LABOUR'S LAST STAND?

The centre Left's long roadmap back to power

Matthew Sowemimo

Compass

About the author:

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.

Compass

Please get in touch, join, support and work with us.

Write to us at Freepost Compass

Email us at info@compassonline.org.uk

You can follow us on Twitter @CompassOffice

To find out more about Compass, please visit our website: www.compassonline.org.uk/join

About Compass:

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 movements to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with top-down/state reforms and policy. The question we are trying to help solve, which we explore in the recent document 45 Degree Change, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

Compass

Overview

Labour has suffered an electoral loss it may well never recover from. Its only chance is to understand the complex and long-term reasons for its electoral failure. In this publication the focus is on the conjunctural influences on Labour's demise.

The 2019 election saw the Conservative Party assemble a broad coalition of people on low and insecure incomes; middle class voters and the affluent, after years of public spending reductions and low real wage growth.

The Conservative Party's major advance in this election was due to its recruitment of a greater number of those who voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum. Whilst Theresa May failed to recruit them in sufficient numbers to win a parliamentary majority, Boris Johnson achieved this. Johnson and his team recognised the greater degree of political intensity amongst Leave voters and concluded that there was a continuing potential to win over more Labour Leavers to the Conservative cause.

At the same time, Johnson retained the lion's share of the Conservative Party's Remain voters, preventing the anticipated losses to the Liberal Democrats. This was achieved mainly because of voters' fears about Jeremy Corbyn coming to power during a hung parliament.

Labour saw an outflow of voters in post-industrial towns to the Conservatives, an acceleration of a process that started from 2005 onwards. The Conservatives won 31 of the seats with the highest blue collar populations.

Labour's defeat was reinforced by a fall in turnout, particularly youth turnout. In 2017, a high turnout for Labour amongst graduates and young people helped offset the shift of working class voters to the Conservatives.

When Johnson took over the premiership, some commentators argued that his gains amongst Leave voters might be cancelled out by lost votes in Southern Remain voting constituencies. But this did not happen. Conservatives held onto 19 per cent of Remain voters. This prevented the loss of more votes and seats to the Liberal Democrats, particularly in the London commuter belt. Whilst the Liberal Democrats came close to victory in seats in Hertfordshire, Surrey and South West London, they fell short.

The Liberal Democrats' electoral setback masks their move into a series of strong second places in the commuter belt around London. However the party fell back in the South West of England, where a majority of voters supported Brexit in 2016. The potency of the Leave vote did not only damage Labour. It also damaged the Liberal Democrats.

Compass

The composition of the parties' support

The Conservative vote

85 per cent of Tory 2017 voters stuck with the party. This was the foundation of the party's success. The Conservatives held onto 19 per cent of all Remain voters[1]. The Conservatives convinced two-thirds of their 2017 Remain voters to stick with them. Had the Conservatives lost more of these voters they might have got close to being forced into a hung parliament. As will be discussed below, part of this success was attributable to Jeremy Corbyn's unpopularity. As the former cabinet minister, Dominic Grieve wrote in *The Guardian*, 'Corbyn became the Conservative Party's bogeyman'[2].

The Conservatives were 15 points ahead of Labour amongst AB professional voters. Even with DE voters they secured an unprecedented 2 per cent lead[3]. However most significant, is how badly the Labour Party performed with over 65 DE voters, where the Conservatives beat them 53 to 26 per cent[4]. This is the group where the working class revolt against Labour was most apparent.

At the same time the Conservatives reached out to more Labour Leave voters. 65 per cent of Leave voters voted Conservative, up from 2017[5]. This group was decisive in lifting the Conservative vote. In the early weeks of the Johnson premiership many commentators argued that the Prime Minister's ability to reunite the Leave vote would be central to his prospects of winning a parliamentary majority. Even though Johnson missed his self-imposed deadline of leaving the EU by 31st October 2019, he was still able to demonstrate his Leave credentials by securing a withdrawal agreement that was backed by an overwhelming number of Conservative MPs. This is something that Theresa May failed to achieve.

In the East Midlands and the North East of England, the Conservatives increased their vote share by 4 per cent[6]. In London it went down. The Conservative's poor performance in London reflects the capital's concentration of highly educated and ethnic minority groups, the two demographics where the party lacks support.

The most heavily Leave seats in 2016 are now in Conservative hands. The Conservative vote increased by 6 per cent in the seats that voted Leave. The Conservative Party now has the most diverse electoral coalition in the mass franchise era. Its support base includes those on low incomes, the suburban middle classes, rural voters and the very wealthy. The significant groups that are outside its reach are ethnic minority voters and graduates. Both groups are now likely to be targeted by the Conservative Party in future elections.

The Labour vote

Whilst Labour's share of Leavers was down to 14 per cent, Labour's

Compass

share of Remain voters dipped to just 49 per cent, in large part due to defections to the Liberal Democrats. 1.1 million 2017 Labour voters shifted to other parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats and Greens. Jeremy Corbyn's equivocal stance on Brexit resulted in the loss of Remain voters to the Liberal Democrats, whilst Labour's official policy of supporting a second referendum resulted in the outflow of Labour Leave voters.

