‘Brexit means Brexit’. Refashioning a realigned Conservative political unity was her most immediate political priority. This was executed through a series of small but significant ideological shifts towards a more traditionalist, interventionist, nationalist and small ‘c’ form of Conservatism – capable of uniting different factions in the post-Brexit context, and drawing UKIP into the Conservative orbit. While she has led a party that has shifted decisively to the right, May’s political approach has been described as ‘Red Toryism’, and seen her labelled as the most left-wing Conservative leader in 40 years.⁸

Viewed more narrowly as the evolution of Conservative thinking, ‘Mayism’ can be viewed as the ‘decoupling of Conservative Euroscepticism from Thatcherism, creating a new fusion of Tory one-nation economic and social traditions with the reality of Brexit’

May’s speech to the 2016 Conservative Party conference staked out her ideological and political approach with its emphases on helping ‘just about managing families’, opposing

corporate greed, supporting the idea of the ‘good’ or ‘smart’ state and the NHS, and proposing to put workers on the boards of companies. These positions were broadly repeated during the 2017 election campaign. The speech and utterances of political contestation since have been a land grab for the centre ground of politics and key features of Labour’s territory. Viewed more narrowly as the evolution of Conservative thinking, ‘Mayism’ can be viewed as the ‘decoupling of Conservative Euroscepticism from Thatcherism, creating a new fusion of Tory one-nation economic and social traditions with the reality of Brexit’.⁹ Viewed as demonstrating the relationship between the Conservatives and modern capitalism, these policies also suggest an attempt, albeit superficially, to renegotiate the relationship between UK conservatism and neoliberalism.

In doing so, May (or more accurately her advisers) responded to the Brexit context with a reconfiguration of Conservative philosophy and policy that has involved reviving ‘Chamberlainite’ economic and social agendas. Known more as a technocratic and pragmatic rather than ideological politician, her interest in Tory one-nation approaches stemmed from the influence of close advisers, notably Nick Timothy (who resigned his post on 9 June following the election debacle). Hailing from a working-class background in Birmingham, Timothy was an admirer of Joseph Chamberlain, the Victorian-era mayor of Birmingham and Liberal minister. Dubbing his proposed model the ‘Erdington Modernisation’, named after the area of Birmingham of his childhood, Timothy argued for a focus not on the most poor nor the middle classes, but on ‘ordinary families’.¹⁰ Mayism thus became defined by policies aimed at new forms of economic and social interventionism and close control of immigration, a sharp break from neoliberal cosmopolitanism of the Cameron–Osborne era.

THE CONSERVATIVE ELECTORAL BLOC AND THE REGRESSIVE ALLIANCE

The Tory electoral bloc

A central aim of the ‘new Tory nationalism’ has been to cement different voting constituencies that were given new definition by the Brexit referendum. The Conservative electoral bloc in

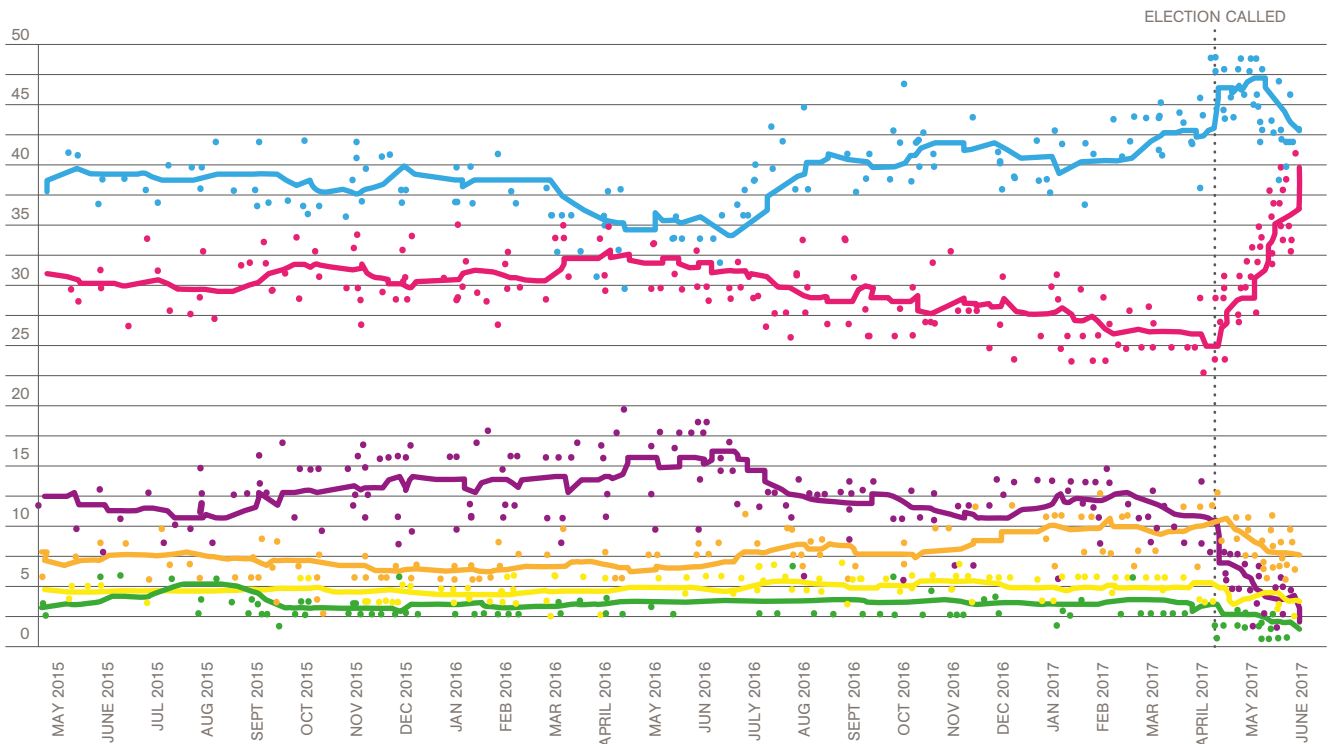
early 2017, accentuating the Osborne strategy, comprised three overlapping sub-blocs that were meant to eat into the Labour vote and drain the UKIP electorate. This alliance of voter blocs is overwhelmingly England-based, incorporating:

- older voters who since 2005 have come overwhelmingly to vote Tory; they had a 75 per cent participation in elections compared with 40 per cent for younger voters in 2015 (but that changed dramatically with a 59 per cent turnout on 8 June, 2017)¹¹
- traditional Tory voters in the shires, the south east and now the south west
- working-class voters who are ‘just managing’ and, crucially, socially conservative groups opposed to immigration, who voted for Leave.¹²

In the event, the Tories managed to obtain nearly 43 per cent of the vote. But this achievement was nullified by Labour’s late surge and hence the crisis for the Tories. The surprise addition to the Regressive Alliance was the Tory vote in Scotland, although this cannot be easily aligned with Hard Brexit and the DUP in Northern Ireland. However, these additions cannot disguise the damage inflicted on the Regressive Alliance by the failure of the combined Tory and UKIP votes to carry the Conservatives to victory. In social terms, the Conservative electoral strategy continues to represent a ‘social holding pattern’, based on a cultural–ideological strategy to knit together disparate social groups of an ageing population rather than build a bloc that is led by the most dynamic and innovative economic, social and cultural forces. Interestingly, in Scotland its resurgence is due to both the Brexit vote and an anti-independence sentiment, together with the fact that the Scottish Conservative leader – Ruth Davidson – lies to the left of the Tory Party.

Figure 1 shows UK polling intentions between May 2015 and June 2017. The election result confounded polling trends from the June 2016 referendum to the days just before 8 June. For most of this period it looked as if the Conservatives now dominated the Brexit era. This pattern was accentuated by another Tory surge following the announcement of the general election and there was a moment

FIGURE 1 UK POLLING INTENTIONS MAY 2015 – JUNE 2017¹³



after the local elections results when the Conservatives were 20 points ahead in the polls. This was the point at which May called the election. But it also coincided with the beginning of a Labour surge from the depths of the mid-20s. Labour not only surged 10 points over its 2015 result; the polling data suggests it surged 15 points in the space of two months. But one sobering fact remains, as of late June 2017, the Tory voting bloc is still hovering around 40 per cent and has not yet been seriously eroded.

