

Letter from Britain: The Corbyn Earthquake

Sheila McGregor



Jeremy Corbyn

‘She’s a dead woman walking and the only question is how long she’s going to be on death row’. This was George Osborne’s verdict speaking on the BBC, three days after the UK General Election. The ‘she’ being Theresa May, the Tory Prime Minister, ‘in office but not in power’ as the Sunday Telegraph put it, whilst Jeremy Corbyn, relaxed and confident, made clear that he was ready to govern and would present an alternative Queen’s speech.

On the Friday morning, erstwhile ‘strong and stable’ Theresa May headed to the palace, following the quaint old custom of asking the Queen for permission to form a government. After all, she was leader of the biggest party with the largest number of votes and could surely govern with a little help from the DUP, that wondrous organisation of enlightenment on all social matters such as abortion and gay marriage - just don’t mention their shady links to terrorism. And never mind the fact that seven weeks previously, the Tories had an overall majority with 331 seats in the House of Commons, whilst now Theresa May looked a trifle weak and wobbly with only 314, having lost 17 seats, her overall majority and 8 cabinet ministers. Meanwhile Corbyn and the Labour Party had achieved the biggest swing

to any political party since 1945, winning in unexpected places like Kensington, the millionaires’ part of London (apart from North Kensington of Grenfell infamy), as well as 6 seats in Scotland.

Amongst the cabinet ministers to go were Ben Gummer, who wrote ‘the worst Tory manifesto ever’ and Housing Minister Gavin Barwell, author of the book ‘How to Win a Marginal Seat’. He was back three days later with a key coordinating role in Downing St. after furious Tory MPs claimed the scalps of Theresa May’s two closest advisors, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill. Or rather they took the fall for May’s manifesto offer of ‘things can only get worse’, as John Sergeant put it on the Sunday morning after the election.

As Tories, former Labour Corbyn haters, pundits and journalists, fell over themselves to attack May and ‘congratulate’ Jeremy Corbyn for his campaign, it is worth looking back to the situation prior to the election to measure the scale of the Tories’ defeat, then look at the campaign that delivered the earthquake and finally assess the forces at work in British society.

This was an election Theresa chose to call. Having vowed the year before she wouldn’t dream of calling an election, a walking holiday in Wales appeared to have changed her mind. In local council elections a few months earlier, the Tories gained 563 seats, gaining control of 11 councils, UKIP lost 145 seats, whilst the Labour Party lost 382 seats and control of 7 councils. Projected onto a general election that would have given 349 (plus 18) seats to the Tories and only 215 (minus 17) to Labour. The polls at the start of the election projected a 20 point lead, which would have given the Tories 424 seats to Labour’s 167; with May herself having a lead of 56 points over Jeremy Corbyn.

The Labour camp was in disarray after two years of attempts to get rid of Corbyn. All the parliamentary Labour Party seemed to have succeeded in achieving was a spectacular own goal; persuading voters that Corbyn was ‘unelectable’ and not fit to be prime minister. Momentum, the organisation that organised the campaign to support Corbyn, was wracked with division, and obsessed with the infighting in the Labour Party; seemingly moribund.

Small wonder May assumed she could have a quick election; increase her majority and rid herself of pressures from Tory backbenchers pushing for a ‘hard’ BREXIT. It would have guaranteed her five years in office until 2022, well past 2019, the due date for leaving the EU. She intended to march into Labour’s working class heartlands and turn the Tory party into the party of working people. Above all, May projected herself as the strong and stable leader, the ‘bloody difficult woman’, and the only politician fit to lead the BREXIT negotiations, scheduled to start 10 days after the General Election.

The result was the complete opposite: no overall majority, an end to the consensus on austerity, rehabilitation of the ideas of taxes on the rich, spending on public services, re-nationalisation of key industries, and a the possibility of a society for the many not the few. Following the election there is now a widespread consensus that May will not be able to conduct the BREXIT negotiations, due to start on June 19th, and is unlikely to survive as leader of the party beyond the next 6 months. On June 10th, the Labour Party stood at 45% in the polls. This was a 5% increase since June 8th, with the Tories slipping to 39%. Jeremy Corbyn sees himself and is seen by others, to be the prime minister in waiting. How have the mighty fallen. And just how chaotic does the Tory party look now.

