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Remainers' revenge: really?

British PM Theresa May's election battering had nothing to do with Brexit

It's become a truism that being a pollster is hard work these days. Yet while the problems plaguing psephologists are now almost proverbial and every poll is taken with more than just a pinch of salt, it's astonishing how blithely pundits and politicians who would never trust a survey bandy about post-facto assertions on voting behaviour.

Last week's general election in the UK is a case in point. Both inside and outside of Britain, there has been no shortage of people citing "remainers' revenge" as one of the reasons why Theresa May was unable to secure the large majority she only recently seemed so capable of achieving. The rationale goes something like this: May was avowedly in favour of hard Brexit and because she lost, the British electorate has rejected a hard Brexit. This account has gained currency across the political spectrum, from the likes of UKIP-leader-turned-shock-jock Nigel Farage, who rushed onto BBC news hours after the result to warn that a clean break with the Continent could now be off the cards, through to Labour MP Chuka Umunna, rejoicing on Twitter that the surge to his party at the expense of the Conservatives negates the mandate for an "extreme & job-destroying Brexit". On the other side of the channel, too, many socially-democratic minded observers would like nothing more than to believe the British public has finally come to its senses.

Labour lost, too – and wants to leave, too

Even the most cursory analysis, however, shows that "remainers' revenge" has little basis in fact. The first statement holds up: Theresa May wanted a "red, white, and blue Brexit" and would happily stick two fingers up to the rest of Europe to get one. After that, though, the logic breaks down. Firstly, as unwelcome as this piece of news may be to many, May did not lose the election. Yes, she failed to win it – quite spectacularly so – and is being borderline-dictatorial in her refusal to accept that, when asked to vote on her as a leadership personality, Britain baulked, and that she

ought therefore to leave office. Yet the Conservatives secured a higher share of the vote and more seats than any other party. That is not what losing looks like. 43% of voters still buy May's Brexit line.

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Secondly, more crucially, and even more inconveniently, the party that deprived Theresa May of victory (NB: not "won") was Labour. And one of the more disturbing elements of the election aftermath is the collective amnesia vis-à-vis Labour's prevarication on Brexit: its leader's failure to campaign strongly in favour of Remain (one made all the more blatant now that he has proven his quality on the stump) and the party's refusal to position itself clearly against the wafer-thin result of a deeply undemocratic referendum are a matter of record. As such, a vote for Labour was a vote for a party which has vowed to take Britain out of the EU. Of course there are some gradations in how this is achieved: Jeremy Corbyn is not as needlessly unfriendly as Theresa May and it is hard to imagine him storming out of talks to pander to readers of the *Daily Mail* (a right-wing British tabloid); he is therefore more palatable to most of those who voted to stay. Yet the fact remains that he never warmed to the EU and that his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell is dangerously deluded about the potential for Britain thriving outside it: 36 hours after the election, he was on the political chat show *Peston on Sunday* underlining Labour's commitment to leaving the single market.

Voters were not duped by Labour – and ignored the Lib Dems

In this, he is no different to British voters, few of whom realise the true import of the decision to leave the EU – even those who voted to remain. And had voters wished to make a clear statement on Brexit, they could have opted for the Liberal Democrats, the only party promising a second referendum: as it was, the party gained only four seats, taking its total to 12, and actually lost its overall share of the vote, slipping from 7.9% in 2015 to 7.4%. To some extent, the vagaries of the British first-past-the-

post system may be to blame here: in many constituencies, the Liberal Democrats were simply not a viable option and many Britons vote tactically against the Tories, meaning that they simply had to vote for Labour.

Except that there are two problems with this old chestnut. The first is that Britons don't actually vote quite as tactically as many assume. In 2015, the Greens picked up a 3.8% share of the vote despite the number of constituencies in which they looked plausible being countable on the fingers of one hand; UKIP picked up four million votes on much the same basis. If Brexit were still emotive in 2017, surely people would have been more willing to demonstratively 'throw away' their votes – and hope to cause a few upsets in certain seats. The second, less theoretical objection, is that Labour actually took two seats from the Liberal Democrats – and did so in constituencies that are full of the young urbanites supposedly so hacked off by Brexit. Former party leader and general all-round European *par excellence* Nick Clegg was unseated in Sheffield Hallam; in leafy Leeds North West Greg Mulholland had to go.