Labour's vote fell evenly across all social classes but with a slightly bigger fall amongst C1 and C2 voters. However amongst C2 18-35 year olds, Labour's vote fell by 11 per cent. This is the group who shifted against the party compared to 2017. This finding is the one that should most alarm the Labour Party leadership. In the key group of voters with a mortgage, where Labour had performed well in 2017, Labour was beaten by 43 to 33 per cent, a fall of 7 per cent. Labour's vote also fell by 12 per cent amongst council tenants[7]. Labour's support fell by 9 per cent amongst ethnic minority voters. Labour's support amongst those with no qualifications fell again, just as it did in 2017, this time by 11 per cent.

In terms of the regional picture, Labour support fell by 12 and 13 per cent in the North East and Yorkshire. Labour support fell by 11 per cent in places with a majority of voters in working class occupations. Labour again had a good general election in London. The capital's concentration of young and highly educated voters created a strong base for the party's appeal there. Labour seats like Battersea and Enfield Southgate, won in 2017, were successfully defended.

Labour suffered a major defeat in Scotland with a fall in its vote of 8 per cent and a Scotland-wide vote share of a mere 18 per cent. Labour remains in an ignominious third place in Scotland, something that is a major impediment to the party ever being able to form a majority government at Westminster. Five years on from Labour's wipeout in the 2015 Scottish election, the party is still on its knees north of the border.

Scotland

The SNP won 80 per cent of Scottish seats on 45 per cent of the vote. Yet another reason for PR, which, in fairness, the SNP back. The SNP gained 13 seats and the Conservatives lost 7. In seats like Stirling, the SNP took Conservative seats by driving down the Labour vote.

The Liberal Democrats won 4 seats, holding more than Labour's 1 in Scotland. The Tory vote fell by 3 per cent in Scotland.

17 of the 18 seats that have comfortable majorities are SNP. Showing how the party has strengthened its hold on the electorate. 10 SNP candidates won 50 per cent or more of the votes cast.

Compass

Labour routed in English towns

The Labour vote fell most sharply in English towns. This is part of a wider long-term trend. In large and medium sized towns Labour's vote fell by 8-9 per cent. Previous work has shown that the proportion of voters who agreed with the statement 'Labour has lost touch with its core values' was much higher in towns than in cities[8].

Education was again a decisive electoral dynamic, with the Conservative vote increasing least in those areas with the highest graduate population. 43 per cent of graduates voted Labour. Only 29 per cent for the Conservatives. 58 per cent of those with low levels of qualifications voted Conservative. The 50 constituencies with the highest proportion of professionals, such as doctors and university lecturers, are moving towards Labour. This group is now more Labour leaning than the national average.

There was a major social class realignment building on the shift of votes in 2017, with 47 per cent of those in the DE grades voting Conservative. This is quite an astonishing development given that these voters have bore the brunt of austerity since 2010. Consider, for instance, the working-age benefit freeze that was in place from 2015. The Conservatives narrowly won DEs, people on the lowest incomes in Britain.

The largest swings away from Labour were in towns with large older populations. The Conservatives won 57 per cent of those in the 60-69 age group. The key age level where voters shift from Labour to Conservative is now 45.

Leave versus Remain

The Conservatives won 71 of the country's Remain voting seats, to Labour's 96. However the Conservatives won 294 of the Leave voting seats. This was assisted by the fact that only 7 per cent of people who voted Conservative in 2017 had a strong Remain identity, whilst 11 per cent of Labour voters had a strong Leave identity. Of Tory 2017 Remain voters only 21 per cent said that in a choice of leaving the EU or having a Corbyn government, leaving the EU was worse. Whereas 50 per cent of Labour 2017 Leave voters said Corbyn was worse than leaving the EU. The weakness of the Remain identity amongst Remain Tory voters accompanied by the countervailing fear of Jeremy Corbyn, helped Johnson keep his electoral coalition intact. The Tory election planners correctly identified the enduring strength of feeling about Brexit within the Labour Party's electorate and capitalised on this.

The Conservatives won 31 of the seats with the highest blue collar populations. Brexit was the primary reason for people voting Conservative and this shows how the party leadership was able to

Compass

frame the election successfully and on its terms. However, Brexit was not a primary or secondary motivation for Labour's vote, unlike the Liberal Democrats.

80 per cent of those enthusiastic about Brexit were Conservatives. Interestingly, of those voters who were strongly opposed to Brexit the majority were Labour and a quarter were Liberal Democrats. This shows how far the Brexit issue structured the voters of the respective parties.

Losing on the economy again

64 per cent of Conservative voters said they trusted the party to run the economy. Confidence in the Conservatives' ability to manage the economy and conversely a lack of confidence in Labour's competence is a consistent feature of party dynamics since the financial crisis. It was the financial crisis that led to a dramatic fall in Labour's economic ratings. George Osbourne, as Chancellor, helped keep this memory alive by driving home the mantra 'we are cleaning up Labour's economic mess'. John McDonnell always ran behind Philip Hammond and Sajid Javid as being trusted with economic stewardship.

Some people in the labour movement have argued that Brexit was the dominant factor that led to the party's electoral disaster. However the data does not support this conclusion. Only 14 per cent of Conservatives said they would have voted for a different party had Brexit not been on the agenda for the election. This shows how solid and committed the party's vote is.

Immigration was an issue for 24 per cent of Conservative voters, whereas it did not feature at all for Labour voters in their list of motivations. The health service is the only cross over motivation between Conservative and Labour voters. Most importantly, leadership featured as one of the top drivers of the Conservative vote and it was absent for the Labour voters[9].