The rise and fall of UKIP

An important sub-plot of the general election was the almost total collapse of the UKIP vote to 3 per cent and while most of these votes went to the Tories, as the campaign progressed, a significant proportion went back to Labour as working-class voters decided to vote in their material interests rather than through the lens of nationalism. The decline of UKIP from its high-water mark of 19 per cent started the moment Brexit was declared. The causes of this are not hard to divine – a case of ‘mission completed’ following the Brexit poll, together with conflict among its various ideological factions.¹⁴ But the bigger picture reflects the fact that the Conservatives succeeded in winning significant sections of UKIP voters to their ‘new nationalism’ agenda and the pursuit of a ‘Hard Brexit’

strategy – hence the resilience of their total voter bloc. By virtue of this, UKIP succeeded in framing a major part of the political discourse for the Conservative right and, even in its reduced condition, it remains an integral part of the Regressive Alliance. It is only likely to re-emerge again as a noticeable ‘regressive third force’¹⁵ if the Brexit process results in a series of compromises that fall short of the clean break sought by the right. For now, however, the UKIP election ‘swamp’ has been drained, denying the Tories a reservoir of support into which they can tap. This ‘maxing out’ on their vote in certain constituencies has serious consequences for them at the next election.

The Liberal Democrats and the Greens

The Liberal Democrats had been on a recovery path before the election, but lost momentum during it because of Labour’s revival and the limitations of campaigning for the Remain vote. They have, nevertheless, an important role to play in regions such as in the south west, which largely remain beyond the reach of Labour regardless of the Corbyn surge. It will be important, therefore, that the Liberal Democrats articulate a distinctive strand of politics within the progressive bloc rather than seeing themselves as occasional arbitrators between the blocs. If Vince Cable were to

become leader, this would signal their shift to the left. The Greens face a different challenge. They have suffered under Corbynism as Labour has taken Green votes and members. However, they continue to provide a distinctive philosophy, vision of the future and mode of politics that provides a moral driving force for progressives everywhere.

In June 2017 the Regressive Alliance – a political and ideological formation – comprises most of the Conservative Party (apart from its most liberal wing), the DUP, the remnants of UKIP, a variety of far-right organisations and networks, notably the online presence of Nigel Farage and Arron Banks, and digital movements such as Cambridge Analytica, together with dominant sections of the print media such as the Daily Mail and the Sun.

The Regressive Alliance in June 2017

The political significance of Mayism was that Tory hegemony has rested on the leadership of the Regressive Alliance, which cements together key voter blocs and ideological constituencies. In June 2017 the Regressive Alliance – a political and ideological formation – comprises most of the Conservative Party (apart from its most liberal wing), the DUP, the remnants of UKIP, a variety of far-right organisations and

networks, notably the online presence of Nigel Farage and Arron Banks, and digital movements such as Cambridge Analytica, together with dominant sections of the print media such as the Daily Mail and the Sun. Electorally, the Regressive Alliance is represented by the DUP link-up, but this is toxic for the Tories and their image of being a modern and decent party. Unless there is another serious refashioning of Conservatism, this version of the Regressive Alliance may crash to defeat.

MAYISM, THE CONSERVATIVE ‘DOUBLE-SHUFFLE’ AND THE NEXT ADAPTATION

The concept of the double-shuffle, as the combination of dominant and subordinate political tendencies, can be applied to policies of different political parties as they seek to maintain their historic and strategic role while attempting to appeal to a variety of political and social forces.

Theresa May may be a ‘dead woman walking’,¹⁶ but Mayism is not yet dead. It has simply entered a new and more unstable phase. Even in what may be the twilight of this latest Conservative reincarnation, it is important to analyse its character, not least because it will provide clues as to the next adaptation and the battles to come within the Conservative Party.

It is helpful to view Mayism through the lens of Stuart Hall’s ‘double-shuffle’.¹⁷ Used to analyse the complexities of New Labour policy at the height of ‘Blairism’, Hall identified dominant neoliberal strands as the main organising discourse (e.g. flexible labour markets) and subordinate social democratic policies

maintaining the New Labour social alliance (e.g. introduction of the minimum wage). The concept of the double-shuffle, as the combination of dominant and subordinate political tendencies, can be applied to policies of different political parties as they seek to maintain their historic and strategic role while attempting to appeal to a variety of political and social forces.

The dominant strand of May's conservatism has revolved around a regressive nationalist position – principally a commitment to Brexit that involves significant reductions in immigration. This has been this emphasis leading to a 'Hard Brexit' strategy. Given that this means that no deal would be struck with the EU regarding access to markets (EU leaders will not want to make it easy for the UK at the risk of encouraging others), the Conservative right have sought to create a nostalgic 'kith and kin Anglophone' trading bloc including countries that were previously members of the Commonwealth. This has always been a post-imperial dream of the Conservative right that has been boosted by Trump's US presidential victory, and the promise of a trade deal with the US and possibly Australia. In foreign policy, Mayism has thus tilted towards a more explicit Atlanticism. At home, she sought to cement her voting bloc, which comprises the elderly and 'just about managing families', not only through economic measures, but also through cultural messages about 'security'. The controversial policy to expand the role of grammar schools (now abandoned in the Queen's speech) had less to do with their actual impact on the education system and more to do with their totemic value that signalled to older and aspiring voters that an England of the past (the 1950s) is now the vision of post-Brexit UK.

The subordinate strand of Mayism concerns economic and social policy to appeal to the theme of 'governing for everybody'. By 'subordinate' I am not referring to the absence of policy – there have been many policies in this area and much political narrative – but their relative weakness and how they are contradicted by the logic of the dominant strand. In the Chamberlainite mode there is an industrial and skills strategy based on a 'soft economic nationalism'. Theresa May has

created a new department for industrial strategy, advocated places for workers on company boards (although this has already been reneged on) and proposed increased scrutiny of foreign takeovers of British companies, again recently played down by the Chancellor. Accompanying this has been a mild relaxation of fiscal policy and the easing of planned cuts to services and benefits, although the crisis in the NHS and social care suggests that this shift can be overstated. Social reform has refocused on the 'just about managing' classes, which involves a housing policy moving from subsidising home ownership, to building homes and supporting private renters. There is also significant commitment to devolution and localism beyond Osborne's conception of a Northern Powerhouse. This latter strategy is not so much a break, but an extension of the Cameron–Osborne era. The complex formation of policy is underpinned by the idea not of a small state, but of a 'smart' or even 'good' state',¹⁸ a conservative orientation that has drawn parallels with Theodore Roosevelt.¹⁹ The evidence so far, however, would suggest that this 'soft' nationalist economic strategy may simply be too weak to offset the effects of the dominant strategy, in which the currently dominant Hard Brexit forces within the Conservatives seek a sharp break with the EU and a gravitation towards the US.

Mayism, the new mixture of hard right and mild left politics in the form of the Conservative double-shuffle, has nevertheless bequeathed to the Tories a great many working-class votes. It has also functioned as a strategy to cement a large but unstable right bloc.

Larry Elliott of the Guardian went as far as to suggest that the Conservative Election Manifesto constituted the Tory 'Clause 4' moment and an attempt to chart a 'Conservative third way'.²⁰ While the Tories have shifted to the right on immigration, they appear to have tacked left on some economic and social issues, reassessing the commitment to low taxation and proposing to protect workers in the 'gig economy', and demanding sacrifices by affluent elderly voters to fund social care. Elliott points out, however, that these Tory commitments lack concrete numbers and May's record for deception suggests that she would renege on the mild social democratic policies in the Conservative double-shuffle. But as Mike Rustin explains, May and Mayism were not prepared to undertake the kind of reforms genuinely to capture working-class votes.²¹

Mayism, the new mixture of hard right and mild left politics in the form of the Conservative double-shuffle, has nevertheless bequeathed to the Tories a great many working-class votes. It has also functioned as a strategy to cement a large but unstable right bloc. This, however, was thrown into complete crisis by the unexpected outcome of the 2017 general election. However, an analysis of this kind of Conservative combinational politics suggests that another variant will follow. There will be a new double-shuffle – dominantly neoliberal, but with subordinate themes of social appeal (and perhaps a younger leader) that try to resonate with the times in which we live. What follows is a dissection of the different dimensions of Conservative political hegemony and its crisis in order to understand its turbulence and the possible adaptations that the dominant political force will inevitably try to make.

