DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

THE BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION OF 2019

Conservative Triumph. Labour Disaster.

Tim Bale
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→ A weakening of the traditional relationship between class and vote choice was an underlying factor for the 2019 parliamentary elections' results: Labour has retained the support of the country's poorest workers, but has been losing support among working people in general.

→ While the Conservatives have been successful in uniting the Leave vote, Labour's equivocal stance on Brexit led to the party winning only the support of half of all Remain voters.

→ The Conservatives' campaign combined impressive message discipline with a highly sophisticated polling, advertising and social media campaign, run by a team of external consultants. All this stood in complete contrast to Labour's seriously dysfunctional, largely in-house campaign.

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ANOTHER EARLY ELECTION: HOW AND WHY

At the 2019 European Parliament elections, the Conservatives, then governing as a minority administration, finished in fifth place on a vote share of just 8.8 percent – easily their worst ever showing in a nationwide contest. True, the Labour opposition had come third on 13.6 percent. But that was little comfort given Nigel Farage's Brexit Party had topped the poll on 30.5 percent. Clearly, the Conservatives urgently needed to find a new leader who could match Farage's charisma and his cast-iron commitment to getting the UK out of the EU. Fortunately, in Boris Johnson, they had one waiting in the wings.

Whatever his flaws – his record of personal, professional and political dishonesty, as well as his lack of significant achievements in any public office he had ever occupied – Johnson, twice elected as Mayor of (largely Labour-voting) London, was a proven election winner, seen as loveable rogue not just by Conservative Party members, who would decide who became leader, but by many ordinary voters too. And, as the face of the Leave campaign during the 2016 referendum, his commitment to Brexit was by now unquestionable – even more so since he had previously resigned from government citing his opposition to a withdrawal agreement whose »Northern Ireland backstop« deprived Brexiteers of the clean break so many of them craved.

At the end of July, having secured an easy victory over his rivals, Johnson became prime minister. Although eventually obliged by his lack of a parliamentary majority to renege on his pledge to leave the EU by 31 October 2019, he nevertheless managed to negotiate a withdrawal agreement with the EU. It was now blindingly obvious, however, especially in the light of his government's battles with parliament over the summer and early autumn, that the only way the new agreement could be passed into law was for Johnson to secure victory at a general election.

This came as a considerable relief to the team that Johnson had recruited over the summer to run the Conservatives' campaign: its greatest fear was repeating the mistakes of the disastrous 2017 general election, one of which had been Theresa May's failure to convince the electorate of the necessity of a contest in the first place. Yet being able to argue at last that, if people really did want to put an end to the argument, they would need to go out and vote even as the weather got colder and the days got shorter was one thing. Actually engineering an early election given the UK's Fixed Term Parliament Act (FTPA) was another – not least because many Labour MPs, in the light of polling which showed the Conservatives well ahead, were understandably reluctant to act like the proverbial turkeys voting for Christmas.

Ultimately, however, they had little choice after the EU effectively took the possibility of a no-deal exit off the table until after an election by agreeing to delay the UK's withdrawal until 31 January 2020. The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) and the centrist, pro-European Liberal Democrats swiftly decided (on the assumption that they would do well and might even stand one last chance of stopping Brexit) to support legislation that, with or without Labour support, would override the FTPA. For Labour's leader, the veteran left-winger, Jeremy Corbyn, refusing to board the bandwagon risked looking like cowardice. In any case, he and some in his inner circle genuinely believed that Labour, with its half-a-million members and a leader supposedly in his element on the campaign trail, could – just as it had in 2017 – overturn the conventional wisdom, namely that a government going into an election campaign with a double-digit lead was practically bound to emerge victorious on polling day.

THE RESULTS OUTLINED

Sadly for Labour, albeit to the relief, perhaps, of political scientists and pollsters, the 2019 election proved to be a victory for both the conventional wisdom and for Boris Johnson's Conservative Party. On a 67 percent turnout, Labour was utterly routed, suffering its worst defeat in terms of parliamentary seats since 1935, finishing with a vote share of 32 percent (down from 40 percent in 2017) which earned the party just 202 seats (down from 262) in a lower house of 650. The Conservatives, meanwhile, may only have added just over one percentage point to their vote share, which rose to just under 44 percent, but they nevertheless won an additional 48 seats, giving them 365 MPs and an overall majority over all other parties of 80. Moreover, a fair few of those MPs were elected in seats in what it had become fashionable to label the »Red Wall« – constituencies in relatively small industrial and post-industrial towns in the Midlands and in Northern England that had more often than not routinely elected Labour MPs. Better still, the Brexit Party failed even to come close to winning a seat, its paltry two percent vote share likely to finally spell an end to the political career of Nigel Farage, for so long a thorn in the Conservatives' side. The Greens won nearer to three percent nationwide but could at least comfort themselves that their sole MP again increased her majority. As for the other »minor parties«, the SNP may not have repeated the near clean-sweep of Scottish seats it achieved in 2015 in the wake of the independence referendum; but, with a vote-share of 45 percent north of the border, it won 47 of Scotland's 58 seats. And one of its 13 gains was the seat held until then by Jo Swinson, leader of the UK Liberal Democrats, whose high hopes of winning big among Remain supporters were badly dashed, their improved 12 percent vote share winning them a mere 11 seats – one fewer than last time.