Labour was seen as 'extreme' by 50 per cent of voters according to Ipsos Mori data published during the election campaign[10]. However the Conservative Party was only seen as extreme by 33 per cent of voters according to the same survey.

The Brexit Party hurt Labour just as UKIP hurt the party in 2015

In some key Labour held seats, the Brexit Party did considerable damage to Labour and in many cases helped the Conservatives take the seat. In Houghton and Sunderland South the Brexit Party increased its vote by 15 per cent, whereas the Conservatives only increased their vote by 3 per cent. In Blyth Valley, the Brexit Party's vote increase led to the defeat of a Labour candidate. In Don Valley, it was the Brexit Party's 13 per cent vote share that led to the defeat of Caroline Flint.

Compass

The Conservative vote in Don Valley only went up by 1 per cent.

A similar result took place in North West Durham. In other seats like Sedgefield and Bishop Auckland, both the Brexit and Conservative parties took votes equally from Labour. In the West Bromwich seats the Conservatives saw a big increase in their vote at Labour's expense and won these elections. This was also true of Wolverhampton North East where the Conservative vote rose by 11 per cent and the Labour candidates fell by 13 per cent. In Wolverhampton South East, although held by Pat McFadden, the Conservative vote increased by 8 per cent.

No youthquake this time

Turnout was also a key dynamic in the overall result. High youth turnout was a significant factor in Labour's unexpected success in 2017. However turnout among 18-24 year olds fell by 7 per cent in the 2019 general election. At the same time over 65 turnout increased by 3 per cent. So the Conservatives existing advantage was reinforced.

Goodwin found that of the constituencies with the largest increase in turnout in 2017, the Labour vote increased by 12.6 per cent. The seats with the largest population of 18-29 year olds saw turnout increase by 4.6 per cent in 2017. The Understanding Society dataset showed that in 2017 there had been an 8 per cent increase in turnout among 18-25 year olds[11]. In 2019, a Labour Party, battered by the anti-semtism scandal and behind in the opinion polls, did not motivate young supporters to turn out despite the increases in voter registration.

Historically, the Conservative support amongst graduates used to be 3-10 per cent higher than the rest of the population. However since 2017 this trend has been reversed, with Labour now leading amongst graduates. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation study found that graduates tend to be more in favour of a 'soft Brexit' than older voters and those with low qualifications[12].

The Liberal Democrats

Although the party increased its vote share and gained a million votes, it still lost seats overall and fell well short of its original high expectations. The party had hopes of winning seats in the commuter belt, but instead had a series of near misses, including Wimbledon, Guildford, Winchester, Cambridgeshire South and most notably Esher and Walton. The Ashcroft poll showed that when Conservative 2017 Remain voters were asked to choose whether a Corbyn-led government was worse than Brexit, they opted for Brexit[13]. The unpopularity of Jeremy Corbyn seems to have helped prevent larger defections amongst Conservative voters. For example, in Cheltenham, the Conservative vote increased by 1 per cent and in Lewes it only fell by 1 per cent.

Compass

One adverse development for the party is the extent to which it has fallen back in its old South West England heartland. During the Blair era the Liberal Democrats held a series of seats like Devon North, Torbay, Cornwall North and St Ives. For example, in Devon North, the seat once held by a former Liberal leader, there was a 10 per cent swing from the Liberal Democrats to the Conservatives. This reflects the strong regional support for Brexit. Brexit disrupted the traditional Liberal Democrat coalition, not just the Labour one. 53 per cent of voters in South West England voted Leave in 2016[14].

The election was a major personal defeat for Jo Swinson. Her personal ratings fell as the campaign progressed and she lost her own parliamentary seat. In previous elections, Liberal Democrat leaders like Paddy Ashdown, Charles Kennedy and Nick Clegg have gained support with the exposure of the general election. The opposite proved true for Jo Swinson.

Nonetheless, the party won some strong second places, such as Wokingham, Hitchin and Harpenden, Cambridgeshire South East, Surrey South West and Wantage. The rise in the Liberal Democrats' national share of the vote has put them back in contention in a series of constituencies, mainly in the South of England, like Mole Valley, where they are now in second place behind the Conservative Party. However, the party saw the defeat of all of its Conservative and Labour defectors, including high profile names like Chuka Umunna and Luciana Berger.

Tactical voting

The election was the story of two halves in terms of tactical voting. Labour was able to retain some Southern constituencies like Canterbury and Portsmouth South by squeezing third placed Liberal Democrat candidates. For example, in Portsmouth South the Liberal Democrat vote fell by 5 per cent.

However tactical voting broke down in three way fights like Cities of London and Westminster, thereby enabling Conservative MPs to be re-elected on reduced votes. In other places there would have been potential for tactical voting, such as Guildford, where a third placed Labour vote could have been squeezed further and Chipping Barnet where a sizeable third placed Liberal Democrat vote could have been squeezed to allow a Labour win. Labour could also have benefited from stronger tactical voting in Wycombe and Truro and Falmouth.

In High Peak the Labour candidate had benefited from the Progressive Alliance in 2017 when the Green Party candidate had withdrawn. However in 2019, the Greens stood against her, taking 2.1 per cent of the vote - more than the Conservative winners margin of victory.