PART 2 TENSIONS WITHIN CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL HEGEMONY

THE ELECTION AND THE ATTEMPTED 'COALITION OF CHAOS'

No one really saw this latest Conservative political crisis coming. Its immediate cause has been the unexpected outcome of the general election resulting from the confluence of several factors. On the surface, the Labour surge was supported by the young coming out to vote in unprecedented numbers and largely backing Corbyn, together with a small proportion of UKIP voters switching back to Labour.²² Amid all the commentary about the impact of leadership personalities (conjuncturally important), more organic shifts are now appearing. Here we see an anti-neoliberal shift – a rejection of austerity and Hard Brexit – by a number of different voter constituencies, together with a desire for improved public services and a better deal for the young. This shift, which was reflected in widespread support for the Labour manifesto and the figure of Jeremy Corbyn, has long-term significance. Added to this has been the totemic and unfolding impact of the Grenfell Tower Fire, which has drained the moral authority of the Prime Minister, the Conservative Party, the party's role in local government and its deregulatory agenda.

Despite winning the most seats and the most votes, the Conservatives have been plunged into a crisis of their own making

Despite winning the most seats and the most votes, the Conservatives have been plunged into a crisis of their own making. At the time of writing (late June 2017), they are in turmoil. Theresa May will attempt to form a government and pass a Queen's speech. She may succeed in this with the help of the DUP, but the government looks paralysed. Due to widespread opposition, it is also unlikely that the DUP will be able to play the full rescue role envisaged and the 'bribe' of £1 billion to Northern Ireland will have repercussions across the UK. As leader of the Conservative Party and thus prime minister (PM), Theresa May's role looks untenable,

although forces will rally round her, fearful of the effects of an internal party struggle and another general election.

The Conservative Party will also try to adapt, something it has been particularly good at doing in the past and a reflection of its ruthlessness in the search for power. Here it is important to comprehend the potential lines of Tory renewal. May and the new leadership will try to execute short-term strategies to stabilise the situation by:

- moving towards a broader form of decision-making with immediate effect; this was the significance of the Timothy and Hill resignations
- establishing a working relationship with the DUP to exercise a parliamentary majority, albeit slim and very unstable
- attempting to stay in control of the Brexit negotiations
- dragging Labour away from its campaign mode and back into a protracted ‘war of position’ – the humdrum of ‘normal politics’ with which Corbyn struggled in the previous parliament; Corbyn, on the other hand, seeks to keep Labour in a permanent campaigning mode in anticipation of the rapid collapse of the Conservative–DUP Regressive Alliance.²³

All of this is an attempt to buy time to regroup. In the medium term, however, the Tory Party will want to select a new leader with greater social and communicative skills than Theresa May has. The problem is that they do not have an obvious heir apparent and so that process will take some time. Boris Johnson will try to get the backing of the Hard Brexiteers (or anyone who will help him realise his long-held personal ambitions), but he may lack wider support within the Tory Party despite his evident charisma. David Davis is also being touted. It is at this point that the different groupings within British Conservatism come into play. Presently, the Tory Party comprises at least three overlapping groups:

- A the ‘Full Fat Brexiteers’, who have been aligned with UKIP and are seeking a ‘clean break’
- B the ‘Neoliberals’, who continue to put open markets first (the George Osborne Tendency and the Chancellor, Philip Hammond)

- C the ‘Liberals’ (e.g. Bright Blue and the Social Justice Group within the Commons), who were one of the outcomes of the early Cameron–Osborne Tory social modernisation strategy, and have now been joined by Ruth Davidson from the Scottish Conservatives).²⁴

One of the functions of Mayism was to try to straddle all these tendencies and, in particular, to harness the support of the Brexiteers. But the outcome of the election has shifted the balance in favour of a relationship between groups B and C. Tory liberals may well put forward a leadership candidate who can speak to the young to ride out the new left shift that has occurred in parts of England, notably the totemic Canterbury loss, and also make renewed appeals to sections of the capital with a Soft Brexit strategy. It may well be the case that the Tories seek to jump a generation.

Nevertheless, in the scenario of Mayism without May there will be some continuation of elements of both the dominant and subordinate tendencies in the Conservative double-shuffle. A focus on a ‘hardish’ version of Brexit will be supported by an emphasis on apprenticeships and skills and infrastructure investment, and the marginal relaxation of austerity.

But this renewal is going to be bloody and because of the equilibrium of forces within the party, British Conservatism might descend into conflict around Hard or Soft Brexit, already illuminated by the differing emphases of the Chancellor and PM. These will surface in any leadership contest and it may be the case that the Tories simply cannot sufficiently adapt this time. Herein lies the path to electoral defeat.

THE RISE AND ANTICIPATED FALL OF THERESA MAY

One of the essential characteristics of Mayism has been the political persona of Theresa May and her role as unifier of the Tory Party and of the Regressive Alliance under Conservative leadership. Initially, she was seen as a safe pair of hands and a straightforward politician in touch with the people. In 2016, following her coronation as leader of the party and thus becoming PM, Nick Cohen summed up her perceived popular qualities: Theresa May

appeals to a stereotype that has a deep grip on the English psyche. Sober and commonsensical, she behaves with the moral seriousness we expect from a vicar's daughter.

She may be a little clunky, but what a relief it is to have a straightforward leader from the heart of the country after the flash, poll-driven phonies of the past.²⁵ This image is the one she tried to portray throughout the general election campaign – representing, strength, competence, stability and the person to negotiate Brexit on behalf of the UK as a whole.

But this image fell apart as another Theresa May emerged – someone who went back on her word, frightened into screeching U-turns around the issue of social care, for example, and was so arrogant that she did not bothering to turn up to debate with other party leaders at the hustings. Added to this have been her robotic public performances that John Crace has captured in his caricatures of the 'Maybot'. Looking at the Conservatives more broadly, John Harris summed up the emerging Mayism vision of the country as a 'cold, crabby nostalgia politics' that leaves cities and their citizens behind and asks the question whether an 'altogether more forward-looking country [might] sooner or later emerge from the Brexit mess?'²⁶ What was not so well known publicly was the toxic relation within Downing Street centred around the roles of her chief advisers Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill. Their controlling behaviour became part of the negative image of Theresa May, a contributing factor to her inevitable downfall.

She is currently trying very hard to stabilise the situation with a more collegial approach to decision-making: performing a cabinet reshuffle, trying to assemble a parliamentary majority and preparing the Queen's speech. But her response to the Grenfell Fire showed just how far she lacks human skill. The Tories are desperate to prevent a general election to allow for renewal and for boundary changes to kick in. But the way forward is littered with obstacles, any one of which could force them into the early election they crave to avoid.

THE LONGER-TERM CRISIS OF UK CONSERVATISM

It is important to remember that despite the semblance of political dominance since 2010, the Tories have only won a majority in one election out of the last six. And this was a slim one in 2015, which led to the ill-fated 2017 venture. There is therefore no new Conservative era in the making and it is this realisation that has been so crushing for the Tories as they take in the meaning of becoming a minority government. There were times in early 2017 when the polling looked like a re-run of the 1980s and Thatcher-like dominance, but this did not happen. We now appear to be entering another era that could seriously undermine the long-term future of UK conservatism.

There is therefore no new Conservative era in the making and it is this realisation that has been so crushing for the Tories as they take in the meaning of becoming a minority government.

