

THINK PIECE  
*#89*

# **Big but brittle: Why one-more-heave is likely to fail Labour**

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Matthew managed Christian Aid's campaign against international tax avoidance. He has equipped grassroots campaigners all over the world with the skills to hold decision makers to account on issues ranging from disability to a living wage. He was Director of Communications at The Cystic Fibrosis Trust and spearheaded the charity's high profile campaign on lung transplantation in 2014. Matthew has published academic articles on Labour and Conservative party politics and is a Compass Associate.

This paper has benefitted from the observations and comments of Barry Langford and Neal Lawson, although the political judgements are the authors own.

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Whether the next general election is sooner or later it will almost certainly be hotly contested. Is Labour's surprise showing in June 2017 a base to build from or a high water mark? Should the Party go for a one more heave approach to get over the line or adopt a more hegemonic and alliance based approach? This Think Piece look at the evidence and suggests Labour may have reached a glass ceiling and this combined with a new level of voter volatility demands a fresh electoral strategy.

We are keen to keep exploring these key issues and would welcome any comments or ideas about how.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Matthew Sowemimo has campaigned on social justice and equality issues for twenty years.

## Executive summary

- Labour did much better than expected at the 2017 general election as policies struck a chord against a changed background of political economy and unprecedented voter mobilisation, especially among the young. But expectations were low to start with. The Tories ran the worst campaign in living memory and Labour came under little scrutiny.
- Labour was successful in expanding its electoral coalition by mobilising young voters, non-voters and highly educated professionals who were opposed to Britain's departure from the European Union. Labour was particularly successful with voters under the age of 40. Despite the media's emphasis on young voters, Labour's greatest surge was among 30–44 year olds – many of them with jobs, families and financial commitments.
- The election saw an intensification of earlier trends, with Labour becoming the party of cosmopolitan cities and the Conservatives entrenching their position as the party of towns and the countryside. The Conservatives also further expanded their already big advantage with voters aged over 65.
- However, Labour's loss of working class support, particularly among those with low qualifications, jeopardises its hopes of forming a governing majority. Labour's electoral coalition has hit clear demographic limits. The decline of class-based voting and the unprecedented volatility shown during the course of the 2017 campaign indicates that the party leadership can take nothing for granted as it prepares for the next general election. Furthermore, it gained pro- and anti-Brexit voters – that trick may not be repeatable whenever the next election is called.
- And despite Labour's unexpected election gains, the general election saw a partial realignment of working class voters behind the Conservative Party. But the Conservative's efforts to expand their electoral coalition came at the price of alienating highly educated voters who supported Remain in the 2016 referendum. The Conservatives were also impeded by the relatively poor performance of the economy relative to 2015. This may not be the case when the next election is held.
- Theresa May lost her majority in large part because progressive votes were channelled very effectively against the Conservative Party. The Progressive Alliance enabled Labour to gain seats that it otherwise would have lost given the narrowness of some constituency outcomes in places like Derbyshire.
- Voter volatility is now high: 20%, or over 6,500,000 voted tactically on 8 June 2017 and party identification is at an all time low. People move to and from parties with much greater ease. The role of social media in this is now decisive.
- There could be few votes left for Labour to squeeze out of the non-voters and left-voters.
- These events, trends and adverse development suggest that Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party has yet to break out of the cycle of decline experienced by most European social democratic parties. The danger for Labour is that 2017 could just be a blip.
- One risk is that Labour's leadership acts as if those in the centre have nowhere to go and takes their support for granted, just as the Blair leadership took the left for granted – politics abhors vacuums, as we have seen. A rejuvenated Liberal Democratic Party or a new party could target this ground successfully.
- The danger now is that Labour's leadership will opt for a one more heave strategy – what we can call a 45% strategy instead of the failed 2015 35% strategy.
- But thinking in voting blocs and believing that any party owns any voters is the politics of the past.
- Labour needs a vision, narrative and policies to develop a hegemonic hold on the nation – not just so that it can win an election but so it can build and sustain a radical reforming country.
- It is unlikely Labour can achieve this alone. In many seats the Liberal Democrats rather than Labour are best placed to beat the Tories. In 2017 the Progressive Alliance polled 3 million more votes than the regressive alliance BLUKIP

– an alliance of right wing Tories, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Democratic Unionist Party. How those votes are going to be used at the next election is key. In over 60 seats on 8 June the wasted progressive votes were bigger than the margin of victory for the Tories.

- As the First Past the Post voting system increasingly delivers hung parliaments, the need for a Progressive Alliance and an over-arching progressive narrative that allows cosmopolitan and communitarian voters to unite is going to continue to be critical to deliver a non-Tory government.

## Overview

The first section of this paper seeks to interpret Labour's 2017 performance in a historical perspective. It sets out a framework for judging Labour's performance in this year's general election taking into account the following factors:

- Contested views on why Labour lost in 2015
- Political science theories about why political parties win or lose elections
- How far Labour has broken out of the cycle of poor performance of its European sister parties
- The anticipated disruption of Labour's coalition caused by the 2016 European referendum.

Labour's 2015 widely unexpected general election defeat stimulated an intense and polarised debate within the party. Much of this debate reflected ideological differences that had developed since Labour's period in office and fused conflicts over electoral strategy with political economy. Jeremy Corbyn's election and his challenge to the party's establishment was also a direct response to the 2015 defeat.

Earlier in the labour movement's history the so-called hard left gained momentum in the aftermath of the party's expulsion from office. Most notably, Tony Benn's grassroots revolution was a repudiation of what he saw as the failed social democratic Keynesian consensus of the post war period (Marquand 1988). Both Labour's hard left and soft left in

1979 and 2010 were able to point plausibly to a breakdown in Labour administrations' chosen economic model as paving the way for electoral defeat. This paper will consider how far the contested analyses of the 2015 defeat were supported or vindicated by the 2017 election outcome. As we will see, opposing views about the party's electoral strategy were interwoven with divisions over public policy.