The Unite to Remain effort saw the Greens and Liberal Democrats

Compass

coordinate their efforts to maximise the Remain parties vote in a series of constituencies where they sought to win Conservative seats. The Liberal Democrats saw big increases in their votes in the following constituencies that were included in the scope of the Unite to Remain agreement:

Finchley and Golders's Green +25%
South Cambridgeshire +23%
Harrogate +12%
Winchester +12%
Totnes +16%
Chippenham +9%
Tunbridge Wells +18%

However Labour's non-participation limited the efforts of this coalition. Had the Labour Party stood aside in seats like Guildford and South Cambridgeshire, the Conservative Party candidates would have been defeated. In a close, election this arrangement could have been decisive, as it proved to be in 2017.

Conversely, Nigel Farage's decision not to stand Brexit Party candidates against sitting Conservatives clearly helped Boris Johnson. It may have helped the Conservatives retain relatively close seats such as Pudsey, Southampton Itchen and Chingford. However the real value of Farage's decision was symbolic in that it reinforced Johnson's claim to be the true standard bearer of Leave, helping him reunite the Leave vote.

The landscape - the 2019 election in historical context

For the last ten years the election battleground contested between the parties has been in areas like the traditional marginals of Nuneaton, Stevenage, Harlow and Swindon South. However the sheer scale of the swing away from the Labour Party has converted many of these long standing marginals into safe Conservative seats in statistical terms. For example, Amber Valley, Nuneaton, Portsmouth North and Harlow, all seats held right until the end of the last Labour era, now have Conservative votes at around 60 per cent, an extraordinary situation given their high working class populations. Whilst attention has focused on the so called 'Red Wall' constituencies, the seats that Labour lost in 2010 are just as pivotal to its ability to regain power.

The Conservative Party has now increased its national share of the vote in every general election since 2010. It is highly unusual for a party in government to increase its vote in a subsequent election. In addition, the 2019 election result was preceded by a sustained increase in Conservative support in English towns over a series of general elections. The following English towns showed a rise in the Conservative

Compass

vote in every single general election from 2005 to 2019:

Dudley North
Burton
Erewash
Gloucester
Great Yarmouth
Kingswood
North Swindon
Nuneaton
Sherwood

The rise in the Conservative vote in towns began in 2005 and has accelerated since then. Jennings and Stoker showed that even in a period like 2010 when the parties national vote was falling, the Labour Party advanced in metropolitan areas[15]. This and the 2019 election showed the country is polarising. English towns, in the main, have low levels of unionisation, private sector driven economies and large numbers of middle aged and older voters. Labour simply lacks the infrastructure and institutions that once built an affinity with these electors.

In the same year the Conservatives had a 22 per cent lead amongst those with no educational qualifications. UKIP had a strong following amongst pensioners and those who had left school at 16. The Tories also increased their support amongst DE voters by 11 per cent. However this rise in support for the Conservatives in 2017 was temporarily offset by Labour's increased vote amongst young people, graduates and ethnic minorities. Turnout was higher in the districts where there were high proportions of these three key groups.

The Conservatives' working class advance in Labour's traditional heartland, including the old mining areas, was prefigured in seats like Houghton and Sunderland South, Hartlepool and Durham North West in 2017. The Conservatives increased their vote share in North West Durham by 11 per cent in 2017 and in the 2019 election the Conservative Party won the seat from Laura Pidcock, having increased their vote by a further 7.5 per cent. Many of these constituencies are deindustrialised and have lost the old long-standing cultural institutions that strengthened identification with the Labour Party, such as drinking clubs. Overall, the Conservatives advanced by 8.3 per cent in the 140 constituencies that had given majority support for Brexit. In the seats that voted most strongly for Leave, the Conservative vote increased by 11 per cent. The election has left a series of prominent Labour MPs in an extremely vulnerable situation, including Yvette Cooper in Pontefract and Angela Rayner in Ashton under Lyne. The last five years have seen a series of precursors to the December 2019 rout. For example, the Labour Party polled badly in local elections in Nuneaton, Derby and Amber Valley in 2018.

Compass

The first major warning of the party's attrition amongst working class voters was in the 2015 election when the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) won 12 per cent of the vote – but were denied any representation by the electoral system. UKIP's emergence did far greater damage to the Labour Party than Conservatives in the 2015 general election. Concerns about immigration and multiculturalism were a major contributory factor behind the rise of UKIP. Margaret Beckett's report into the Labour Party's 2015 election defeat identified immigration as one of the factors driving that result[16]. As noted above, immigration was a major motivator for Conservative voters in the 2019 election.

Goodwin and Ford argued that socially conservative voters in economically depressed communities had turned against Labour because it was seen as a party that did not share their values, especially on immigration[17]. Two-thirds of UKIP's voters said EU migrants should not be able to access social security benefits at all. The social conservatism of these voters is shown by the fact that 75 per cent wanted to see the reintroduction of the death penalty[18]. Of voters in the 2017 general election who thought that immigration was a burden and not a benefit, the Conservatives won 46 per cent support, compared to 25 per cent for Labour[19].

The British Election Study analysis in 2017 showed that for voters whose priority was immigration control, the Conservatives had a 40 per cent lead over Labour. Perhaps the most striking finding in the literature, is that of the voters who voted Labour in 2015 but then voted Conservative in 2017, 36 per cent told the Opinium polling company that British identity is ethnic in character and not civic[20]. These voters believe that you cannot be born British, it is purely a matter of your ethnicity. This finding shows that hostility to immigration is about much more than the distribution of resources or employment but that some British people delegitimise their fellow citizens and do not identify with them.