THE RESULTS EXPLAINED

Like all elections, 2019 is best explained by combination of underlying and short-term campaign factors. Of the former, the most profound, perhaps, is the weakening (and some analysts even suggest a complete reversal) of the traditional relationship between class and vote-choice. La-

bour has managed to retain the support of the country's poorest voters, particularly if they are from an ethnic minority and/or live in rented accommodation. But it has been losing support for decades now among working people in general. The reasons are complex and multifarious, and include the following: de-industrialisation and an associated decline in trade union density (down from over 50 percent in 1979 to below 25 percent now); a long-term increase in home-ownership (albeit one now levelling off and, indeed reversing among younger people) and a concomitant decrease in those living in social housing; a parliamentary Labour Party which looks increasingly well-off and well-educated and has been led by politicians who, especially in the 1990s and early 2000s, responded to the long-term shrinkage of Britain's working class by emphasising the party's appeal to the expanding middle class; and, finally, Labour's adoption and advocacy of the socially liberal, »cosmopolitan« attitudes which characterise its (overwhelmingly white, middle-class, middle-aged, and university educated) members but which contrast markedly with the more traditional, authoritarian, and nationalistic cultural values held by many of the country's working class voters.

That »values divide« dovetails with a generational and an educational divide. Indeed, in 2019, as in 2017, age and university attendance were better predictors of an individual's vote than class. Labour has a substantial lead among young people, especially those with degrees. But the Conservatives have an even bigger lead amongst older people, particularly those with fewer qualifications. In an ageing society, and one in which turnout at elections increases as one moves up through the age cohorts, this is a serious disadvantage for Labour. It also means that the party fails to capitalise as much as it might do on its greater popularity among younger and middle-aged women. Differential turnout means, too, that Labour's far higher support among the country's largest ethnic minorities does not translate into as many parliamentary seats as it might.

This particular misfortune is compounded by Britain's electoral geography. The country's black and Asian minorities tend to be concentrated in England's larger towns and cities – as do, incidentally, people who have been to (or are currently attending) university. Although, in the long-term, the tendency of both groups to move out of city centres towards more affluent suburbs and smaller towns may eventually change their political complexion, Labour is currently prone to piling up votes in places where, under first past the post, they deliver the party relatively few seats. The Conservatives, on the other hand, are doing increasingly well in smaller, not necessarily particularly affluent, English towns where home-ownership is not beyond the reach of ordinary folk, most of whom are neither graduates nor people of colour – and where cultural attitudes are accordingly less cosmopolitan.

Those cultural divides do, of course, exist in Scotland but, especially since the 2015 election that followed hard on the heels of the 2014 indepence referendum, they pale in-

to insignificance compared to the debate over Scotland's future. Labour's equivocation on the issue has seen it fall between two stools – secession preached by the SNP and uncompromising defence of the union by the Conservatives. After dominating Scotland for decades, winning 41 out of its 59 seats as recently as 2010, Labour managed just one solitary seat there in 2019. In Wales, which (unlike Scotland and Northern Ireland but like England) voted Leave, Labour's performance was far less dire but still worrisome. In 2019 the party won only 22 seats out of 40 and lost six seats directly to the Conservatives, who built on their longstanding support in those constituencies bordering England to win 14 altogether.

Since the 2016 EU referendum, and across Great Britain as a whole, the Conservative Party has made it its mission to consolidate the Leave vote under its banner. Theresa May did this reasonably effectively in the run-up to the 2017 election. However, over the course of the campaign, while she hung onto most of those voters who had since 2015 transferred their support from UKIP to the Conservatives, she failed to keep hold of a significant number of former Labour voters. As a result, while she managed to attract the support of nearly two-thirds of all Leave voters and the Conservatives consequently improved their vote-share in many traditionally Labour Leave seats, they all too often finished a close second rather than first. Two years later, however, Boris Johnson managed to do even better, attracting the support of nearly three-quarters of all Leave voters. Even more importantly, many of them who had previously supported Labour were now prepared to switch straight to the Conservatives and, for the most part, ignore the Brexit Party – for three main reasons.