So What Happened?

For some years now, we have been watching the collapse of the consensus on neo-liberalism, resulting in a political polarisation throughout Europe, with the rise of Syriza on the left and Golden Dawn on the fascist right in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the movement for Bernie Sanders in the US. In Britain, the signs have also been there. The independence referendum in Scotland in September 2014 was marked by a clear rejection of austerity politics and active engagement of young people, albeit articulated by the SNP, a nationalist party.

The 2015 General Election seemed to continue the policy of ‘business as usual’ with a choice between Tory austerity and Labour Party ‘austerity lite’, but the energetic explicitly socialist and anti austerity campaign that saw Jeremy Corbyn elected as Labour Party leader that same year, showed that the tectonic plates were also shifting across the UK.

The 2016 EU referendum campaign was dominated publicly by rightwing nationalist and racist ideas but it was also an expression of profound bitterness and hatred in working class communities left to rot by neo-liberal policies imposed by central government, but often enacted by local Labour councils. The Tories and pundits alike, including the bulk of the Labour Party, as well as younger voters interpreted the referendum as a vote for a hard BREXIT, harsh immigration controls, and a tolerance of continued austerity. The spike in racial attacks immediately after the referendum and the heightened racist atmosphere seemed to confirm this interpretation of the vote. Diane Abbott was very much a minority voice amongst politicians, when she argued that the dispossessed had voted to leave Europe in an attempt to change the economic system ‘designed for the few over the many’.

In early 2017, the signs of opposition to both austerity and racism were there. 200,000 people mobilised for a demonstration in defense of the NHS called by the

Health Campaigns Together and the People's Assembly. Two weeks later, 30,000 marched against racism and islamophobia in London, as well as thousands more in Glasgow and Cardiff. But still it felt as if Theresa May and the Tories were sweeping all before them, driving home the destruction of the National Health Service, cutting three billion from the schools budget, while at the same time proposing cuts in corporation tax.

The election was going to be all about BREXIT and Theresa May as the 'strong and stable leader' compared with Jeremy Corbyn who could not be trusted. May proved so 'strong and stable' she never went out to meet ordinary voters, all her appearances were stage managed with Tory supporters. She made a fatal decision not to turn up to a debate with Jeremy Corbyn, causing herself to be branded as arrogant, weak and afraid. And then there was the Tory manifesto proclaiming an end to universal fuel payments for older people, an end to the triple lock on pensions, and an end to free school meals in primary schools. Undoubtedly, the icing on this poisonous cake was what was quickly dubbed the 'dementia tax'; a proposal to use people's homes to pay for their social care. And then there was the promise to have another vote on fox hunting.

The Corbyn campaign

The contrast with the Corbyn campaign could not have been starker. The Labour Party Manifesto, 'For the many, not the few' was leaked several days before it was due to be launched giving it unprecedented media coverage. Labour proposed to tax the rich and increase corporation tax to properly fund the NHS, schools, and abolish tuition fees. It guaranteed the triple lock on pensions, a minimum wage of £10 an hour and free school meals. The proposals were fully costed, whilst the Tory manifesto was not. Try as they could, the media could not rattle the confidence of Corbyn and other Labour spokespeople that redistribution of

wealth to working people would be good for Britain. On the EU, Corbyn kept repeating that EU citizens would be automatically guaranteed their status in Britain, if he got elected.

But above all, Corbyn went out to meet people, as many as possible. He spoke to tens of thousands at over 90 rallies up and down the country, taking the message of change and hope wherever he went. In Gateshead, a crowd of up to 10,000 scrambled up the hill in the pouring rain to listen to him speak. In Middlesbrough, about 300 mainly working class women with their kids, emerged from a local estate to hear Corbyn. And because he went to meet people, he got a response from the thousands who had felt ignored and unrepresented. One of his last rallies in Glasgow on election day convinced people to turn out and vote for him, helping the Labour Party to win back six seats from the SNP.