Goodwin and Ford also found that 56 per cent of working class voters in 2011 agreed with the statement that immigration has a negative cultural impact[21]. Goodwin and Ford's data also shows that over time, working class voters became more concerned about immigration, whilst middle class voters became more liberal on the issue[22].

In 2017, evidence of the disruptive effect of Brexit could be seen by Goodwin's finding that the Conservatives led Labour by 52 per cent to 34 per cent amongst those on low incomes who favoured Brexit. The central factor in cementing working class support for Brexit was that these voters never believed the economic warnings made by the Remain 2016 campaign[23]. Brexit, in many respects, is symptomatic of working class concerns about immigration's economic and cultural effects.

Compass

Labour has struggled to navigate the interplay between the economic and cultural insecurities of its traditional voters.

The fall in Labour's vote is also closely related to the decline in the saliency of social class. In the 1960s, Labour's vote was 40 per cent higher amongst working class voters than middle class ones. By 2015 Labour's lead amongst working class voters had disappeared. Another factor that has depressed the Labour vote in English towns is that these communities are ageing and have lost young people as they leave in search for work.

Why Labour lost the general election

The principal reason why the Labour Party lost the general election was because it was led by the most unpopular leader in modern times. The Opinium findings show that for Labour to Tory switchers this was the major factor[24]. YouGov showed that for voters who shifted from Labour to Conservative in 2019 only five per cent had a favourable view of Jeremy Corbyn. 81 per cent had a favourable view of Boris Johnson[25]. Ed Miliband's leadership was also found by the Trade Union Congress poll to be one of the major reasons for the 2015 defeat[26]. Quite simply, leadership matters and it can either lift a party's fortunes or bury them. Older voters are more likely to be concerned about the quality of leadership[27]. Blumenau has also shown there is a relationship between a party leader's ratings and electoral outcomes[28]. During his early months David Cameron's high personal ratings help lift those of his party.

The second reason for Labour's defeat was that Boris Johnson galvanised Leave voters around his 'Get Brexit Done' rallying cry. In 2017, Labour was able to hold onto more of its Leave voters because there was a widespread perception that Brexit was a done deal. Johnson was able to credibly present the question as in the balance, due, in part, to the Labour commitment to hold another referendum and the previous two years of parliamentary paralysis.

Johnson's framing of the general election was devastatingly effective because it encouraged Labour Leave voters to prioritise their support for Brexit over their long standing attachment to economic progressivism, which Johnson to some extent cleverly coopted. YouGov found that 49 per cent of Labour to Conservative switchers cited Brexit as the reason for their decision[29]. The Labour leadership failed to heed the warnings that giving Boris Johnson his 'Brexit election' would lead to a Labour defeat. An election fought on solely domestic issues would have been far less favourable for the Conservatives as 2017 indicated.

Compass

Selected results from the 2017 general election

Constituency	Majority	Leave vote	Second place party
Dudley North	22	71%	Conservative
Ashfield	441	70%	Conservative
Newcastle under Lyme	30	61%	Conservative
Peterborough	607	61%	Conservative
Bishop Auckland	502	61%	Conservative
Penistone and Stocksbridge	1322	61%	Conservative
Crewe	48	60%	Conservative
Stockton South	888	58%	Conservative
Wrexham	1832	58%	Conservative
Lincoln	1538	57%	Conservative
Barrow and Furness	209	57%	Conservative
Ipswich	831	56%	Conservative
Keighly	239	53%	Conservative
Bedford	789	52%	Conservative
Portsmouth South	1554	53%	Conservative
Colne Valley	915	50%	Conservative
Stroud	687	46%	Conservative

All of the seats above, that had a majority voting Leave, with the exception of Bedford and Portsmouth South voted Conservative in 2019. The Conservatives also recognised that there was a concentration of Labour-held marginals in the West Midlands, such as West Bromwich East and West that were vulnerable to their party

Compass

framing the election around Leave and Remain.

Many people within the labour movement have argued that if the party had retained its 2017 policy on negotiating an exit from the European Union that this would have lost Labour many more seats. It is highly likely that a Leave orientated Labour Party would have seen seats like Battersea and Reading East go to the Conservatives. However, the number of constituencies with high Remain votes (at 60 per cent or above) is much smaller than the proportion of seats with high Leave votes. So whilst the party faced losses in both directions, the losses were always likely to be greater if it had a policy of re-opening the referendum outcome. Nonetheless, in recent history, Brexit was almost uniquely disruptive to Labour's electoral coalition. The party leadership faced a 'lose/lose' situation where it either faced the loss of votes in traditional heartlands or in big cities and university towns.

Labour was very poorly placed to win any general election, including one where Brexit was not a factor, due to its low economic competence ratings. Even with an economy that is barely growing and with wages that have yet to recover to pre-financial crisis levels, the Conservatives have held a lead as the party best placed to manage the economy since the financial crisis. As Green argued in her 2015 pamphlet, the financial crisis destroyed Labour's economic credibility, just as Black Wednesday in 1992 had robbed the Conservatives of the same attribute[30]. It is worth noting that the Conservative Party took twelve years to recover this credibility. The problem is that the Labour Party never started the process of regaining the electorate's economic trust. Arguably, the high spending commitments of the 2019 manifesto compounded the problem that Labour was seen as profligate and an unsafe choice in terms of economic stewardship. At the beginning of the campaign Sajid Javid had a lead of 18 per cent over John McDonnell when voters were asked which person they trusted to manage the economy. Unless Labour is able to narrow the economic trust gap, even if a new recession or Brexit-inspired shock comes, the party cannot expect to benefit in the way that David Cameron and George Osbourne did in 2010.