Brexit and economic crisis

The election outcome has been interpreted as a vote against Hard Brexit because of the growing realisation of the damage it could cause chaos in terms of trade, travel and security. Hard Brexit flies in the face of the realities of global and regional inter-dependence, not least because it is tilted against the realities of international production. Car components, for example, cross the Channel upwards of five times before becoming part of a finished vehicle, resulting in tariffs that would be prohibitive for the car industry remaining in the UK.²⁷ Not surprisingly, some international companies may choose to leave, particularly if Hard Brexit is pursued to its logical conclusion. This extreme post-referendum approach, the economic effects of which are now only beginning to be felt. Economic growth has slowed markedly and there is a renewed decline in disposable

income, leaving people to rely on unsustainable credit.²⁸ These fundamental economic trends are creating tensions with the economic and class allies within the wider dominant historical bloc, leading to splits within the Conservatives as to how to respond.

There are also social and economic contradictions in the longer term. The only course of action open to government in the Hard Brexit scenario is to 'open up' the economy to attract new inward investment, taking us further down the deregulation road. One obvious consequence will be a more concerted attack on working conditions, forms of social protection and further cuts to public services, which will undermine any pretence of following a Chamberlainite social strategy. The post-Brexit Conservative economic and social strategies thus appear incompatible and the election result, together with the political fall-out of the Grenfell Tower Fire, appears to have pushed this strategy off the table.

At the wider international level, by making enemies of the countries of the EU, a totally unnecessary strategy, May and the Tories have been drawn ever closer to an extremely unreliable ally in the form of the Trump Administration. Drifting away from Europe to the mid-Atlantic is full of dangers – being landed with poor trade deals, unnecessary wars and a general sense of international isolation through being associated with someone who is ideologically and politically unstable. In relation to the US, the UK will look very small and very isolated.

When these larger factors are taken into account, the growing popular reaction against Hard Brexit is not difficult to understand. What is surprising is the form in which it came and how swiftly. The cards are now stacked in favour of what has been termed 'Soft Brexit' with compromises on access to the single market and customs union, EU citizen rights and ultimately immigration. The Conservative Eurosceptic wing and elements of the Regressive Alliance will not be able to travel this road without the whole formation falling apart. In her weakened form, Theresa May does not have the authority to lead this process and that is why

the argument is swinging towards a more multi-party approach to the Brexit negotiations and even Labour's audacious attempt to lead it.

Is a new type of UK emerging?

The 2017 election probably changed the future course of the UK. Before this vote we were heading towards Hard Brexit, an IndyRef 2.0 at some point, and the possible break-up of the UK. However, the surge of both Tory and Labour forces in Scotland has been a blow to the Scottish National Party (SNP) and its ambitions for independence. At the same time, it is quite possible that more powers will be devolved to Scotland and to Wales thus producing conditions that continue to loosen relations between the three small countries of the UK and an English dominated Westminster. But the factor that really affects the future of the UK has been the left shift in England. There is a prospect, albeit still distant, of a federal social democratic UK that involves more common socially just politics across the four countries and further acts of political devolution.

Austerity and instabilities in the Regressive Alliance

It is becoming clear that the austerity era is now running its course, which the figure of Jeremy Corbyn has come to symbolise.

There are additional instabilities within the Regressive Alliance. The worm has turned on austerity and it will be difficult for the government to force through any further cuts to public expenditure (not least because the DUP will not be able to countenance them). A particularly difficult problem is the growing crisis of social care and the NHS, a destabilising factor that is hard to exaggerate. This issue crashed into the centre of the 2017 general election with the Tories questioning the 'triple lock' on pensions and arguing that the affluent elderly will eventually have to sacrifice their houses to pay for social care. They had to row back on

this in the Queen's speech to reconnect with their older voting bloc. Added to this is now the funding crisis of policing and security. It is becoming clear that the austerity era is now running its course, which the figure of Jeremy Corbyn has come to symbolise.

Given the general breakdown in internal discipline within the Conservatives, there will also be attacks by Tory neoliberals against the 'Red Tory' elements of Mayism.²⁹ Their alliance with her to keep her in power and thus avoid an early general election will place pressure on her to take a more pro-big business position. But this merely opens up more space for the Labour Party to champion the younger, more entrepreneurial and outward-looking social and energetic economic forces that are mainly concentrated in cities, and to promote worker rights, thus adding to their socio-political bloc.

CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL HEGEMONY – DOWN BUT NOT YET OUT

The extent and significance of these tensions depends in good part on the challenge that comes from oppositional political parties and, in particular, the Labour Party in the current period. In future there will be not only pressures on the Conservatives, but also new challenges for the opposition, which aspires to be in government. The Labour Party and the wider left will now be under significant pressure to show how far it responds to the desire to end the austerity era, to construct a viable transformatory economic programme, to build a progressive strategy on Brexit, to construct progressive voter blocs by reaching out and connecting a range of social and political forces, and to champion a progressive version of the national interest. It is to these challenges that this think piece now turns.

PART 3 CAN PROGRESSIVES BUILD A BETTER BLOC?

AN EXPANDED, COMBINATIONAL AND COLLABORATIVE POLITICS TO DEFEAT THE REGRESSIVE ALLIANCE

The Tories and the Regressive Alliance are based on the Conservative double-shuffle, a regressive combinational politics aimed at co-opting social groups and voter sub-blocs. My central argument is that the Regressive Alliance and its politics need to be confronted by an expansive progressive combinational politics (a counter-hegemony) based on an expanded progressive political story to coalesce the main forces of the progressive bloc and to detach social groups from the dominant bloc. In practical terms this would involve promoting policies and discourses that appeal beyond the educated and young concentrated in cities and focusing on sections of the Conservative working class and older voters who live in small towns and the countryside.

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Currently there are two visions of the left on offer. The first, and currently the most dominant, is that of Corbyn's Labour Party, which is now better understood as an anti-austerity, socially just and distributive political force. Its new political role is the result of the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and what is termed Corbynism, which worked against Mayism in the June 2017 general election, although – interestingly – not in April 2017 in the local elections. As we will see in the final section of this think piece, Labour sees itself as the sole force that will be able to move into government through its existing policies and mobilisation executed through ‘one last heave’. They are also relying on the collapse of the Regressive Alliance in parliament. The current and dominating strategy of Corbyn's Labour Party can be characterised as that of ‘war of manoeuvre’; this conception is reviewed in the final part of this think piece.

The second conception of the left that has emerged on the public stage, but is not yet dominant, is that of the Progressive Alliance. This is based on the fundamental conditions of 21st century societies, their heterogeneity and the pluralism of different strands of progressive thought that have arisen in opposition to the neoliberal era. The Progressive Alliance is currently – and following the recent general election – understood primarily as a form of anti-Tory electoral co-operation. This dimension of the Progressive Alliance concept can help Labour as the leading force (although Labour is currently deeply reluctant to reciprocate) and will only become a powerful expression of collaborative democracy with the introduction of proportional representation.

Beyond this, if the concept of the Progressive Alliance is to be seen as a viable alternative to the Regressive Alliance as a ‘dominant historical bloc’, it has to develop a multiple and expanded narrative and programme to cohere into a collective will a heterogeneous range of economic, social and political forces. This will involve constructing at least four dimensions of a ‘combinational’ democratic politics and culture to demonstrate a strategy of ‘war of position’ through:

- democratic collaboration between progressive forces at all levels – the different dimensions of a progressive alliance
- the renewal of the public realm and economic and technological futures that bring about real material change for people
- making connections with ‘the people’, their feelings and experiences exhibited through progressive concepts of community, civic politics and the national interest in a globalised world
- grassroots mobilisation as the wellsprings of the progressive bloc.

THE LEFT BLOC IS NARROW AND IMBALANCED – THE NEED FOR PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCES

The Regressive Alliance or right bloc is in crisis. The ironically dubbed ‘coalition of chaos’ marks its next phase as sections of the Conservatives try to keep Hard Brexit as a preferred outcome. Matched against this is a progressive

‘assemblage’ comprising a leading insurgent force (Corbyn’s Labour), but surrounded by political and social fragments. The Labour and wider left is not yet an extended, connective and balanced political progressive bloc.

The Labour and wider left is not yet an extended, connective and balanced political progressive bloc.