Tuition fees and hospitals beat Brexit

"Ah", say proponents of the "remainers' revenge" theory, "but those seats were filled with students who wanted to punish the Liberal Democrats for breaking their pledge not to raise tuition in the 2010-2015 coalition government". To which the answer is: precisely. Many voters in these constituencies clearly felt more strongly about tuition fees than about Brexit – so much so that they did not turn out to unseat the offenders in 2015, but did turn out two years later when Jeremy Corbyn promised to wipe their debt.

"Look at London," though, continue those arguing for remainers' revenge, "where Labour's candidates were strongly anti-Brexit." In some seats, perhaps; yet in the south-west of the city, where Labour is irrelevant, other constituencies highlight the flaws in the argument. Take Richmond Park: when Conservative MP Zac Goldsmith resigned it in 2016 to protest against the Heathrow expansion, the seat (which had voted to remain by a margin of 69%) did actually see the only documented example of remainers' revenge to date when the Liberal Democrats' Sarah Olney took it from his successor running a Brexit-based campaign. Last week, Goldsmith (now disgraced as a racist) stood again – and took it back.

Moreover, in Carshalton and Wallington, where a sitting London Liberal Democrat – astonishingly – held off the Tories in an area which voted to leave in 2016, Brexit was conspicuously absent from the agenda. Speaking

on BBC London after the count, pro-European Tom Brake said: "We fought a campaign about the issues that matter: the future of our hospitals, cuts to schools funding." Spot the omission. And at the other end of the country, let's not forget the Scottish National Party (SNP), the only other major party to take a strongly anti-Brexit stance: it lost more seats to the Conservatives than to any other party.

Brexit is only just beginning – for politicians. For voters, it's already happened

The facts of the matter are plain: British voters were called to an election about Brexit and singularly failed to vote on Brexit. The Scots were voting to stop a second independence referendum, an issue which is related to Britain leaving the EU, but tangentially so. The Labour surge of first-time voters, meanwhile, was looking at issues like tuition fees: Jeremy Corbyn not appearing rabidly anti-European like some embarrassingly racist uncle certainly may have helped his cause with younger people, but it wasn't what got them out to vote in this general election after their failure to turn out when Europe really mattered (on 23 June 2016).

Corbyn's equalling of Labour's 1997 share of the vote is not the work of remainers, and it is not revenge either. It was the effect of hope on the one hand, kindled by a raft of traditional left-wing policies once sunk without a trace by Tony Blair's Third Way (nationalisation, investment, stimulus), and of fear on the other: older voters, statistically in favour of Brexit, were spooked by Theresa May's frankly suicidal policies on social care. Where the Conservatives failed to take northern working class seats from Labour – or where Labour unexpectedly stole safe Tory seats – it was not Brexit the voters were angry about.

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Why would they be? As far as they're concerned, Brexit happened last June; but their next visit to hospital is coming up next week. It is, unfortunately, too much to ask that they make the connection between EU freedom of movement and that nice Bulgarian male nurse in casualty. And this leads us to an uncomfortable conclusion: Jeremy Corbyn was entirely right to muddy the waters with regards to Brexit last year, retaining a conspicuously low parliamentary profile when it came to voting through Article 50 while organising protests

against it for the benefit of London-types. He pulled off the balancing act between "respecting the result of the referendum" in the way that the right-wing populist media made sure Britons expected and not willingly type-casting himself as some kind of Boadicea-on-steroids as Theresa May has done.

In fact, not picking sides like the Tories, the Liberal Democrats, and the SNP has proven to be the only way to avoid the choice between metropolitan and Middle-England seats that would definitely have dealt Labour the electoral wipe-out it was predicted. This is a tragic realisation for strongly pro-Europe, left-wing Britons and social democratic Europeans alike: henceforth, there is no electoral link in the UK between moderate, progressive policy and a European outlook.

Britain is now, politically speaking, a post-Brexit landscape

This is bad news, given that Brexit will affect every area of the economy and society for decades while sapping government energy like a black hole; but it is the truth. Voters do not, for now at least, see how Brexit is more relevant than health, transport, and security – and they certainly don't grasp how it is relevant to these issues (if they did, they would have given a convincing majority to remain in 2016). And as Brexit retreats further and further into the realms of political Muzak, omnipresent yet rarely obtrusive on single issues, it is hard to see how it will ever become so. Psephologists are probably adapting their models as we speak in anticipation of the next election; politicians and political commentators would be wise to do so, too.



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