First, they had by that time seen more than enough of Labour's Jeremy Corbyn to convince them that he neither shared their patriotic and small-c conservative cultural values nor came over as a convincing alternative prime minister when compared to Johnson. »Boris« was deemed reasonably likeable and at least seemed to love his country even if, apart from on Europe (in respect of which he was helped by Nigel Farage's last-minute decision not to stand Brexit Party candidates in Conservative-held seats), he was not regarded as particularly trustworthy.

Second, Labour Leavers' support for Brexit had not waned whereas the party's most certainly had. It was now promising to negotiate a new deal with the EU and then hold a second referendum on that deal, during which it would remain neutral – a position widely seen as absurd. But those voters wanted a party which would, as Boris Johnson's oft-repeated mantra put it, »Get Brexit Done« – a prospect, incidentally, that a significant number of Remain voters were now prepared to sanction if it meant not crashing out without a deal and putting an end to the parliamentary chaos of the last three years.

Third, a sufficient slice of Labour Leave voters were now convinced (to an extent they hadn't been in 2017) that getting Brexit done would at last allow the country to get on

with their top priority – bringing an end to the government-imposed austerity of the last decade.

That they were so convinced was, at least in part, down to the impressive message discipline of a Conservative campaign focused on reassuring voters that getting Brexit done was not merely an important end in itself but also a means to an end – namely restoring spending on public services (in particular the NHS, schools and policing) and »unleashing the potential« of those regions that had been »left behind« even as the rest of the country had experienced economic growth. That message discipline, along with a highly sophisticated, well-coordinated and well-resourced polling, advertising, and social media campaign, was down to a team of external consultants – a team that was not only functional and friendly, having recently worked together on the Australian general election, but was also very familiar with the workings of Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ). The team also benefited hugely from a very clear organisational hierarchy, as well as from the fact that it was sufficiently trusted by the party's frontline politicians and in-house staffers, all of whom had bought into the team's strategy and would therefore do whatever it asked of them. In the prime minister's case, this meant his agreeing to front visually arresting photo-opportunities whilst minimising any opportunity journalists had to cross-examine him and his opponents had to debate him. This led to accusations that his minders were effectively hiding him in plain sight but, as was the case with criticisms of the Conservatives' occasionally controversial social media tactics, voters didn't seem to care.

All this stood in complete contrast to Labour's seriously dysfunctional, largely in-house campaign. It suffered from a lack of strategic direction and organisational coordination, from acrimonious personal and political arguments between advisors, and from a refusal among some of those involved to accept internal research that suggested the need for a more defensive targeting strategy. Their refusal stemmed from both their left-populist ideological instincts and their (unfounded) belief that a similarly defensive approach, rather than helping to hold on to marginals that would otherwise have been lost, had somehow denied the party a well-deserved win at the 2017 election. Unsurprisingly, none of this – nor the fact that its IT systems had problems – helped Labour leverage what might have been one of the party's strengths, its larger grassroots membership, although, truth to tell, the fact that so many Labour members live in London and Southern England, rather than those areas of the country where a more effective »ground game« might have made a difference, was always going to be an issue.

Labour was not helped either by its manifesto. For one thing, its equivocal stance on Brexit helped ensure that, whereas the Conservatives gained the confidence of nearly three-quarters of all Leave voters, Labour only won the support of half of all Remain voters. For another, the manifesto was so full of frankly incredible spending pledges (free broadband for all being the archetypal example) that

it blew any claim the party tried to make to fiscal responsibility – something which the Conservatives, with their comparatively modest spending proposals, were very careful to emphasise in their own document, even at the risk of it being labelled a rather dull, »safety-first« affair by an otherwise overwhelmingly supportive print media.

Those same newspapers, inevitably, spent the entire campaign monstering Labour, and in particular its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, as profligate metropolitan Marxists who couldn't and shouldn't be trusted to deliver Brexit or to run Britain's economy. Hopes that such messages could (as some in his party liked to think had happened in 2017) be counteracted or at least bypassed by a savvy social media campaign proved illusory. True, Labour's advertising spend was considerable; but the Conservatives, by concentrating theirs at the beginning and end of the campaign, arguably spent more wisely and had in any case massively upped their game when it came to creative content. Moreover, Labour's ability to generate a sense of momentum by pushing out footage of Corbyn addressing adoring mass rallies – a strategy it successfully employed in 2017 – depended on people turning up to them in significant numbers, which this time round they signally failed to do. Whether this was because of waning enthusiasm or simply not wanting to wait around in the freezing cold for a man who often turned up late to his own meetings is a moot point!