This brings us to the rationales for the Progressive Alliance or, more accurately, progressive alliances. The Corbyn surge is the result of a revolt against austerity, Tory rule and Hard Brexit, but has yet to become an embodiment of the connected heterogeneity of the 21st century. Diversification, as well as a sense of connectiveness, is the fundamental organic trend. Beyond the largest subordinate party – the Labour Party – there is a range of progressive tendencies. These include ecological visions, social liberal traditions, feminism and women’s equality, and the progressive nationalisms of Scotland and Wales – all of which have found forms in distinct but small political parties. In addition, a vast array of organisations, campaign groups and movements have erupted as part of a radical civil society that campaign against various injustices; they are building visions and practices for a future society beyond the orbit of established political parties.³⁰ There is little suggestion that Labour’s left turn can embrace and represent these tendencies effectively even if it sought to do so. The Progressive Alliance in all its forms should therefore reflect this organic trend. Such a vision has also been articulated by Caroline Lucas and Clive Lewis, who state that a true progressive alliance is the only way to produce ‘a permanent and vibrant progressive majority for change’.³¹

The second rationale for the Progressive Alliance is more strategic and conjunctural. Under current boundaries Labour requires 64 seats to gain a working majority.³² But ‘one more heaven’ is a very narrow route, particularly if the Tories get their act together. And, as Zoe Williams has observed, if the Progressive Alliance had been

operating in the south west there would not be a single Tory MP from that region and Corbyn could now be PM.³³ There is, therefore, a huge difference between making the last mile, gaining a slim majority and struggling to implement a radical programme, only to be thrown out after five years and having the political hegemony based on a stitching together of different social groups, geopolitical areas and political forces in order to govern effectively and to map a path to a sustainable political future.

‘a true progressive alliance is the only way to produce ‘a permanent and vibrant progressive majority for change’.³¹

The third dimension of the Progressive Alliance is internal to the Labour Party itself. Corbynism, while now dominant within Labour, does not reflect all its progressive traditions and is less powerful as a consequence. The concept of the Progressive Alliance is therefore confined to external relations between not simply parties, but also internal alliances. This has particular significance if Labour is to appeal to a range of social groups – the young and urban, the Brexit-oriented working class and the older voter bloc. A new set of internal alliances within Labour could broaden the basis of Labour’s own renewal, increase the intellectual and political resources available to its radical project, link with its local and civic traditions, and increase its popular appeal by a convincing show of unity.

A NEW STORY OF A DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC REALM AND ECONOMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL MODERNITY

The radical social and anti-austerity agenda that featured in the Labour manifesto needs to be supplemented by a driving sense of the democratic renovation of the public realm and new economic and technological futures that capture the imagination of both the most energetic economic forces in society and the wider public. Labour has attempted to flesh out a vision in a radical socialist document, *Alternative Models of Ownership*,³⁴ which makes

a case for extending public ownership and the role of co-operatives. However, the wider and laudable proposals in the manifesto require elaboration, in particular, on the green economic and civic participation agenda.

A democratic and participatory concept of publics would go far further than the Labour emphasis on constitutional convention, reform of the House of Lords and a more federal UK, welcome though they are.

This alternative ownership model should be added to a more democratic concept of the renewal of the public realm, together with a broader, more connective and ecological view of the economy. The concept of renovation of the public realm could be seen in two related senses. The first, and most evident in Labour’s manifesto, is the recovery of the lost ground of the public sector by bringing the major utilities back into public ownership. This ‘statist’ conception of the public realm is seen as an accompaniment to an anti-austerity strategy. But there is another dimension of the public realm that requires greater prominence: the desire for democratic participation and greater popular accountability.³⁵ This participatory concept of the public realm corresponds to the insurgent public movements that are occurring in several countries where workers, tenants and citizens seek greater control over their lives. A democratic and participatory concept of publics would go far further than the Labour emphasis on constitutional convention, reform of the House of Lords and a more federal UK, welcome though they are.

When discussing a vision of future economy, the concept of the ‘green direction’ has been articulated by Mariana Mazzucato and her

colleagues. They envisage economic innovation as a 'green direction' that creates an industrial and technological ecosystem that 'provides convergent trajectories for multiple and disparate industries to innovate, while generating common synergies (suppliers, skills, equipment, service and distribution networks, demand patterns, etc.) that provide advantages for all participants'.³⁶

In strategic terms this would involve a decisive shift towards the 'investment state', a clear sense of left economic competence and leadership, the creation of new types of skilled employment linked to technological change, a restructured and more regulated labour market with the focus on training and skill enhancement, and far greater economic power being placed in the hands of working people and their communities – the alternative ownership argument. The challenge for progressive forces is to create a compelling and popular narrative and story that links the themes of a rebalanced sustainable economy, new forms of public ownership, state green-led investment, reimagined local public services, skills development and economic participation to form an economic and social 'ecosystem'.

THE POLITICS OF PLACE, CONNECTION AND THE CONCEPT OF THE 'PROGRESSIVE NATIONAL INTEREST'

The Tories have become masters of mobilising popular belief and 'common sense' to shift people's feelings, hopes and fears in a regressive direction. We must recognise that people need to move forward from where they are ideologically and not simply from where we would want them to be. We should therefore be prepared to operate on the terrain of common sense as well as the terrain of informed understanding, which appreciates facts and detailed explanation. While existing in an inchoate state, common sense or popular belief nevertheless has a rationalist component that Gramsci referred to as 'good sense', which arises from the experiences of everyday injustices and the educational process. The transformation of common sense is therefore a deeply ideological struggle between opposing political forces, involving not only the defiance of imposed neoliberal common sense and the

invention of a new language of the future, but also a contest to dominate the key terms and understandings that straddle the dominant and subordinate historical blocs.³⁷ These include the language of fairness, inclusion, democracy, society, nation and patriotism, and innovation; the left needs to coalesce around a concept of the 'progressive national interest' to reshape the Brexit era.

The election campaign has also shown that material interests really do count. For the first time in living memory Labour was sufficiently brave to put forward an inspired radical public and distributive programme that could be discussed on the doorstep and chimed with sections of the population who were tired of austerity and inequality and prepared to back a clear alternative. At the same time, we are still in the Brexit era in which the critical concern will be how best to act in the 'national interest'. This poses the question, which version of national interest should be pursued?

What emerges therefore is a progressive national narrative that is open rather than closed.

We need to instill in the popular imagination the idea that a fairer society is a more productive one and that a nation that collaborates with other nations, within the UK and beyond, is a stronger and better nation. What emerges therefore is a progressive national narrative that is open rather than closed. The election appears to have tipped both the forces and argument in favour of a more connected and less isolating version of Brexit, thus offering the possibility of a looser but nevertheless cordial relationship with other European countries. The same will apply here in the UK in relation to a new set of federal relationships involving Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with a more prominent role for the English regions (something that to its credit the Labour manifesto relays). Varoufakis has written about an alternative to the 'barricaded nation state' in the form of a progressive internationalism based on a New Deal for all.³⁸

At the roots of an open country will be people creating and recreating the concept of community and a vibrant locality in which they can exercise greater control over their lives. This can become part of a new type of ‘civic socialism’ that involves building more cohesive communities based on a closer relationship between what the London Mayor refers to as ‘work, living and playing’.³⁹ That is why it is so important for Labour and the left to develop a narrative and strategies that seek to transform post-industrial communities economically coupled with a pride of place and a strong sense of the local and regional. But here too there are more radical interpretations of ‘civic socialism’ that are manifesting in transformatory conceptions such as ‘radical municipalism’ and ‘beyond capitalism dynamics’.⁴⁰ Both the operative and the insurgent versions of local political life have to be brought into dialogue.

GRASS ROOTS MOVEMENTS AS THE BASE OF THE PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCE

The roots of renewal are almost always to be found in radical activism (progressive activity purposefully directed). Jeremy Gilbert reminds us, ‘The coalition (or “progressive alliance”) strategy must never be seen as an alternative to grassroots mobilisation – they are two prongs of the same strategic fork, not different political approaches.’