The 2017 general outcome also needs to be assessed in the context of the struggles experienced by comparable social democratic parties in Europe. These parties have sought to maintain or enhance their support against the backdrop of some similar social and economic conditions to the UK, particularly the aftermath of the banking crisis.

Labour's 2017 performance has to be further judged against the key electoral dynamics that influenced its heavy defeat in 2015, most notably the rise of UKIP, which lured away a substantial section of the party's traditional working class electorate. Did the 2017 election outcome indicate that the UKIP threat has been disposed of by the party?

Political scientists have developed analytical frameworks that transcend the fortunes of social democratic parties and examine the impact of factors like economic conditions and perceptions of leaders on the performance of all political parties. This paper examines Labour's position entering the election and the outcome using these frameworks.

First this paper sets out how expectations of the general election outcome were influenced by the tumultuous 2016 European referendum. The referendum generated fears among Labour members of parliament that a full scale electoral realignment might take place at the party's expense, mirroring the collapse of the old Liberal Party in the aftermath of the First World War. As we will see, the Conservative Party leadership in its rhetoric and its formal position in the European Union secession negotiations sought to make these predictions a reality. Did the 2017 general election outcome show that Theresa May's ambitions had comprehensively failed?

The second section assesses the pattern of support achieved by Labour and the

Conservatives, looking at which demographic groups voted for each party and why. It examines how far the predictions of Jeremy Corbyn and his critics were borne out by the results, whether the much predicted realignment took place, how far traditional theories over the parties' respective standings on the economy and leadership are supported by the outcome, and finally whether Labour's performance represents a major divergence from the fortunes of its sister parties in Europe.

The third section looks at how far the Progressive Alliance effort affected the general election outcomes and the extent to which it aided wider trends at work in the contest.

This paper concludes by considering, given this analysis, whether Labour is poised to win the next general election given its performance on 8 June 2017.

## **1. 2017 election in historical perspective**

### **Labour's loss of economic credibility**

The 2009 banking crisis was Labour's 'Black Wednesday' a massive loss of credibility and voter confidence over the party's economic stewardship. The banking crisis has the greatest impact on voters with low incomes but it also led to an erosion of the party's electoral standing with voters across the income range. After 2009 the Conservatives decisively overtook Labour as the party best perceived to manage the economy effectively. Prior to the banking crisis Labour had been able to undertake a degree of redistribution against the backdrop of low interest rates, low mortgage rates and a growing economy. After this point resource allocation decisions, including in taxes and spending, became more contentious as the national cake shrunk. The 2010 general election saw the party lose almost all of its constituencies in the south of England.

Essex University researchers have a long established model that correlates consumer confidence levels, the perceived economic competence of the parties competing for power, and electoral outcomes. Professor David Sanders pioneered this model. He

argues that the expulsion of ruling parties in elections such as 1979, 1997 and 2010 show the strength of this relationship. A series of commentators have argued that the recovering economy in 2015 enabled the Conservatives to argue that they were more responsible economic managers than Labour (Green 2015).

It is notable that even during the years 2011 and 2012 when the economy was at its weakest voters still had more confidence in Conservative economic management than in the Labour alternative. However the 2017 general election took place against a different economic backdrop. Real wages dropped for the first time in three years in 2017, after a period in which they recovered following the end of the financial crisis. An analysis in the Financial Times found that the average British worker will earn less in 2021 than they did in 2008. Britain is currently the only growing industrialised economy where wages are falling and not rising.

### **Poor leadership ratings**

Many analysts have argued that a party leader's approval rating is closely identified with their party's electoral prospects. Ed Miliband and Gordon Brown had consistently low approval ratings. By the end of the 2015 general election campaign David Cameron had a strong lead as the 'best prime minister' over Ed Miliband.

Jeremy Corbyn experienced no electoral honeymoon with voters in his leadership competence ratings. Corbyn began his leadership with negative ratings and by the time of the 2016 Labour leadership challenge his ratings were as low as Michael Foot's were during the disastrous 1983 general election contest. Labour MPs during their attempted 'coup' against Corbyn's leadership insisted that the party could not win general elections with a leader experiencing this level of unpopularity. If, as expected, the Conservative Party elect a new leader to replace Theresa May, her successor could improve Tory ratings if she or he is perceived to be a much stronger prime minister than Jeremy Corbyn.



## The debate following the 2015 general election

Labour's unexpectedly decisive defeat in 2015 sparked an intense debate both within the party's leadership contest and beyond it. Many figures put forward explanations consistent with their preordained views. Thinkers and activists associated with the Blairite wing of the party insisted that Labour had strayed too far from the electoral centre and had been punished as a result. In an Observer article on the Sunday after the election defeat the former prime minister said Labour had to accompany calls for greater social equality with an emphasis on supporting individual aspiration and championing the role of the private sector in wealth creation (Blair 2015). Liz Kendall's leadership bid articulated these arguments.

Jeremy Corbyn and his many supporters argued that Labour did not have a sufficiently radical cutting edge to its policies and therefore had not galvanised the base of its support. Corbyn argued that an alternative path to victory would involve mobilising young people and non-voters. The hard left of the party were able to support the SNP's electoral resurgence with its distinctively anti-austerity and anti-Trident platform, to provide comfort for their views. Neal Lawson at Compass argued that the political outlooks of both the party's right and left wings were psychologically trapped in different periods in the party's past and that electoral victory could not be built using traditional top-down forms of politics. Lawson argued for Labour to make strong connections to a wider progressive movement in order not just to win power but to rethink the very nature of how power is exerted in today's society (Lawson 2015: 13).

The party's Blue Labour wing had become a major new pole of debate and discussion in the Miliband era. Blue Labour centred on the importance of a strong common culture based on social institutions like the family and neighbourhood relationships as the mechanism for generating security and opportunity for disadvantaged communities. Blue Labour thinkers like Jonathan Rutherford have long warned of Labour's growing disconnection from working class communities, fuelled in part by the Labour leadership's cosmopolitanism. Rutherford saw the 2015

outcome as corroborating his argument that the party had alienated many working class communities and created the conditions for UKIP to develop a hold on their affections (Rutherford and Cruddas 2015). Rutherford argued that Labour needed to respond to working class resistance to immigration and show greater respect for conservative cultures within the country more generally.