In 2019, the narrowness of the Labour coalition was laid bare due to the fall in overall turnout and specifically the fall in young people voting, identified above. Labour was able to temporarily overcome the loss of working class support in 2017 because of the rise in turnout amongst 18-44 year olds. In the 20 'youngest constituencies' Labour made a gain of 15 per cent, whereas the Conservatives gained only 1 per cent[31].

A fourth more complex reason for Labour's defeat is its increasing cultural disconnection with its old heartland constituencies. The collapse of old industries, like mining, the loss of the social institutions closely associated with these economic relationships and the process of de-unionisation, all broke the umbilical connection between these areas and the labour movement. A Joseph Rowntree study found that

Compass

the greatest support for Brexit came in the areas that had experienced greatest deindustrialisation and were least well equipped in terms of skills to operate in a modern globalised economy. This study also noted that areas that experienced a sharp drop in earnings were much more likely to vote to leave the EU[32]. The Leave campaign presented these areas with a simple analysis about how regaining policy independence and ending free movement would hold open the prospect for an economic revival.

Many of these voters have also seen the sharpest fall in their levels of trust towards politicians and the wider political system. Goodwin reported that in 2019, working class voters and those without degrees were twice as likely to believe that they had no voice in the political system[33]. This is why when Labour sought to re-open the issue of Britain's departure from the European Union, it came to symbolise a wider disconnection between the party and its traditional voters.

Despite what some members have argued, Labour never won the battle of ideas with the Conservatives. The Labour Party never presented a coherent programme for national economic renewal based on an alternative analysis of the problems of deindustrialisation, low wages and the decline of 'good jobs'. Instead Labour offered a disconnected programme of individual retail offers, just as Ed Miliband's soft Left leadership had four years before. The poor standing of Labour's leader further reduced the voters' confidence that such an expensive programme of public spending could be delivered.

The 2019 election was for Labour a 'perfect storm', where public opposition to Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, low economic competence ratings and a sense of betrayal amongst its traditional constituencies led to a landslide defeat. The framing of the general election around Brexit ensured that a defeat became a rout.

Labour now rests perilously on a narrow electoral coalition, one based on support in the big cities. This support is primarily based on ethnic minority communities. For example, if ethnic minority voters were removed from the calculation, even in London, Labour would be level pegging with the Conservatives. A series of seats in the party's remaining towns held by senior Labour MPs, including Angela Rayner and Yvette Cooper will face an assault from the Conservative Party in future and could well be lost. Paradoxically, if the party's growing disconnection from town voters continues, it could be the leadership of the Conservative Party that these electors turn to during an economic downturn. The party is particularly vulnerable to a further fall in youth turnout.

Brexit is unlikely to have the same salience in the next election as in this one. And Corbyn will not be Labour's leader. But that doesn't mean it's a shoe-in for Labour. The scale of the defeat suggests a ten year road back, and that depends on the Tory party forgetting to be smart and

Compass

adaptable – keen to hold on to the new seats they now have. Johnson has proved how cunning and clever he is and he can do so again.

The long road back for the centre Left

The Conservatives had a strong campaigning message 'Get Brexit Done'. The Labour Party had no equivalent that it could seek to frame the general election around. Next time Labour needs to develop a core election campaigning message that connects its major argument with its estimation of the voters' outlook. The Conservative Party has a good track record on message discipline, for example, reiterating that its austerity measures were 'cleaning up Labour's mess'. Labour could profit from drawing on this approach.

Labour faces a huge age voting divide. It is probably unrealistic for Labour to hope to scale back the scale of its deficit with the over 65 age group due to a combination of their cultural conservatism and that the Conservatives have financially protected them from austerity. However, **the lower hanging electoral fruits are the 44 to 54 age group**. Labour did relatively well with this group in 2017. These voters will need to be convinced about Labour's ability to manage the economy well. This group of voters have mortgages and financial commitments and therefore have a different perspective than the over 65 age group. If Labour can develop credible economic policies, it will be able to draw support from voters within this age group. The Conservatives will continue to be vulnerable on wage stagnation. Labour will need public endorsements for its economic strategy from respected actors, including in the business field. Ed Miliband had interesting ideas on responsible capitalism but lacked allies for his approach.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation produced a series of 'values indicators' based on their research on the priorities of voters across British society. These indicators are as follows: money or debt; physical health; caring for your family; immigration and work or finding a job[34]. **Labour needs to try and formulate strong messages with symbol-based 'proof points' on each of these value indicators**. However, on immigration policy Labour must never validate the Faragite slur that ethnic minorities are the principal cause of Britain's problems.