At the very base of the Progressive Alliance, therefore, lies a new collaborative, participative political life, through not only forms of consultation such as citizens’ panels, but also deliberative democracy where different groups come together to resolve deep-seated problems and create new life possibilities. These mobilisations, resistances and the building of radical civil society through collective endeavours form the permanent foundations of the progressive political bloc. It is important to recall that the ‘Spirit of 1945’ was not just the result the Second World War, but followed the patient political struggle and community building that the Labour Party conducted throughout the harsh decade of the 1930s.

These four strands of narrative and strategy are required to supplement the political

approach of the leading force, Corbyn’s Labour Party, in order to confront the totality of the Conservative-led Regressive Alliance. The final section of this paper therefore analyses the challenge of Corbynism and, in light of the concept of the Progressive Alliance and progressive bloc-building, the challenge for Corbynism.

PART 4

THE CHALLENGE OF CORBYNISM: THE CHALLENGE FOR CORBYNISM

THE BALANCE OF FORCES IN JUNE 2017 – A POLITICO-MILITARY METAPHOR

In 2015 the Conservative political–ideological bloc constitutes an extensive and well-organised array of ‘ramparts and earthworks’ geared to fighting successful political and ideological ‘wars of position’ and occasional ‘wars of manoeuvre’.⁴² This contrasts sharply with the ramshackle political and ideological ‘trenches’ of Labour and the left, which could be characterised as fragmented and in a state of serious disrepair.⁴³

In July 2017, the contours of the battlefield look very different. Viewed in politico-military terms, Labour has conducted a brilliant manoeuvre against a complacent and superior enemy to force a stalemate when a serious defeat was widely anticipated. The party has emerged from this battle much stronger (another increase in membership taking it to 600,000 and with 45 per cent post-election poll ratings in mid-June). Its generals have led in a manner far better than expected and it has an appetite for the next and possibly decisive battle. There is also every chance that it can formulate a winning strategy and marshal the necessary resources.

But it is also attempting to recover and still has more power than the subordinate force to decide when and where the next major battle will be. It also knows the insurgent’s line of attack and will be better prepared next time.

The dominant force, while still broadly in command of the war arena, has been stung by the resistance while expecting an easy win. It cannot cope with the stalemate and is in disarray. But it is also attempting to recover and still has more power than the subordinate force to decide when and where the next major battle will be. It also knows the insurgent’s line of

attack and will be better prepared next time. But its record of adaptability may not be able to defy the fact that the whole dynamic of the political war may have changed.

THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF CORBYN'S LABOUR AND THE LEFT BLOC

Corbyn and Corbynism

The Labour Party now finds itself in a highly paradoxical situation. Although it lost an election, everyone feels it has won something very significant. It is now a genuine mass party and has recovered ground not only in England, but also to some extent in Scotland. It is also a stronger governing force in Wales.

Jeremy Corbyn has confounded his left critics (and I was one of them) who thought that he did not have the leadership skills or the strategy to force the Tories to a standstill. He is widely seen as a person of principle, quietly communicative and imbued with strong progressive values. He is a comfortable campaigner (like Bernie Sanders) and these virtues count for a lot in this populist age. But, and this is the surprise, he has surrounded himself with people who have made some good calls – building up Momentum as a social and mass campaigning organisation, mobilising the young to make them into an effective voter bloc, being able therefore to develop grassroots social media over the established media, designing a bold and successful manifesto, and using mass outdoor rallies to project a sense of popular appeal.

but, crucially, the Corbyn approach was based on the simple understanding that people have had enough of austerity and want a decisive change

The risk was that this strategy could have produced left 'echo-chamber' politics but, crucially, the Corbyn approach was based on the simple understanding that people have had enough of austerity and want a decisive

change. He has done this in the teeth of scepticism and opposition within his own party and wider society. It is an achievement indeed. He has got where he is so far by exercising a virtuous stubbornness. However, with more confidence and now greater support within the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), even this may change. Nonetheless, on a more sober note his achievements and those of the Labour Party also have to be measured against the performance of the adversary. Theresa May and the Conservatives fought an abysmal general election campaign.

The struggles within Corbynism thus may not be so much about policy and political content but more about style and culture and how closed or open the politics.

The emerging complexities of Corbynism are held together by the political and symbolic persona of Jeremy Corbyn. Corbynism in 2017 appears to comprise at least two tendencies. The first is a statist, sectarian hard left politics, represented by many of those who surround him at the national level. This has provided some of the discipline and focus, but is unattractive at the human and wider political levels and vulnerable to ideological attack as promoting a historically failed form of top-down socialism. The second tendency is the growth in the number of local insurgent anti-austerity activists. Often young, without much previous involvement in politics, they have been inspired by Corbyn's message of hope and seek to build a new type of left politics. Both tendencies have manifested themselves in Momentum. The struggles within Corbynism thus may not be so much about policy and political content but more about style and culture and how closed or open the politics.

The vitality and limitations of the new left oppositions

Corbynism, as distinct from the Jeremy Corbyn the leader, also needs to be analysed in a broader and historical sense. It is part of the international trend of new left oppositions that have broken with traditional social democracy, marked by an emphatic rejection of neoliberalism and its austerity strategies. New energetic movements have sprung up in various forms,⁴⁵ having arrived as ‘external surges’ as new left and often digitised parties beyond those of established parties. These include parties such as Syriza, Podemos, the Pirate parties and Alternativot.⁴⁶ The 5-Star Movement, which is thriving in Italy, is more difficult to locate on the left–right continuum. Conversely, some established social democratic parties have moved to the left as the result of ‘internal surges’. These include the social and political movements of Corbyn’s Labour and the Bernie Sanders’ movement among US Democrats.

While they harness new social and political energies and promote radical visions of the future, these new movements have found it difficult to break through to form progressive governments. In general, the new left oppositions have not been adept at building cultural, political and economic alliances or hegemonic blocs. Some of them have been better than others but, in the main, they have emphasised their own alternative political identities and tended towards sectarianism. In The Osborne Supremacy, Labour under Corbynism was described as a ‘primitive political bloc’, existing as a vital but subordinate force that remains isolated from other progressive tendencies in society and key social groups.

But it may only be able to do this if it abandons sectarianism to develop more multi-based alliances – within the Labour Party itself, between this broader and more open party and other progressive political forces, and between a progressive political formation and civil society

However, reaching 40 per cent of the vote and creating a political party as a mass movement suggests that Corbynism could now have the capacity to break through this ceiling. But it may only be able to do this if it abandons

sectarianism to develop more multi-based alliances – within the Labour Party itself, between this broader and more open party and other progressive political forces, and between a progressive political formation and civil society. This strategy may be the key not only to winning a general election, but also to leading the country in relation to Brexit, and to creating a sustainable progressive political or historical bloc.

But it may only be able to do this if it abandons sectarianism to develop more multi-based alliances – within the Labour Party itself, between this broader and more open party and other progressive political forces, and between a progressive political formation and civil society

THE CRISIS OF TRADITIONAL SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND ITS POTENTIAL RENEWAL THROUGH CIVIC SOCIALISM

Amid the dominance of Corbynism, there is a danger of forgetting about other tendencies within the Labour Party. Consideration needs to be given to more mainstream social democrats and their potential role.

Traditional social democracy has been struggling now for decades. It was historically outflanked by neoliberalism, and when it re-emerged in the UK in the form of Blairism its strategic compromises eventually led to New Labour’s downfall. Since then British Labour social democracy has failed to provide a convincing economic and social programme or a language of communication with what remains of the traditional working class, large sections of which have defected to parties promoting English nationalism. It also lost its social democratic

mantle in Scotland to the SNP (although it has made a come-back in the general election).

The crisis of traditional British Labourism has been manifested in losing ground to the left within the Labour Party, the relative isolation of its MPs in the Commons, and the lack of an obvious leadership figure. I am far from convinced that a traditional social democratic figure would have matched the performance of Corbyn's Labour despite the weakness of Theresa May. They would not have inspired and mobilised the young, nor would they have produced such a clear and radical manifesto. But I also reject the analysis that social democrats who have been sceptical of his leadership are automatically neoliberals. Some Blairites may be, but most are not. And here too there have been signs of renewal. Many social democrats are seeking to embrace a new political economy and 'civic socialism' around a reformed and participative concept of local government.