The more people saw of Corbyn the more they warmed to him and his message. Team Corbyn had two years campaigning to get him elected and retain him as leader. They knew how to amplify the messages from the rallies on social media. Videos of all the rallies were made and posted on line so yet more local people could hear what Corbyn had to say on their patch. These reached two million people. A film, 'Daddy, why do you hate me?' had a reach of seven million. A video of Corbyn interjection during Theresa May's Facebook Live Chat got four million views. Canvassing and phone banks were not only organised with extraordinary efficiency, people were encouraged to take part in the campaign, in whatever way they could. Use of email and messaging made it easy for groups of friends to pitch up and get involved. Nothing was left to chance. Polling day mobilised 1,000s of volunteers to turn out the vote in marginal seats up and down the country. Teams of people, young and old, men, women, LGBT, Black and minority ethnic, of different faiths and none, came together to get over the Corbyn mes-

sage and then turn out the vote. All over the country, young women played a key role in the campaign. The London phone bank was run by a 21 year old woman, whilst another 22 year old woman ran the Momentum press operation.

Voter registration was part of the drive to maximise the vote. Two million new voters registered from the announcement of the election to the cut-off of on 22nd May. The last 24 hours saw 600,000 register, two thirds of them aged 18-24. Teams of volunteers toured colleges getting people to register using their mobile phones. The National Union of Students played an important role in this initiative. Some of the positive results of this were seen on June 8th when the Labour Party won Canterbury on a 72% turnout and claimed Nick Clegg's scalp, the Lib-Dem deputy prime minister 2005-2010, in Sheffield Hallam.

But the army of volunteers that registered voters and then knocked them up on polling day wasn't the typical electoral army. These were volunteers trained in the art of questioning voters on the doorstep, probing to find ways of communicating their message of hope, of changing people's minds. One activist described the difference in Ilford North, a marginal constituency held by Wes Streeting, an arch opponent of Jeremy Corbyn. At the outset of the campaign on the doorstep, many voters reflected back the views of the Labour Party parliamentary party, that Jeremy Corbyn was unfit to be prime minister. Wes Streeting and his Labour Party circle would simply counter this by agreeing about Corbyn, but explaining that this election was about electing the local MP. Meantime, the activists who had been to training sessions with the Sanders' volunteers from the US, would counter such views, perhaps using Corbyn's principled stand on issues to illustrate his leadership qualities, thus enabling potential voters to think differently about him. The strategy of winning people over clearly gained traction as the increasingly positive messages

about Corbyn and the Labour Party manifesto filtered through, in stark contrast to the 'things can only get worse' message from May's camp.

Nothing was left to chance. Volunteers going out on the doorstep were given half hour briefings before they went out, that included being provided with information about the concerns of local people they were about to canvas. An activist who spent the afternoon in Kilburn on polling day described walking up Kilburn High Road and seeing an Indian restaurant which she first mistook for the headquarters only to discover it was local Indian residents organising to turn our their community. But there were also a great number of young Muslim women wearing the hijab and she herself was in a mixed group of different ages and faiths. There were three waves of volunteers throughout the day going out to check everyone had voted. She estimated there were up to 500 during the afternoon alone. Their efforts were rewarded by turning Hampstead and Kilburn from a marginal seat for Labour's Tulip Siddique into a solid vote. Up to a thousand volunteers in Croyden Central, another marginal seat, helped win it for Labour.

Other campaigns also fed into the Momentum/Labour campaign. At their Easter annual conference the NUT, the National Union of Teachers, launched a campaign against May's proposed £3 billion cuts package. Local socialist activists, sensing the grassroots anger, organised a 6,000 strong demonstration in Bristol last May, with local working class parents distributing hundreds of leaflets. A similar campaign in East London, involving Head teachers, local parents and teachers mobilised 1,000 people for 'The Big School Assembly' in a local park on a Wednesday afternoon in late May. Other active branches of the NUT organised similar protests throughout the election campaign.