LOOKING FORWARD

Both the 2019 general election and a plethora of local elections held in May 2021 seem to confirm that a realignment of British politics is indeed well underway. Leave and Remain identities, which encompass cultural attitudes way beyond Brexit itself, now map more closely onto support for and opposition to the Conservatives, who have managed to eliminate the threat from the populist radical right – in part by adopting some of its characteristics. In so doing, and by promising additional public spending without sacrificing their reputation for fiscal responsibility, they have built a culturally conservative, cross-class coalition composed of both well-off and less well-off home-owners which is efficiently spread so as to maximise support in the UK's plurality electoral system. Over time, the inevitable growth of Britain's minority and mixed-race population, as well as the expansion of higher education and the liberal values associated with that expansion, might erode that coalition's power – but far too gradually to help Labour (and the Liberal Democrats) in the short to medium term.

Given how difficult it will be for Labour to make large gains in Scotland and Wales, then it will have to focus on winning back largely white, home-owning, culturally conservative voters living in smaller English towns – even if paying particular attention to their concerns risks reducing the party's majorities (but not, hopefully, its seat-share) in larger conurbations and reducing its chances of picking up seats in suburbs where affluence is increasingly associated with higher education. An eventual failure on the part of the Conservatives, post-Covid, to make a tangible differ-

ence to standards of living and quality of life in provincial towns in England's north and midlands should help Labour. Yet many Conservatives are hopeful that any such failure can be mitigated by their pursuit of a culturally conservative »war on woke« amplified by a supportive press.

The 2019 general election left Labour a long, long way behind. Indeed, it might have finished even further behind had a few more Leave voters in seats it managed to keep hold of not plumped for the Brexit Party rather than the Conservatives. Given Nigel Farage's departure from politics, this is not likely to be an option available to those voters next time round, which could be worth between ten and twenty additional seats for the Conservatives. The Conservatives are also likely to be the main beneficiaries of the forthcoming parliamentary boundary review aimed at equalising the size of constituencies. Consequently, barring a severe economic downturn, or a highly-negative retrospective verdict on Johnson's handling of the pandemic, or else a messy break-up of the UK occasioned by a vote for Scottish independence, it is very difficult to imagine Labour – even if it fights a far better campaign than it did in 2019 – winning in 2023 or 2024.

For now, however, the 2019 contest should serve as yet another reminder to Europe's centre-left parties that they cannot afford to ignore culturally conservative voters, nor those voters who, while they are hardly rich, do not consider themselves as poor, even if they worry about the quality of life and prospects of the smaller, often post-industrial towns in which they live. Centre-left parties also need to avoid putting too much faith in their larger memberships: grassroots activists simply cannot compensate for the lack of an agreed, evidence-driven, electoral and targeting strategy and a campaign team with the authority, freedom and financial resources to execute it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Bale is Professor of Politics at Queen Mary University of London and an expert on British and European party politics. He is one of the co-authors (with Robert Ford, Will Jennings and Paula Surridge) of the forthcoming Nuffield study, *The British General Election of 2019* (Springer/Palgrave) as well as the forthcoming text *The Modern British Party System* (OUP), written with Paul Webb. Other books include *Five year mission: the Labour Party under Ed Miliband* (Routledge), *The Conservative Party since 1945* and *The Conservative Party from Thatcher to Cameron* and, more recently, and co-authored with Paul Webb and Monica Poletti, *Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century* (Routledge).

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Complex and multifarious reasons like de-industrialisation and an associated decline in trade union density; an increase in home-ownership, and a concomitant decrease in those living in social housing; a Labour parliamentary party which looks increasingly well-off and well-educated; and Labour's adoption and advocacy of if socially liberal, »cosmopolitan« attitudes, explain why Labour has been losing support for decades now among working people in general. Labour has a substantial lead among young people, especially those with degrees. But the Conservatives have an even bigger lead amongst older people, particularly those with fewer qualifications. In an ageing society, and one in which turnout at elections increases as one moves up through the age cohorts, this is a serious disadvantage for Labour.

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Since the 2016 EU referendum, the Conservative Party has made it its mission to consolidate the Leave vote under its banner. Many leave voters switched from Labour to the Conservatives as they were convinced that Labour's Jeremy Corbyn did not share their cultural values nor came over as a convincing alternative prime minister. They saw Labour's plan to negotiate a new deal with the EU and then hold a second referendum on that deal during which it would remain neutral, as absurd. And because they were now convinced that getting Brexit done would bring an end to the government-imposed austerity. Labour's equivocal stance on Brexit helped ensure that, whereas the Conservatives gained the confidence of nearly three-quarters of all Leave voters, Labour only won the support of half of all Remain voters.

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The impressive message discipline of the Conservative campaign focused on reassuring voters that getting Brexit done was not merely an important end in itself but also a means to an end – namely restoring spending on public services and »unleashing the potential« of those regions that had been »left behind« even as the rest of the country had experienced economic growth. Labour's campaign suffered from a lack of strategic direction and organisational coordination, from acrimonious personal and political arguments between advisors, and from a refusal among some of those involved to accept internal research that suggested the need for a more defensive targeting strategy.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
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