Labour needs a national programme for economic renewal based on a clear analysis of why our economy has under-performed and why Conservative policies will fail to lead to economic revival. At key moments in Labour's past, such as 1964 and 1997, the party has advanced electorally when it has a powerful national story about economic and social renewal. The centre Left, as a whole, has hard thinking to do about how it pursues social equality in a post-Brexit world where tax revenues may fall. It may be that income transfers are no longer the most viable and effective methods for achieving the redistribution of wealth. 'For the many and not the few' is a slogan and

Compass

not an economic argument. For example, Labour could have argued that Britain needs a skills revolution that will both strengthen the economy and also give opportunities to individuals living in both the suburbs and working class English towns. Labour has to develop persuasive prescriptions on issues like developing higher quality work, that speak to people in communities like Stoke-on-Trent.

Tactical voting campaigns need much earlier and more sustained investment amongst progressives. The increase in the number of second places held by the Liberal Democrats means that the party cannot be wished away. Every single Liberal Democrat MP who defeats a Conservative reduces the prospect of future Tory majorities. Paddy Ashdown and Tony Blair maximised the chances for tactical voting by having a shared vision for constitutional reform. Labour can make a big move in this direction by endorsing proportional representation. PR will ensure that the so-called 'left behind' areas can never be ignored by Westminster and Whitehall again.

Tactical voting campaigns started too late and were undermined by the proliferation of tactical voting sites that often gave conflicting advice. Tactical voting should be seen as part of a much wider sphere of progressive collaboration. The Democrats in the United States managed to win a majority in the House of Representatives in 2018, in part, because they were at the apex of a coalition of well coordinated activity by pressure groups and civil society organisations. Britain lacks a similar united progressive front. The Progressive Alliance of 2017 showed the electoral potential of opposition parties collaborating and was instrumental in the Conservatives, under Theresa May, losing their parliamentary majority. Whilst the Conservatives won 31 of the seats with the highest blue collar populations. In the 42 Progressive Alliance seats, there were 9 gains and 15 holds, including 13 for Labour. However in 2019, the Labour leadership spurned overtures to work with the Liberal Democrats and Greens, which could have seen those parties stand aside for each other in the constituencies where each was best placed to win. 1997 shows what's posisble when two leaders, then Blair and Ashdown, signal collaboration is both desirable and feasible.

Labour needs **a leader who commands popular respect** and is seen as a credible alternative prime minister. **The next Labour leader's first three months in post will be crucial in determining long term perceptions of themselves.** David Cameron's first three months as opposition leader should serve as a model for this approach. Cameron used a series of symbolic initiatives to cultivate a sense that the Conservative Party was moving back to the centre. He also used early initiatives and confrontations to show his decisiveness. Jeremy Corbyn's vacillations throughout 2019 over Brexit policy made him look weak in the eyes of voters. Ed Miliband's inactivity during his first two months as leader created a vacuum and created the conditions for the long-term erosion of his standing. Labour's next leader must have a plan

Compass

in place for immediately introducing themselves to the voters. If they do not, the Conservative Party's high command will introduce that person to the voters on their terms.

Listening and re-engagement: As discussed above, the political class is distrusted by large numbers of voters on low incomes. For this reason, Labour needs to do a bottom-up consultation about what the priorities are for voters in low income communities. Chakrabortty has noted that nationalisation was the centrepiece of the Labour programme when a far higher priority for many target voters was universal credit[35]. The centre Left needs to get into the habit of co-producing its policy programme with the electorate, rather than developing policies first and then reviewing them in front of focus groups. Labour needs not just to listen and engage but demonstrate that it has listened. Only by doing this can the party begin the process of fostering trust amongst a section of the community who have felt voiceless.

Dominic Cummings struck a powerful chord with the Vote Leave slogan 'Take Back Control'. Brexit highlighted the desire that many communities have for agency in their lives. It is now time for the centre Left to develop its own measures that will empower communities so that they can pursue their own destinies. Labour needs to consider devolving both powers and revenue generation to facilitate this. Labour has the chance to model these approaches in the local authorities that it still controls.

Labour may have magnified its own defeat by **failing to mount a proper defence of the most marginals seats that it was defending**. This hubristic attitude led to an over concentration of party activists in seats like Chingford and Uxbridge. If proper defence campaigns are not put in place at the next election, the party could be wiped out in all English towns. One of the few successes of Labour's election campaign was winning so many news cycles. However this was done by announcing a plethora of new policies that militated against embedding a strong key message.

Conclusions

Labour's road back to power will be a very steep one. The party's collapse in Scotland and the possibility of Scottish secession from the Union means that it has to win even greater numbers of English seats. To return to office it needs to build a coalition that spans the English towns in the North of England, the middle classes in service dominated towns in the Midlands and South of England, alongside its strongholds in the big cities. It has to extend its appeal to those who are in mid-life, coping with the pressures of bringing children through to adolescence, who want good public services and jobs that pay good wages. Labour has to deliver for these people, whilst embarking on significant

Compass

redistribution to those on the lowest incomes.

Politics is not static and the Johnson government is likely to make some bold moves to try and consolidate its support amongst the new entrants to its electoral coalition. Boris Johnson may engage in a degree of redistribution to post-industrial English towns, at least in the near-term. Johnson did a deft 'double shuffle' when he became premier, by accompanying strong Leave rhetoric with increased public spending for the health service. This meant he was able to combine his Brexit appeal with one that spoke to the economic progressivism of voters in places like Bishop Auckland. He is also likely to underscore his commitment to manage immigration and respond to these voters concerns about cultural identity. The centre Left has a long tradition of fighting the 'last war'. The next Labour leader will need to anticipate these moves as well as bring forward their own prospectus.