Commentators have increasingly argued that the rising salience of the issue of immigration policy shows that values and cultural matters are becoming at least as influential as economics in shaping voters' preferences and outlook. Jon Cruddas' independent report on the 2015 general election used the values typology produced by the Campaign Company to analyse the dynamics behind the election result (Cruddas 2016). This typology centres on how different groups in the population respond to social, economic and cultural change. The report argued that Labour had lost ground among two of three groups – 'settlers' and 'prospectors'. 'Settlers' are a culturally anxious group whose members fear change; 'prospectors' are materialistic voters who reward parties perceived to enhance their financial circumstances. 'Prospectors' are the least ideological of the segments and are materialistic. Their votes are swayed by which of the parties they believe will improve their living standards. The final group is 'pioneers', who are culturally liberal and welcome change and innovation. They are emerging as the biggest group.

Professor Jane Green's more nuanced analysis saw Labour as needing to not only satisfy 'the centre' but also provide a strong left wing impetus to some of its traditional voters (Green 2015). Green argued the 2015 result might have been even worse if Labour had not motivated ideologically left of centre voters. Some of the post-2015 analyses overlapped across the party's factions. Labour's lack of economic credibility was identified both by the Blairite right and by the soft left's Jon Cruddas as an impediment to electoral success. Lawson and Rutherford both see Labour's cultural decay as a major dynamic behind its decline. However, Jon Cruddas's independent report on the election defeat was at its most persuasive when it pinpointed that the party's support

base had shrunken to a core of metropolitan cultural liberals (Cruddas 2016).

All of these analyses contained elements of truth in their conclusions but some were open to significant challenge. The Blairites' arguments were challenged by the dispersion of votes to parties that did not conceivably represent the electoral centre, most notably UKIP, the Greens and the SNP. The Blairites failed to acknowledge the party's loss of voters in its northern heartlands and persisted with the arguments that their forebears had made following Labour's 1987 general election loss. Their emphasis on the centre is also challenged by growing evidence that indicates segmentation of the electorate rather than clustering around a fixed point of attitudes and outlooks. The Social Market Foundation's study *Dead Centre* and NatCen's analysis of the 2016 referendum outcome indicate that defined groups in the population hold conflictual and polarised views, drawing on cultural preferences as well as economic characteristics. The absence of culture and values in the Blairites' analysis is their central intellectual failing.

The Cruddas review of the 2015 election result was on stronger ground in its emphasis on values-based voting becoming as strong an influence on voting behaviour as individuals' material and economic conditions. For example, Kirby Swales' analysis of the 2016 referendum results shows that cultural attitudes prevailed over economic considerations for key groups in the population (Swales 2016).

Blue Labour thinkers failed to acknowledge the tensions involved between reconnecting with defecting working class voters and maintaining the growing band of cosmopolitan voters. Blue Labour never defined or articulated the over-arching appeal that could bring together the 'settler' vote in towns and post-industrial communities with the pioneers of the dynamic and cosmopolitan cities.

### **The decline of class-based politics**

From the 1960s sociologists and political scientists began discussing how the decline of class solidarities were disadvantaging Labour. David Sanders contrasts the intensity of class-

based voting in the 1960s with trends in the 2010s. In 1964, just under two-thirds of middle class voters supported the Conservatives and a similar proportion of working class voters supported Labour: there was a very clear relationship between class and vote. By 2015, the class-vote nexus had weakened considerably. While the Conservatives garnered slightly more middle class votes (43%) than working class ones (33%), Labour's support was almost the same among the middle class (31%) as it was among the manual working class (33%). Class-based voting in fact declined progressively after 1964 (Sanders 2016).

Allied to this voters have lost their identification with individual political parties. This creates scope for there being much greater electoral volatility. For Blairite figures like Peter Mandelson, it strengthens the argument for the party to become maximisers of electoral preferences. Professor Stephen Fielding's analytical framework sees parties as being either able to shape voters' views and outlooks – preference shapers – or seeking to aggregate as many of these preferences as possible in order to form a governing majority. For Mandelson the weak attachment of voters to the political parties creates opportunities to assemble large sections of support by Labour aligning itself with the preferences of these electors.

### **Declining party identification**

Linked to the decline of class-based voting behaviour is the phenomenon that voters are increasingly less loyal to any of the political parties. This creates a much more volatile environment for all the parties as they cannot take for granted even recent increases in support. Lee and Young analysed data from the British Social Attitudes survey and found that not only has party identification fallen since the 1980s, but the strength of engagement has also declined (Lee and Young 2013: 4). In 1987 almost half (46%) of the British public said they had a 'very strong' or 'fairly strong' identification to a party. By 2010, only around a third (36%) of the public said this.

Ipsos MORI data shows that Labour faces a particularly challenge as its largest number of

new recruits – the under 25s – are the least loyal to a political party. Ipsos MORI data compared the party loyalty of different generations of voters (Duffy 2015) and found that 60% of the pre-war generation identify with a political party. However Generation X has only 30% levels of party identification. Only 20% of people within the Generation Y cohort of people (born 1985–2000) identify with a political party. David Sanders also argues that the fluidity of voter preferences demonstrated in recent general elections suggest that current electoral preferences are unlikely to last for very long (Sanders 2017a). Sanders argues that declining levels of class-based voting has opened up new opportunities for the political parties to exploit new issues of political cleavages in order to win support. As discussed above, some of these cleavages may be based on culture and national identity.

### **The impact of UKIP on Labour's electoral coalition**

However, the banking crisis may have simply accelerated the party's long-term detachment from its core vote. This can be seen with reference to key constituencies. In 2010 the Labour candidate John Denham saw an 11% fall in his vote in the Southampton Itchen seat after previously enjoying a comfortable majority. By 2015 the Conservatives had captured the seat and still hold it now. There were also sharp falls in the Labour vote in the Ashfield constituency in the North East of England in 2005 and 2010. It is now held by Gloria De Piero by a majority of only 441. Anxieties about Labour losing its working class base centred on the emergence of UKIP in the last parliament.