It is also interesting to note that mainstream social democrats are in the forefront of a new local and civic politics, with popular figures in the form of mayors Sadiq Khan and Andy Burnham, and local civic leaders such as Richard Leese in Manchester and Darren Rodwell in East London. This type of local social democracy is the main thrust of the group Labour Together,⁴⁷ led by some Labour MPs, which aims to reconnect with working-class communities and to build a democratic left vision from the local level. It is interesting to note that Corbynism has not yet asserted itself in this local progressive civic arena, albeit with the possible exception of Preston.⁴⁸ Here there lies an opportunity for bridge-building within the Labour Party around the vision of radical local governance.

THE CHALLENGE FOR CORBYNISM: AN EXPANDED LEFT FORCE BUT NOT YET MATURE

Following the 'Corbyn surge' the Labour Party currently sees itself as the sole 'go it alone' force focused on 'one last heave' to propel it into government. This is the dominant strategy, but it is full of promise and dangers. The promise is of the offer of genuine political change, a break with the neoliberal past that will inspire many to give Labour the chance to put its manifesto

into practice. It now has a leader who may be beginning to chime with the wider public and not just the young.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the dangers are many and varied. The most immediate is that Labour might not be able to win over sufficient previous UKIP voters and sections of the older voting bloc to win the necessary 64 seats at the next general election. Failure to do so could result in another stalemate situation, possibly with Labour being the largest party but without a functioning majority. Moreover, Labour also looks relatively unprepared for government. It has a thoughtful manifesto, but notably lacks precision in its policies on Brexit as it continues to fudge its position, in order to hold on to the younger Remain vote while retaining the older Leave vote.

But there are deeper problems, which principally concern Labour's sectarianism and political style. The Labour left appears in no mood to reach out to other sections of the Labour Party, which represent its social democratic tradition and in particular its relationship with working-class voters. Nor does Labour as a whole appear to value relationships with others. In reality, Labour of all colours remains a top-down force with only a vision of themselves as a political party supported by movements such as Momentum, which they seek to control. Put another way, Labour does not have a conception of a set of alliances that constitutes a viable progressive bloc: it only has a conception of itself. These internal and external sectarianisms are highly unattractive to the public and may well prove politically damaging in both the short and longer-term.

While it is clear now that a mass and successful Labour Party will be a leading force in any progressive bloc, the party cannot on its own represent the range of progressive forces and may not yet have the strategies and political conceptions to move it into government. It is important to remember that what has been achieved in the 2017 general election was a successful 'war of manoeuvre'. While Corbyn and Labour have built a powerful insurgent movement, there are several weaknesses that will have to be addressed in what can be seen as a return to the 'war of position':

- They have a strong and costed manifesto, but have not yet developed a fully fledged economic narrative capable of winning public confidence in their economic competence.
- Labour has yet to fashion a progressive strategy for Brexit. The election campaign focused on radical social and public expenditure issues with little if anything said about Brexit. Here there is the potential for splits between a hard-line 'Lexit' position advocated by McDonnell and his supporters, and the pursuit of a progressive 'Soft Brexit' approach supported by most other parts of the party. Corbyn may end up taking a more mediating role, conscious that he needs to balance the interests and views of Labour's sub-blocs – the young and the core working-class vote that has flirted with UKIP.
- There is little relationship between Corbyn's Labour and all the other radical and innovative civil society developments taking place across society. The view so far is of a big tent of a red hue with the call to 'join us'. Many will, and that will be great, but many will not. Conversely, as Mike Rustin argues, Labour needs to create a set of inclusive intermediate institutions in order to broaden policy-making in the current period to develop and fill out the new agenda.⁵⁰
- Corbynism is not backed by an intellectual surge. There are interesting theorists such as Srnicek and Williams who contributed to the 'alternative ownership model', but the radical intellectual tradition remains narrow.⁵¹ This too will need to be broadened and made more inclusive.
- Finally, Jeremy Corbyn is rightly seen by many as inspirational, but his perceived limitations away from the campaign trail were not simply the result of a hostile press or hostilities within the PLP, important though they were. The widespread misgivings of many progressives about his leadership skills and political approach proved justified in the dire polling of April 2017. He needs to grow an additional political persona if he is to succeed in the coming period.

There is now a real danger that, boosted by electoral success, left sectarianism takes hold of the Labour Party. This could place a cap on Labour's appeal with the effect that polling 40

per cent was not a platform for further advance, but a high-water mark. Political narrowness could also provide the ideological and political space for counter forces to emerge and reorganise. The first is a Conservative adaptation in a more human and communicative direction – what Matthew Ancona sees as the 'Amber Rudd option'.⁵² The second, and possibly more serious still, is that the lack of any dialogue and accommodation of wider social democratic thinking will provide ideological and political space for a centrist force to emerge. This would be a disastrous development.

Political narrowness could also provide the ideological and political space for counter forces to emerge and reorganise.

THREE FINAL REFLECTIONS

This think piece concludes with three brief reflections. First, it is important not to underestimate the adversary – the Conservatives will try to buy time, choose a new leader, adapt their policies and exploit Labour's perceived weaknesses through a new 'double-shuffle'. They have done this in the past, but their ability to do it again will depend on not only their political skill, but also whether we are really entering a new political era and the degree to which Labour and the progressive left can articulate a historic turning point.

Second, it is tempting to be transfixed by conjunctural events. The 2017 election result was unexpected and exciting for the left and all those who seek to leave behind austerity and neoliberalism. The challenge now for Labour and the wider left is to raise its political game by recognising that the upcoming period will involve intense and complex political and ideological contestation – the war of position. The left will win if it offers not just a new content of policy (the manifesto that announced an era of fairness), but also new ways of doing things. This requires radical alliance-based politics rather

than a central command and control approach. It is understandable that all progressives want to win Labour over the line, but winning a majority through 'one last heave' will not be easy and nor will it be sufficient.

Finally, we need to see beyond the most immediate and focus again on the more organic trends and requirements to build not only a more unified and diverse Labour Party, but also an expanded pluralist and collaborative progressive bloc that reflects the fundamental trends of the 21st century. Beyond the notable achievements of Corbynism to date, developing a 'mature' political formation may be the key to both a sustainable progressive government and the actual means of getting there. The critical factor will be the democratic manner of the victory and whether the political style is symptomatic of a sustainable future progressive politics. We do not need unnecessary sectarianism that contributes to a chaotic and politically isolated left experiment that ultimately falters, thus putting the progressive movement back a generation.