At a national level, the union posted out leaflets to union members to use in their local area. These leaflets explained the pro-

posed cuts and called for a ‘Vote for Education’. In many areas, local campaigns in defense of the NHS and education, housing campaigns and Keep Racism out of the Election, came together with stalls in town centres, organised local hustings, and thus mobilised the vote against the Tories. The commitment to proper funding for public services undoubtedly helped increase the vote amongst people who were not normally natural supporters of Labour; as well as winning back others, who were perhaps thinking of voting Tory because of BREXIT.

Some commentators have explained the turn out for Corbyn as the ‘revenge of the young’ Remainers. If not that, then it was the bribe of getting rid of student fees ‘wot did it’. Unquestionably, there was a BREXIT effect. One activist campaigning in Hampstead came across Tories who were contemplating voting Labour for a ‘softer’ BREXIT and some Labour Party voters were considering voting for May as they considered her most likely to deliver on BREXIT. But it would be a big mistake to simply try to map last year’s referendum results and UKIP voters onto this year’s election. This was the assumption made by Theresa May, leading her to trumpet that she was going to turn the Tory party into the natural party of the working class. She forgot two things, if she ever understood them: that the referendum result had not simply been a nationalist and racist vote but a ‘cry of the oppressed’ against the conditions of their lives. Secondly, a campaign that projects real solutions to those conditions can cut through any racism and nationalism in abandoned class communities, by providing a vision and hope for a different kind of life. Corbyn’s manifesto put working class people and their needs at the centre of the campaign in a way no one had seen since before Tony Blair’s time. This election was about class and not about BREXIT. One spin off was (unexpectedly) winning back six working class constituencies from the SNP in Scotland, where the government implements

Tory cuts rather than use their powers to tax the rich.

There were clearly places where the ‘class’ message needed more time to get through. In Copeland, the constituency which covers Sellafield, 62% had voted ‘Leave’ in the referendum, the highest Leave vote in Cumbria. The former Labour MP, Jamie Read, a staunch supporter of nuclear power who had resigned as shadow Health minister on Corbyn’s election in September 2015, because of Corbyn’s stance on nuclear power. Read famously described him as ‘reckless, juvenile and narcissistic’. He resigned his seat to take up a post at Sellafield in early 2017. The Tories won the bye-election and increased their vote on June 8th. Only a party which combined a commitment to securing workers’ jobs with arguments against nuclear power would gain traction against the poisonous position of the former MP and the local trade union.

Similar local factors seemed to be at work in Mansfield, a Labour seat since 1923 that went Tory. Well paid local miners’ jobs have been replaced by low paid ones at Sports Direct. It had also been home to the UDM, the scab breakaway union during the Great miners’ strike in 1984-5. The Leave vote was 71%, whilst the local MP, Alan Meale, was a prominent Remainder. He, however, was another Blairite hostile to Corbyn, and deeply involved in the parliamentary expenses’ scandal in 2009 when he claimed £13,000 in gardening expenses. Although the Financial Times reported the beginnings of a swing to Labour in the last few days of the campaign, it was not enough to split the UKIP vote as happened in other areas. Here it went almost entirely to the Tories.

There is a similar story in Stoke on Trent South, an area of low pay, where the Leave vote was 69.4%. Fello, co-founder of a firm of tax and financial advisors, was the first to call on Corbyn to resign in June 2016. Bizarrely, he opposed employment rights for temporary and agency workers and blamed traffic congestion in London on cycle lanes.

Middlesborough South and Cleveland East voted 65% for Leave. The local Blairite MP, Tom Blenkinsop, resigned at the start of the election, saying he could not campaign for Labour under Corbyn. His constituency went Tory with a majority of 1,020 votes. Fortunately, similar antics by Blairite Alan Johnson who denounced Corbyn as ‘useless, incompetent and incapable’ did not lead to defeat in Hull West and Hessle where the Leave vote was 68

Clearly in constituencies like these, where many people feel abandoned to their fate, the Labour Party has a way to go to overcome the legacy of austerity, Blairism, and local right wing MPs. John McDonnell is probably right to argue that another two weeks of positive campaigning could have both stemmed some of these losses and led to greater Labour Party gains. As it is, Hartlepool thought to be at risk of going to the Tories because the Leave vote was over 69% saw an increased Labour vote. The Corbyn rally in nearby Gateshead had an impact, helping to put public sector cuts at the centre of the debate, rather than BREXIT.