The next general election could be held well before 2024 as Boris Johnson may wish to go to the country before the economic effects of Brexit become widespread. The coming abolition of the Fixed Term Parliament Act will remove the power of the opposition parties to block a general election. The next Labour leader may have only two years to rebuild before facing another general election.

Labour faces electoral extinction if it experiences another strong swing to the Conservative Party. Many of its incumbent MPs rest on a precipice and could be easily defeated at the next general election. The Conservatives could make inroads into the cities, including West London. Labour can also not assume that the seats it lost in the former coalfields will be easily won back. Newly elected Conservative MPs in these constituencies will build on their incumbency and some will become community activists in these areas. Labour should look across the channel at the state of the French Socialist Party that was marginalised within the National Assembly. As I outlined in Labour's Eleventh Hour, Labour could be heading the way of social democratic parties in other countries like Germany and the Netherlands into long-term marginalisation[36]. The Liberal Democrats could recover from their 2019 setback and move into winning seats in the suburbs of London and the commuter belt, if there is a Brexit-inspired economic shock, potentially becoming the second party in British politics.

Given the workings of the first-past-the-post electoral system, a further swing from Labour to the Conservatives could lead to the party's annihilation as happened in Scotland in 2015. The Labour Party, at every level, need to recognise the severity of the situation before this happens and not retreat into denial and insularity. The next general election could be the labour movement's last stand.

Compass

References

1. Ashcroft, M (2019), 'How Britain voted and why: My 2019 general election post-vote poll'
2. Grieve, D (2019), 'Even in Tory heartlands, Boris Johnson was merely the lesser of two evils' in The Guardian, 23 December
3. Ipsos Mori (2019), 'How Britain Voted In The 2019 General Election'
4. Ipsos Mori (2019), 'How Britain Voted In The 2019 General Election'
5. Ashcroft, M (2019), 'How Britain voted and why: My 2019 general election post-vote poll'
6. BBC, (2019), 'Election results 2019: Analysis in maps and charts'
7. Ipsos Mori (2019), 'How Britain Voted In The 2019 General Election'
8. Cadywould, C (2018), Labour's Towns Problem. London, Policy Network
9. Ashcroft, M (2019), 'How Britain voted and why: My 2019 general election post-vote poll'
10. Ipsos Mori (2019), 'Labour party image falls since 2017 - seen as more divided, more extreme and less fit to govern', 22 November
11. Sturgis, P and Jennings, W (2018), 'Why 2017 may have witnessed a youthquake after all'. London School of Economics, British Politics Blogs
12. Goodwin, M and Heath, O (2017), UK 2017 Election Vote Examined: income, poverty and Brexit. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
13. Ashcroft, M (2019), Would you vote tactically? What worries you most about a Tory or Labour government? What would actually happen under Johnson or Corbyn?
14. Swales, K (2016), Understanding the Leave Vote. London, NatCen Social Research
15. Jennings, W and Stoker, G (2018), Tilting Towards The Cosmopolitan Axis. London, Political Quarterly
16. Mason, R, (2016), 'Beckett report: Labour lost election over economy, immigration and benefits' in The Guardian, 14 January
17. Ford, R and Goodwin, M (2014), Revolt on the Right. London, Routledge.
18. British Social Attitudes 31 (2014), NatCen Social Research
19. Drummond, A (2018), How should Labour approach Brexit? Opinium
20. Drummond, A (2018), How should Labour approach Brexit? Opinium
21. Ford, R and Goodwin, M (2014), Revolt on the Right. London, Routledge, p123
22. Ford, R and Goodwin, M (2014), Revolt on the Right. London, Routledge, p121
23. Swales (2016), Understanding the Leave Vote. London, NatCen, p13
24. Opinium, (2019), 'Preview of our Day of Poll survey'
24. Curtis, C, (2020), 'New Tory voters think Labour left them, not the other way around' in The Times, 17 January
26. Trade Union Congress (2015), 'New poll has no easy answers for Labour but trust and competence key'
27. Bartle (2005), Homogenous Models and Heterogenous Voters. Sage
28. Blumenau, J (2015), Do party leader approval ratings predict electoral outcomes. British Politics and Policy at London School of Economics
28. Curtis, C, (2020), 'New Tory voters think Labour left them, not the other way around' in The Times, 17 January
30. Green, J (2015), Learning The Right Lessons from Labour's 2015 Defeat. Institute for Public Policy Research

Compass

31. Goodwin, M and Heath, O (2016), [Brexit Vote Explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities](#) . Joseph Rowntree Foundation

32. Goodwin, M and Heath, O (2016), [Brexit Vote Explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities](#). Joseph Rowntree Foundation

33. Goodwin, M (2019), '[The End of Trust in Our Political Class](#)' in New Statesman, 11 May

34. Ainsley, C and Soodeen, F (2019), [Every Voter Counts. Winning Over Low Income Voters](#). Joseph Rowntree Foundation

35. Chakrabortty, A (2019), '[On the doorstep, Labour faces the question: who do you speak for?](#)' in The Guardian, 26 November

36. Sowemimo, M (2015), [Labour's 11th Hour](#). Compass

Compass

COMPASS IS THE PRESSURE GROUP FOR A GOOD SOCIETY

We believe in a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build alliances of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen.

JOIN COMPASS TODAY   action.compassonline.org.uk

Compass

CompassGoodSociety
CompassGoodSociety
CompassOffice