From 2011 to 2013 UKIP support rose by 10% among pensioners and those who had left school at 16. In 2013 white older men with relatively little formal education dominated UKIP's electoral base (Ford and Goodwin 2014: 165). Goodwin and Ford show how UKIP attracted votes that might have otherwise gone to Labour during the harshest periods of austerity and economic weakness (173). I have previously charted Labour's loss of working class voters in an era where other social democratic parties have struggled with the same challenge (Sowemimo 2015).

### **Labour's electoral fortunes in the context of the performance of European social democratic parties**

The 2014 European parliamentary elections could hardly have been worse for the centre left and sent a clear warning signal, resulting in its lowest representation since 1979. In Spain, the vote of the Spanish Socialist Workers' party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español; PSOE) collapsed following the banking crisis. The Irish Labour Party's vote halved from 14% to 7%. In the Netherlands, the Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid; PvdA) polled less than 10%. In France, the Socialists crashed to 7.4% of the vote in this year's National Assembly elections. In Germany, the Social Democrats' ratings have fallen to little more than 20% as they approach the federal election.

Labour's dire 2015 electoral performance actually sits at the upper end of the scale of its European sister parties. There are some commonalities in the factors that have driven down the performance of the European centre left. Several parties have lost support to far right anti-immigrant insurgent parties. For example, Le Monde found that half of the Front National's voters in the north of France are working class. As with UKIP supporters, these voters support progressive economic policies, like higher taxes for the wealthy. Painter has argued that the backlash against multiculturalism is linked to a broader set of cultural tensions. Lowles and Painter identify a social group of 'latent hostiles' who feel insecure in response to the economic and cultural dynamics brought about by globalisation. They fear both a loss of national identity and the loss of their living standards in the face of global competition (Lowles and Painter 2011). UKIP's referendum rhetoric offering to 'get our country back' powerfully embodies these anxieties.

Social democratic parties have also faced 'challenger parties' to their left in countries like France, Spain and Greece since the banking crisis. Most notably Podemos emerged to the left of PSOE and won 21% of the vote in the 2016 election. The Labour Party in Britain and Spanish Socialists were in power during the banking crisis and saw a direct loss of support as a consequence of



being considered to be poor economic stewards. However the Dutch and French centre left parties were also damaged by presiding over austerity economic policies that inflicted greatest damage on low income voters. A hard left party also emerged in France led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, winning 18% of the vote in the 2017 French presidential election.

It is important to note that the Corbyn hard left insurgency took place within the Labour Party. So the energy, including youth mobilisation and the increased membership, renewed Labour rather than diverted support from it, whereas Podemos drew support away from the Spanish Socialists. An Ipsos MORI opinion survey in the last few weeks of the French presidential campaign showed that Jean-Luc Mélenchon benefited from a surge of youth support similar to that of Podemos. Britain, France and Spain share the phenomenon of having a large 'wave' of economically disenfranchised young people who were channelled into either challenger parties or in Corbyn's case challenged the established leadership of a centre left party politically. Ipsos MORI research shows that young people in Britain have some of the highest levels of pessimism about their future prospects than their counterparts in other countries (Duffy 2015).

The crisis of social democracy partly results from the rise of cultural and identity politics, which has highlighted new tensions within these parties' electoral coalitions. The younger voters in countries like Spain and Britain are seeking economic enfranchisement and are more liberal culture. The older male parts of these traditional coalitions fear economic and cultural change. The 'Hampstead versus Hull' phenomenon is the cause of a wider electoral fracture for the European left.

Prior to 2017 some elements of the party saw the road to victory as a reversion to centrist politics. Jeremy Corbyn won the leadership by arguing that mobilising non-voters and the young through providing a sharp ideological contrast could bring about victory. The Blue Labour faction warned that Labour might lurch further backwards unless it addressed anxieties over cultural identity. Academics and other commentators insisted that Labour could not

regain power unless it was trusted to manage the economy and its leader was perceived to be a credible alternative prime minister.

Would the European referendum lead to an electoral realignment, rewarding the Conservatives' attempts to woo working class voters, particularly the older voters who had become aligned to UKIP? In 2017 these contentions were put to the test.

### **Would the 2017 general election see working class voters shift to the Conservatives?**

Professor Andrew Gamble argued in *The Free Economy and the Strong State* (1988) that the Conservative Party has long had a hegemonic project in Britain. This project has seen successive party leaders seek to adapt its 'politics of support' in order to expand its electoral coalition. Historically the Conservatives have retained power through a strategy of adaptation. The party adapted to the introduction of the mass franchise, the creation of the welfare state and the rise of a more affluent section of the working class during the late 1970s. Professor Ken Spours describes the latest manifestation of the party's adaptation approach. In his publication *The Osborne Supremacy* (2015) he argues that the Conservatives' hegemonic politics saw the leadership seek to make overture to socially liberal voters, for example through the introduction of gay marriage. This 'double shuffle' was designed to expand the Conservatives' electoral coalition.

Following the European referendum Theresa May saw an opening to further expand the Conservative Party's electoral coalition and cement its hegemonic project. A majority (58%) of Labour voters in the north of England voted Leave. In her 2016 Conservative Party conference speech the prime minister sought to identify herself with the anxieties of these voters and present the Conservatives as their true champions. Within months the Government's negotiating position was brought into alignment with this rhetoric. Ministers said that the UK would leave the single market in large part so that free movement of EU nationals could be brought to an end. The prime minister's Lancaster House speech confirmed that the Government was

negotiating for a hard Brexit, giving the UK the ability to strike its own trade deals.