In Ipswich, with a Leave vote of 58%, almost the entire former UKIP vote went to the Labour Party, turning it into a Labour gain. Likewise, Portsmouth South, which also voted to leave the EU, went Labour with a massive swing of 21.75%.

The uneven way in which the UKIP votes split between Tory and Labour confounded Tory expectations of easy gains and the stronger the Corbyn effect, the bigger the swing to Labour.

The recent tragic fire in Grenfell House which, at the time of writing, has claimed a minimum of 30 lives (a figure that is certain to rise, probably by a lot), illustrates how neglected working class communities exist cheek by jowl with some of London’s most sought after real estate. This shows how cuts, privatisation of housing, and cut backs in property regulations, cost lives. It is a horrific illustration of the consequences of a ‘bonfire of regulations’, of the drive to-

wards private wealth at the expense of public squalor. Small wonder the Labour Party won Kensington, albeit with a margin of 20 votes. It also makes the defeat of Gavin Barwell, (in Croyden Central) former Tory Housing Minister, all the sweeter.

Many assumed that the two terrorist incidents in Manchester and London, especially with the gratuitous loss of life at a concert mainly for young teenage girls in Manchester, would swing the election back to May and the Tory law and order party. The incredible display of Manchester unity showed that people did not want to be divided. Equally, Corbyn’s clarity about connecting Britain’s wars abroad with the breeding of terrorism at home struck a chord and broke the usual political consensus on extremist Islamism being the root of terrorism. The response after the London attack, by putting the spotlight on the 20,000 cut in police numbers, highlighted May’s former responsibilities as Home Secretary and the impact of public sector cuts. This argument is, however, double edged because of the way it plays to the ‘security’ agenda.

Corbyn’s victory in increasing the number of Labour seats and securing, the biggest swing of any party since 1945, has been about reasserting the needs of working class people. It has also silenced, however temporarily, the right wing MPs who only a year ago were so desperate to get rid of him. That is enough cause to celebrate after decades of the mantra of neo-liberalism with added austerity since the bankers’ crash of 2008. Nevertheless, a couple of words of caution are in order. The manifesto was a solid left reformist social democratic programme and not a revolutionary document. Concessions were made along the way. Before the general election, Corbyn gave up his opposition to the Trident nuclear deterrent in response to pressure from the likes of Len McCluskey, leader of the largest union, UNITE. This did not stop Copeland, where the Sellafield Nuclear Plant is, from going Tory.

During the campaign itself Corbyn reem-

phasised his commitment to giving EU citizens security of residence, but made clear he would no longer defend free movement of people; worse still, during the leadership debate, he appeared to blame migrants for low pay. Such concessions on issues of principle for anti-racists do not bode well.

Currently, the Tory Party, despite the visceral anger at the damage wrought by May's miscalculations, is once more rallying behind her. We should remember that the show of unity after the shock BREXIT vote lasted less than a year. May is in an incomparably weaker position as she attempts to buy time for her government with a deal with the DUP.

She may well be prepared to play with the Northern Ireland peace process, but there is huge opposition to the bigotry of the DUP. Opposition over health and education cuts will continue to grow, as will anger over housing, pay and many other issues. People will feel emboldened to fight; knowing May's government to be weak and most likely will

be forced to retreat over some of the issues in the Tory manifesto. Unexpected events like the Grenfell Tower disaster can galvanise people into fighting back.

It seems it will only be a matter of time before Corbyn is elected prime minister and has to form a government. Then it won't just be the media barons who throw the worst at him, he will face the direct pressures of big business, the banks and the stock exchange with the security forces waiting in the wings. The fate of Tsipras and Syriza in Greece, who were forced to impose ever harsher penalties on the Greek working class, stands as a warning to those who believe that an election victory is sufficient to break the power of capital. It can be a first step, a very welcome first step, and help sow panic in the ranks of the ruling class, but socialists have to prepare to go much further. Building the resistance in the here and now and fighting to get rid of May and her Tory friends can be part of that.