NOTES

- ¹ See Patrick Butler, 'UK survey finds huge support for ending austerity', *Guardian*, 28 June, 2017.
- ² The term 'Mayism without May' was coined by Professor Michael Young of University College London's Institute of Education in his response to an earlier draft of this think piece.
- ³ This Compass publication focused on the roots and nature of contemporary Conservative political hegemony under David Cameron and George Osborne. See Ken Spours, *The Osborne Supremacy*, Compass, November 2015, www.compassonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/The-Osborne-Supremacy-Compass.pdf (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ⁴ For a liberal conservative view of the new Tory nationalism see Alex Massie, 'Britain for the British: Theresa May leads a new nationalist government', blog, *Spectator*, 6 October 2016, <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/10/britain-british-theresa-may-leads-new-nationalist-government/> (accessed 15 November 2016).
- ⁵ Reflecting on the EU vote, John Harris argued that Brexit is about more than the EU: it's about class, inequality and voters feeling excluded from politics. See John Harris, 'If you've got money, you vote in... if you haven't got money, you vote out', *Guardian*, 24 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/commentisfree/2016/jun/24/divided-britain-brexit-money-class-inequality-westminster> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ⁶ Zoe Williams, 'Think the north and the poor caused Brexit? Think again', *Guardian*, 7 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/07/north-poor-brexit-myths> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ⁷ See Spours, *The Osborne Supremacy*.
- ⁸ James Forsyth, 'Theresa May is the most left-wing Tory prime minister for 40 years', *Spectator* 14 January 2017, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/01/theresa-may-is-the-most-left-wing-tory-prime-minister-for-40-years/> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ⁹ Nick Pearce and Michael Kenny, 'The empire strikes back: how the vote for Brexit has re-opened deep wounds about race, identity and the future of the United Kingdom', draft article to be published in the *New Statesman*.
- ¹⁰ Nick Timothy, 'What does the Conservative Party offer a working-class kid from Brixton, Birmingham, Bolton or Bradford?', *Conservative Home*, 22 March 2016, www.conservativehome.com/thecolumnists/2016/03/nick-timothy-what-does-the-conservative-party-offer-a-working-class-kid-from-brixton-birmingham-bolton-or-bradford.html (accessed 22 June 2017).
- ¹¹ Alan Travers and Caelainn Barr 'Youthquake' behind Labour election surge divides generations *The Guardian* 20 June, 2017.
- ¹² Owen Jones cites the work of pollster Ian Warren who concludes that two groups in particular defected from Labour to UKIP – blue collar working households that are socially conservative on issues of defence, social security and immigration, and deprived disaffected voters often in insecure work. These people would never have voted Tory but feel talked down to by Labour. See Owen Jones, 'Labour would save the NHS – but the NHS won't save Labour', *Guardian*, 1 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/01/labour-would-save-the-nhs-but-the-nhs-wont-save-labour> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ¹³ Source, Wikipedia, 'United Kingdom general election, 2017', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_United_Kingdom_general_election,_2017 (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ¹⁴ Owen Jones 'Ukip may be dead but its agenda is alive and well', *Guardian*, 18 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/18/ukip-tories-labour-policy> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ¹⁵ 'Third force' politics, or what Gramsci referred to as 'Caesarism', occurs where the two opposing fundamental forces are deadlocked. The 'third force' can play a progressive or regressive role in relation to tipping the stalemate between the fundamental classes. Donald Trump, UKIP, the Brexit campaigns and European anti-immigration parties are manifestations of regressive third force politics that seeks to bring disillusioned working-class voters into a newly rebalanced right bloc. For a detailed discussion of this see Ken Spours, *The Very Modern Prince: the 21st century*

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- 16 Jessica Elgot, George Osborne says Theresa May is a “dead woman walking”, *Guardian*, 11 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/11/george-osborne-says-theresa-may-is-a-dead-woman-walking> (accessed 2 July 2017).
 - 17 Stuart Hall, ‘New Labour’s double-shuffle’, *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Culture*, 27 (4), 319–35, 2005.
 - 18 The concept of the ‘good state’ was outlined in May’s speech to the 2016 Conservative Party conference. See Peter Dominiczak and Michael Wilkinson, ‘Remember the good that government can do, says Theresa May as she vows to intervene to help workers’, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 October 2016, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-may-patriotic-speech-conservative-party-conference-live/ (accessed 2 July 2017).
 - 19 See Allister Heath, ‘Theresa May’s speech shows that free-market ideas are in decline’, *Business Telegraph*, 6 October 2016, www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2016/10/05/no-prime-minister-the-government-doesnt-always-know-whats-best/ (accessed 2 July 2017).
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 - 21 Mike Rustin, ‘The prospect of change’, *Soundings Blog*, 16 June 2017, <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/blog/ge2017-corbyn-labour-what-next> (accessed 2 July 2017).
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 - 24 Matthew d’Ancona also identifies Conservative three grouping, but defined somewhat differently – the Ideologues; the Explainers and Adapters in ‘What do the Tories do now? One question, three solutions’ *The Guardian* 3 July, 2017.
 - 25 Nick Cohen, ‘Theresa May lied and lied again to become PM’, *Guardian*, 30 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/30/theresa-may-lie-and-lied-to-become-prime-minister> (accessed 2 July 2017).
 - 26 John Harris, ‘Britain’s cities are falling victim to Theresa May’s cold, crabby nostalgia politics’, *Guardian*, 20 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/20/britain-cities-falling-victim-to-theresa-may-cold-crabby-nostalgia-politics> (accessed 2 July 2017).
 - 27 ‘UK car firms “want to be in EU single market”’, *BBC News*, 28 September 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-37496273> (accessed 2 July 2017).
 - 28 Angela Monaghan, ‘UK consumers run down savings to record low’, *Guardian Business Live*, 30 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/live/2017/jun/30/pound-steadies-at-130-ahead-of-uk-growth-figures-business-live> (accessed 2 July 2017).
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- ³⁴ Labour Party, *Alternative Models of Ownership: report to the Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer and Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy*, 2017, www.labour.org.uk/page/-/PDFs/9472_Alternative%20Models%20of%20Ownership%20all_v4.pdf (accessed 28 June 2017).
- ³⁵ The concept of ‘publics’ has been extensively researched by colleagues at the Open University. See for example, Nick Mahony and Hilde Stephansen, ‘The frontiers of participatory public engagement’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2016, 1–5, and Nick Mahony and John Clarke, ‘Public crises, public futures’, *Cultural Studies*, 27 (6), 2013, 933–54.
- ³⁶ Mariana Mazzucato and Carlota Perez, *Innovation as Growth Policy: the challenge for Europe*, Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex, July 2014, <https://marianamazzucato.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/SPRU-WP-Mazzucato-Perez.pdf> (accessed 2 July 2017).
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- ³⁸ Yanis Varoufakis, ‘We need an alternative to Trump’s nationalism. It isn’t the status quo’, *Guardian*, 22 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/22/trumps-nationalism-response-not-globalization> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ³⁹ Cited in Greater London Authority, *A City for All Londoners*, 2016, https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/city_for_all_londoners_nov-2016.pdf (accessed 16 November 2016).
- ⁴⁰ Plan C. and Bertie Russell, *Radical Municipalism: demanding the future*, *Open Democracy*, 26 June 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/plan-c/radical-municipalism-demanding-future> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ⁴¹ Jeremy Gilbert, ‘Quick first thoughts on the June 2017 UK General Election result’, blog, <https://jeremygilbertwriting.wordpress.com> (accessed 13 June 2017).
- ⁴² Gramsci contrasted an ideological and political ‘war of position’ likened to the trench warfare of the First World War, with the ‘war of manoeuvre’ reflected in the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917. In contemporary politics, ‘war of manoeuvre’ could be associated with offensive movements such as general elections or mass campaigns aimed at shifting the balance of power. Conversely, ‘war of position’ can be associated with the more patient building of ideological dominance and alliance building. Successful political forces combine both strategies.
- ⁴³ See Spours, *The Osborne Supremacy*.
- ⁴⁴ The Tory election campaign has been detailed in Andy Beckett’s account ‘How the Tory election machine fell apart’, *Guardian*, 26 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/26/tory-election-machine-fell-apart-negative-tactics> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ⁴⁵ The new left oppositions are analysed by Susan Watkins in *New Left Review*, 98, March 2016.
- ⁴⁶ See Adnan’s, *21C POLITICS Is the Party Over?* for details of these new parties.
- ⁴⁷ Labour Together, www.labourtogether.co.uk
- ⁴⁸ Stephen Bush refers to Labour’s civic experiment in Preston. See Stephen Bush, ‘What Corbynism and Milibandism do, and don’t, have in common’, *New Statesman*, 13 April 2017, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2017/04/what-corbynism-and-milibandism-do-and-dont-have-common> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ⁴⁹ Owen Jones makes this point in his reflections on Jeremy Corbyn’s speech at Glastonbury and the way it was covered across the media. See Owen Jones, ‘Glastonbury is more evidence: Corbyn’s appeal crosses classes’, *Guardian*, 26 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/26/labour-jeremy-corbyn-middle-working-class-glastonbury> (accessed 2 July 2017).
- ⁵⁰ See Mike Rustin, ‘The prospect of change’.
- ⁵¹ See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: postcapitalism and a world without work*, Verso Books, 2015, and Labour Party, *Alternative Models of Ownership*, 2017.

⁵² Matthew d'Ancona, 'May is the past for Tories now. And Amber Rudd looks like the future', Guardian 12 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/12/may-tories-amber-rudd-prime-minister-leadership> (accessed 2 July 2017).