Labour MPs' fears about an acceleration of their loss of support in the north of England following the high Leave vote in their constituencies was a key factor behind the vote of no confidence in Jeremy Corbyn, and Owen Smith's subsequent leadership challenge in summer 2016. Many commentators predicted that the Conservative 'hard Brexit' stance would enable them to win over UKIP voters, as well as peel away Labour support. Andy Burnham MP was one of the many Labour figures to highlight the extent to which the European referendum had disrupted the party's electoral coalition. Burnham said the party had to reconcile being the party of 'Hampstead and Hull'. A number of Labour figures called for a hardening of the party's policy line on immigration in the aftermath of the Leave vote. Professor Tim Bale charted the tortuous attempts by Ed Miliband to reconcile the Hampstead and Hull elements within the Labour coalition. Miliband attempted to harden the party's policy by presenting immigration as an extension of the party's traditional opposition to the exploitation of labour, thereby using arguments that party members could feel more comfortable with. The possibility that Brexit could create an electoral realignment was envisioned by a presentation given to the shadow cabinet by the polling company BMG. The company concluded that the electors' referendum vote had become more important in shaping their political outlook than how they had voted in the 2015 general election.

The Conservative rhetoric and policy stance on Brexit appeared to be reaping dividends in eroding Labour heartland support right on the eve of the general election. In the 2017 May local elections the Conservatives swept up UKIP votes, won seats from Labour in Cumbria, and won Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. In Lincolnshire the Conservatives picked up 21 seats, while UKIP lost 10.

While much news print had been devoted to the tensions within the Labour coalition engendered by Brexit, it was taken for granted that if the Conservatives repositioned themselves as a nationalistic and anti-immigration party they could retain the

support of cosmopolitan voters who they had cultivated under Cameron and Osborne. Could the Conservatives reach out to more 'settlers' while retaining a significant number of 'pioneers'? The analysis below of the 2017 general election result shows that the demands of both groups were in conflict with each other.

## 2. The 2017 election results

### Who voted Conservative and why

The Conservatives received support from people working in the private sector, those without educational qualifications, the over 65s, 2015 UKIP voters, and to a lesser extent people who voted Leave in the European referendum. The party attracted a substantial increase in support from low income voters, particularly those with low or no qualifications. The party was 22% ahead of Labour among this group. The Conservatives' electoral dominance in the June 2017 election among this group correlates with the fact that only 25% of this group voted Remain in the 2016 European referendum. So the 2017 general election realigned many working class voters behind the Conservative Party.

The party achieved an increase in its vote among the over 65s. The Conservatives' 10% vote increase among this group compared with its performance among the same group in 2015 is striking. Since 2010 the generation gap between the Conservative and Labour parties has markedly increased with what began as a 5% gap among the over-65s becoming a 30% gap. The Conservatives have become the party of older voters. The key dynamic behind this trend is Brexit. NatCen produced a typology of referendum voters. They identified an older working class category of whom 73% voted Leave in the referendum (Swales 2016: 25).

The election saw a strong revival of the party's fortunes in Scotland. The Conservatives achieved a 14% increase in their vote share compared with the 2015 election, and won 12 seats. The party did particularly well in the northeast of Scotland. All its gains were from the SNP. This result is a continuation of the trend whereby Ruth Davidson has sought to consolidate the Conservatives' hold on the

2014 Scottish independence referendum ‘No’ vote.

However, in the 2017 election there was a fall in support for the Conservatives from high income voters and among voters under the age of 40. In 2015 the party won 36% among those in this age bracket. In 2017 this figure fell to 29%. The Conservatives were much more likely to be supported by wealthier men (ABs) than wealthy women, and the country’s second female prime minister fared very poorly with women below the age of 34. The Conservatives also did poorly among graduates compared with 2015.

The Conservative Party in the election became the party of Leave: 46% of Leavers voted Conservative against 36% who voted Labour. Nonetheless, the strength of Conservative voters’ support for Leave is shown by Lord Ashcroft’s finding that seven in ten Tory voters wanted Brexit to happen as soon as possible. Ashcroft also found that 48% of Conservative voters saw Brexit as the central issue of the election.

In many respects the party’s electoral strategy was rewarded, specifically in pulling UKIP voters into support for the Conservatives and in gaining low income voters, particularly those with low levels of qualifications. The Conservatives gained 60% of 2015 UKIP voters. The British Election Study (BES) data shows that the hardening of the Conservatives’ policy on immigration in the months following the referendum was a decisive factor for the party’s voters. The BES data showed that the Conservative led Labour by more than 40% among those who wanted full control of immigration. Had Theresa May not been successful in pulling over such a large chunk of 2015 UKIP voters she would not have remained prime minister. Overall, the Conservative vote increased by an average of 4 points across all seats won by Labour in 2015.

Lord Ashcroft’s follow up survey of general election voters also points to a broader clustering of cultural attitudes among Conservative voters, where hostility to the European Union sits alongside resistance to multiculturalism, social liberalism, feminism, the Green movement and immigration.

However, the flip side of the party’s strong issue profile on immigration was the loss of support among 30-something voters and among the AB professional middle classes. Overall the Conservatives intensified their support among older voters and won over low income voters in the DE category, but these gains were offset by the loss of voters under 40 and highly educated voters. This explains the big variations in the party’s performance at constituency level.

The power of the Remain vote was also a substantial factor at a constituency and local level in affecting the number of seats the Conservatives won in the House of Commons. Chris Hanretty of East Anglia University identified the Westminster constituencies with the highest Remain votes. These correlate strongly with the constituencies that saw the sharpest falls in Conservative votes in 2017, including Putney, Chelsea, Kensington and Battersea. Hanretty also showed that once controlling for demographics like graduate numbers in a constituency, the highest swings from Conservative to Labour were in areas that voted 60% for Remain.

The Conservatives were particularly damaged by the loss of voters who were high income and strongly supportive of remaining in the EU: 32% of voters with annual incomes over £55,000 and those with degrees were strongly motivated by a desire to the Remain in the EU, so Theresa May’s hard Brexit policy alienated this segment of traditional Conservative voters. The Campaign Company’s analysis of the changing Conservative Party values coalition shows that in 2017 the Tory value coalition shed support among the socially liberal pioneer voters who Osborne and Cameron had wooed in the ‘double shuffle’ discussed above by Ken Spours.

Equally the regions where there were the largest increases in the Conservative vote, like the northeast of England, have both high Leave votes at constituency level and high numbers of voters with few qualifications. The 2011 Census showed that the northeast had the highest proportion of any region that had adults saying an apprenticeship was their highest level of qualification.

At a constituency level the growing social class and educational cleavage in the Conservatives' electoral fortunes is also evident. The Conservatives sharply increased their vote in the following constituencies that have a mainly working class electorate of C1s and C2s:

- Hartlepool +13%
- Houghton and Sunderland South +11
- Mansfield +18%
- Middlesbrough +10%
- Middlesbrough South +13
- North Tyneside +8%
- North West Durham +11%
- Nuneaton +6
- Plymouth Moor View +14%
- Redcar +17%
- Walsall North +15%
- Warwickshire North +14.

The Conservatives significantly increased their vote in a number of marginal constituencies with predominantly working class electorates being defended against Labour, and were therefore able to hold on even as Labour put on a 10% increase in its support nationally:

- Amber Valley +12.6%
- Bolton West +7.3%
- Morley and Outwood +11%
- Rossendale and Darwen +4.3%
- Southampton Itchen +4.8%
- Telford +9%
- Thurrock +5.8%.

The Conservatives succeeded in expanding their electoral coalition by winning a much larger segment of working class voters. However they lost a substantial number of professional, pro-European and socially liberal voters as a consequence of Theresa May's nativist rhetoric and hard Brexit negotiating position. Overall the Conservative electoral coalition has become more narrowly based, even though the party increased its share of the vote by 6%.

### **Who voted Labour and why?**

Most importantly, 62% of young people voted Labour, compared with 27% who voted for the Tories, and they turned out in unprecedented numbers for the party. Nearly two-thirds

(64%) of 18–24 year olds turned out, compared with only 43% of the same age group in 2015. Less remarked is that 56% of under 34 year olds voted Labour. This represents the biggest shift in election voting since 2010. Labour's youth surge was also reflected in Scotland and came at the expense of the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP).

Given the claims made by Jeremy Corbyn during the 2015 leadership election about mobilising non-voters, a key finding is that 60% of people who did not vote in the 2015 general election voted Labour in 2017. Labour also increased its support among people from ethnic minority communities, rising to 73%.

Some 40% of people with a mortgage voted Labour, compared with 29% in 2015. Labour is also the party of graduates, winning 48% of this group. Labour only attained equal status with the Conservatives among graduates in 2015. Labour increased its support by 11% among ABC1 voters, those from a middle class and professional background. The dominant age group where Labour surged was 30–44 year olds – people with jobs and young families.

Labour achieved a strong swing from the Conservatives in London, but received only modest swings in other parts of England. This is consistent with the distribution of support in the 2016 referendum and the strong vote for Mayor Sadiq Khan in the London mayoral election of 2016.

Nearly half (47%) of those who voted Remain supported Labour, compared with one-third (33%) who supported the Conservatives. Overall Labour's share of the vote increased by 13 points in the most strongly Remain areas of the country. Given the ongoing debate within the labour movement over European policy, it is important to note that BES data shows Labour had a 40% lead among those who wanted to remain in the single market. Professor John Curtice found that there was a 13% increase in the Labour vote among people who supported Remain in the 2016 referendum during the course of the election campaign. The ballot of many Labour voters was a pro-European one. BES data also shows that people who switched to Labour during the course of the campaign were more likely to



favour remaining in the single market. Lord Ashcroft's follow up opinion survey showed that 43% of Labour voters hoped that Brexit would not happen (Ashcroft 2017).

NatCen's analysis of the European referendum shows that Remain voters are persuaded by the arguments that leaving the EU is a threat to British prosperity. It is therefore significant that the Campaign Company's analysis published in August 2017 shows that Corbyn's Labour did well among the acquisitive and materialistic voters in the 'prospector' segment where Ed Miliband had performed poorly. Europe may have been decisive in expanding Labour's electoral coalition into middle income voters, including those who are owner occupiers and graduates.

However there were other factors at work in the big increase in Labour's vote in 2017. Lord Ashcroft's follow up survey showed that concern about the health service and spending cuts were the biggest motivators for Labour voters (Ashcroft 2017). This indicates that the spending commitments in the Labour manifesto did indeed strike an electoral chord.

### **Labour's seat gains**

A majority of Labour's seat gains were in constituencies where 'pioneers' were well represented, including highly educated professionals. Key examples are:

- Brighton Kempton
- Bristol NW
- Lincoln
- Warwick and Leamington.

Other seat gains were in areas with high student populations including:

- Canterbury
- Plymouth Devonport
- Portsmouth South
- Reading East
- Sheffield Hallam
- Warwick and Leamington.

Other Labour gains were in southern constituencies with high ethnic minority populations:

- Bedford

- Peterborough.

The only Labour gains that broke this pattern were the few Scottish constituencies it gained. One telling example of Labour's contrasting electoral fortunes is the two Southampton parliamentary constituencies. Southampton Test has a large number of students and a significant community of people from ethnic minorities, whereas Southampton Itchen is predominantly a white working class constituency. Labour had a 17% increase in its vote in Test, but lost Itchen by a slender margin and the Tories increased their vote by 5%.

Overall Labour expanded its electoral coalition, bringing in the constituencies that Jeremy Corbyn promised that he would in 2015. Labour also unexpectedly secured the support of pro-European highly educated voters in many former Conservative constituencies. However, Labour has experienced a further decline in working class voters and is still performing poorly in towns, rather than cities. So Labour lost Copeland again, while winning Canterbury. Labour failed to win the general election because of the loss of these working class voters, particularly in the Midlands and the Northwest.

### **3. Assessing the impact of the Progressive Alliance**

As we have seen the election saw a consolidation in the progressive vote around Labour. This was partly attributable to the intensity of support for a Soft Brexit. However within this environment Compass quickly formed the Progressive Alliance initiative designed to prevent the dispersion of support amongst the opposition parties that has damaged the centre left in previous eras. Compass built a national network encouraging opposition parties to co-ordinate to stand aside candidates in seats where they were less well placed to prevent a Conservative victory. In addition, more generally there was an unprecedented movement behind tactical voting with a number of non-aligned groups such as Better Britain, More United and others encouraging tactical voting to prevent a hard Brexit (which in practical terms typically



translated into voting for non-Tory candidates).

Ealing Central and Acton was the first domino with Labour's Rupa Huq reaching an agreement with the Greens. She pledged to support PR, tougher action on climate change and oppose a Hard Brexit, all of which were conditions on her receiving support from local Greens. Subsequently, 42 local Progressive Alliances were formed to allow the best placed progressive party a better chance in total where Progressive Alliances were formed. In the overwhelming majority of these, it was the Green Party alone that took the courageous and principled decision to stand aside their candidates for the greater good. The reluctance/refusal of the Liberal Democrats and above all Labour to even consider standing down their own candidates limited the advance and impact of the Progressive Alliance. Nonetheless, this impact was tangible. In the 42 Progressive Alliance seats, there were:

- 9 gains, 7 for Labour and 2 for the Lib Dems
- 15 holds, 13 for Labour, 1 for the Greens and 1 for the Liberal Democrats
- 15 seats not gained
- 2 seats lost

In two constituencies that Labour gained the margin of victories were very similar to the size of the Green Party's vote in 2015. In Derby North the 2015 Green vote share was 3.6% and Chris Williamson's margin of victory was 3.9% in 2017. In High Peak the Greens won 3.6% in 2015. In 2017 the Labour candidate won by 4.3%.

Across the country as a whole, analysis shows that the Progressive Alliance enhanced the chances of progressive parties wherever it played a part. The average swing across England Wales from the Conservatives to the leading progressive party (not just Labour) was only 0.9%. In the 40 Green stand-aside seats, the swing was 1.5%. In the seats where Compass and the Progressive Alliance concentrated canvassing and campaigning activities the average swing was higher still. In Scotland, despite Labour's modest gains, the party's vote only slightly recovered from its 2015 electoral crash. Labour's vote increased

only by 2.8%, much lower than its national average increase of 9%. The Scottish National Party remains by the far the largest political party in Scotland. The SNP was second in all of the 21 constituencies that it lost.

Competition between progressive parties in Scotland looks like it only helps the Tories.

It is impossible to try and disentangle the work of the Progressive Alliance from other influences on the election – such as the Labour manifesto and the work of Momentum. But it is undoubtedly the case that the campaign, and with the work of people like More United, directed voting and campaigning resources where they could be most effective and provided wider 'permission' to vote and act tactically. It is also worth noting that UKIP (whose vote nationally of course collapsed) stood aside in a large number of seats to give pro-hard Brexit Tories a free run, in a "regressive alliance".

Both the regressive and progressive alliance had an impact on the result, with over 20% now voting tactically. With party alignment in decline, there is little reason to believe that such initiatives won't be relevant in the future. In the wider context, most of the 38 seats where the Liberal Democrats are in second place are against the Conservatives. These include seats like St Ives and Devon North where Labour is out of contention and runs a poor third. In other words, Labour has everything to gain – in terms of electing MPs who are more likely to support a Labour-led government – and nothing to lose – because it stands no chance of winning these seats - by helping consolidate the progressive vote in Liberal Democrats target seats at the next general election. However, Labour's stubborn hostility to electoral pacts – which extended to expelling three long-time activists from the party for their public endorsement of an insurgent anti-Tory candidate in the completely hopeless seat of Surrey South West – makes it more difficult for the Green Party and others to persist in working towards alliance, given the cost this exacts in terms of their own national vote share and profile.

Given that party loyalty is increasingly weaker, and voter volatility intensifying, progressive alliances will be a crucial way to harness people's voting choices to the

underlying values that motivate them, and which are weakening in the same way. People may change the party they vote for but in doing so one they are unlikely to feel they have fundamentally changed their outlook on the world. If you believe in social justice, or a more sustainable economic model, or the peace movement, or redistribution of wealth, you might at one time or another vote Labour, or Liberal Democrat, or Green, or Plaid if you live in Wales, or SNP if you live in Scotland, and that choice may change from one election to another for a host of reasons: but you will retain your core values regardless of how you cast your vote. Promoting awareness of this “values-based” politics will be crucial to building the next Labour coalition.

#### **4. Conclusions**

##### **Where Labour advanced**

Labour’s electoral performance undermines many of the arguments made by internal critics within the party. Labour’s performance among mortgage owners and professional voters shows that Tony Blair’s arguments about claiming the ‘centre’ are no longer valid. Jeremy Corbyn can rightfully claim vindication that bringing non-voters and younger people into the party’s coalition would transform the party’s prospects. We are now living in a different political era with a rise in labour market insecurity, falling living standards and divergent cultural outlooks among different sections of the population as discussed in ‘Labour’s Eleventh Hour’ (Sowemimo 2015). These factors have created the potential for the centre left’s arguments about inequality to resonate with broader demographic constituencies, including middle class voters. In particular the housing crisis has created a potential cross-class coalition that includes most young people.

The UK election in 2017, like those in France, Spain and the United States, showed evidence of economically disenfranchised young people seeking a vehicle for the fulfilment of their political aspirations. Jeremy Corbyn was able to channel those voters within the traditional social democratic party rather than see them move to a challenger party. It is now clear that the big growth in Labour’s membership prefigured a wider demographic connection

made by Jeremy Corbyn. Is this connection enough to win power?

Jeremy Corbyn’s electoral performance ironically validates some aspects of political science theories on leadership and economic management. By the time of the election itself, Corbyn had eliminated the gap in leadership ratings between himself and Theresa May. So Labour achieving near electoral parity with the Conservatives was strongly associated with the leadership competence ratings, as past models have predicted. What is unprecedented is that Corbyn’s previous leadership ratings deficit could be eliminated during the course of a campaign. Less widely discussed, given the focus on Brexit, is that the 2017 general election took place against the backdrop of falling real wages, whereas the 2015 election was held after rising real wages and two years into the restoration of economic growth. The economic backdrop to the next general election will be a major factor determining Labour’s prospects. If our departure from the European Union in 2019 generates an economic shock this will advantage the Labour Party, but Labour cannot expect simply to be the passive beneficiary of further economic decline and falling living standards. The leadership’s stance on the European Union negotiation outcome will be of great importance. The party also needs to put forward a wider strong economic argument about how it would generate wealth and distribute it more fairly.

##### **Adverse factors**

During the election there was an intensification of earlier trends – principally between metropolitan, cosmopolitan areas and the towns. Earlier manifestations of this can be seen in London’s high Remain vote in the 2016 referendum. Jennings and Stoker (2017) have shown that even in periods like 2010 when the party’s fortunes were weak nationally, Labour made advances in cosmopolitan areas, while failing to advance in towns (as discussed above). This is further evidence that the country is polarising and that the party cannot expect to form a governing coalition in the way that it did in the Wilson and Blair eras.

The election saw a social class realignment with a big shift of low income voters to the Conservatives and a significant shift of highly educated voters towards Labour. Labour's big increase in support has obscured the fact that many of its traditional supporters voted Conservative. The fears of many Labour MPs were therefore borne out by the pattern of the party's support. What was unexpected, however, is that the shift of older and northern voters to Labour was offset by the mobilisation of non-voters, younger voters and Remain-inclined electors. Nonetheless the sharp swings to the Conservatives in places such as Derbyshire should worry the Labour leadership. If these voting patterns persist they raise questions about whether Labour can expect anything other than to form a minority government. At the very least if older and working class voters continue to support the Conservative Party at these levels, Labour must achieve an even greater mobilisation of young people and mobilise higher number of non-voters. If the Conservatives consolidate their status as 'the settler party' Labour's electoral path will narrow, with the party needing to offset this weakness by winning higher numbers of votes from middle class 'prospectors' and 'pioneers'. This is achievable but will be a major undertaking.

Although Labour's aggregate performance is a major departure from its social democratic sister parties, Labour's performance with the demographic of people with low skills and low qualifications is still one of long-term decline. Jennings and Stoker (2017) show that Labour's attrition rate among these voters is a secular trend that has developed since 2005. In this respect the general election changed nothing and suggests there is greater cause for alarm.

Can Labour expect to win back lost working class and older voters? It would be foolhardy to make predictions given the dramatic nature of the 2017 election and the unprecedented shift of voters to the party during the course of a single campaign. However, the leadership should be concerned at the cultural underpinnings behind this switch of allegiance, including but not limited to immigration policy. The evidence discussed above, including the clustering of cultural attitudes among Conservative voters identified by Lord

Ashcroft, shows how the outlook and priorities of traditional Labour voters have shifted sharply away from their old 'home'. If Brexit is indeed a cultural issue for these voters, the likely economic dislocation of leaving the European Union may not weaken their affiliation to the Conservatives. The greatest source of encouragement for Labour is that just under a fifth of previous UKIP supporters voted for Labour in the 2017 election – but more than 80% of previous UKIP supporters voted Conservative.

In autumn 2017 the party's gains look fragile, in large part because the influx of urban professionals is so linked to the question of European Union membership. By the time of the next general election Labour is likely to have had to take stance on the secession negotiation outcome. Theresa May has said that she is only willing to allow a straight vote between acceptance of the deal or rejection. If Labour supports the Government's final deal, it could lose the support of many voters to the Liberal Democrats in England and the SNP in Scotland.

Labour should also be concerned that there was an intensification of the generation divide in the 2017 general election. In 2015 the over 65s were 18% more pro-Conservative than the UK average. By 2017 this group had become 35% more pro-Conservative.

Both Conservative and Labour parties face a highly volatile environment where class-based voting has substantially retreated and partisan identification levels are low, as discussed above. The dramatic increase in Labour support during the election campaign is unprecedented. Equally, the fact that so many Labour MPs went to their counts expecting defeat, only to secure large majorities, shows the magnitude of these trends. Apparently settled patterns of support can now be overturned quickly. In 2017 Labour benefited from this new phenomenon but in future it could be its victim. The recent past shows how dramatically electoral sentiment can shift in this political environment. In 2015 the SNP won a sweeping victory in Scotland, achieving 50% of the vote, but in 2017 the party's vote fell by 13% and it lost 21 of its Westminster seats. The revival of the Conservative Party in

Scotland in between 2015 and 2017 underscores the new political volatility.

Young and Lee (2013: 78) argue that the new group of non-aligned voters has become highly influential in determining electoral outcomes. Ben Page at Ipsos MORI has also warned that young voters may be the most electorally volatile group. Labour faces the challenge of drawing together and sustaining an electoral coalition in a terrain where there is evidence that voters are increasingly split into segmented groups with diverging outlooks and interests (Diamond 2017: 24)

Many of the seats that Labour needs to gain for a parliamentary majority are in Scotland. While Labour made a modest recovery north of the border, powered in part by a youth surge, it only increased its vote by 2.8%. The Conservatives in Scotland achieved a much larger increase in vote share. Labour faces the real risk that it is squeezed out in a unionist–nationalist battle between the Conservatives and the SNP.

This paper has shown that Labour’s support in the 2017 general election hit against clear demographic limits. This underscores the importance of the party leadership embracing wider forms of political mobilisation that can channel progressive voters effectively. The Progressive Alliance mobilisation made the difference between defeat and victory in a number of constituencies. The BES data shows that the channelling of progressive voters, spurred by Europe, had a dramatic effect against the Conservatives, but if this factor is absent in the next general election, Labour will need the Progressive Alliance even more than it did in 2017. Corbyn’s Labour, even when harnessing the energy of Momentum, is still a mobilisation of only some of the Labour tribe. The impact of the Progressive Alliance shows the wider value and power of mobilising progressives outside the tribe. Every Conservative seat that is retained at an election is a vote not only for a Tory Queen’s Speech but for measures like adverse boundary changes and restrictive trade union legislation. Jeremy Corbyn and his steadfast supporters may find that they have fallen back on the cry of earlier Labour partisans that ‘one more heave’ is enough to win power. The evidence presented here is that this may not be the case.

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