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# The rise and rise of Corbyn's Labour

## And how he should capitalise on it

*A month after the UK general election, things have only got worse for Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May. The latest Yougov poll gives Labour a five point lead over the Conservatives, with a 45 percent voter share if an election were held tomorrow. <link about writers-and-contributors writer ellie-mears-1>Ellie Mears spoke to Matthew Laza, Director of the international think-tank Policy Network, about the reasons for Labour's newfound popularity.*

**Just weeks ahead of the UK's general election in June, everyone from the tabloids, to stand-up comics, to members of Jeremy Corbyn's own Labour Party, was scoffing at his chances of winning an election. And of course he didn't win. But Labour's poll ratings have more than doubled since April, and now they're ahead of the Tories. Can you explain Labour's meteoric rise?**

The rise in Labour's popularity since 8 June is a direct continuation of what happened in the last stages of the election campaign, and can be explained both by a rise in popularity for the party and the slow implosion in public perception of Theresa May as prime minister.

As the election campaign went on, May went from projecting the "strong and stable" leadership of her much-parodied slogan to being seen as cold and out of touch. The media dubbed her the "Maybot" - conflating her surname and robot – and it stuck. In interview after interview she seemed incapable of doing more than trotting out trite soundbites. Her refusal to join the key party-leader debate on television only added to the sense that she was avoiding scrutiny. The suspicion the Tories were using attack as a means of defence was key to neutralising the impact of their attacks on Corbyn. Even when attacking him on areas where he was undeniably vulnerable – such as his naïve-at-best relationship with some terror-supporting groups in the 1980's and 90's – the Tories weren't being listened to.

Conversely, Corbyn benefitted from the national stereotype of backing underdogs: remember Eddie "the Eagle" Edwards, a British winter Olympian who was so bad he became a national hero? Corbyn

became the Eddie the Eagle of politics: surely he couldn't be as "bad" as the media portrayed. This opened up an opportunity that the Labour leader capitalised on with aplomb. As May stiffened in her media appearances, Corbyn relaxed. The Tory-supporting tabloid newspapers continued to brand him a scary Trotskyite, but he managed to project an image both genuine and empathic, a cuddly grandad to May's brittle headmistress.

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Since Labour's unexpectedly good performance, this trend has only accelerated. The Grenfell Tower tragedy encapsulated their different approaches: the PM avoided meeting victims, being filmed talking only to the emergency services; meanwhile Corbyn was listening to victims' horrific stories over tea and hugging them as they wept. The stark contrast of the treatment of these poor, mostly immigrant workers, in the richest borough in Europe couldn't have better exemplified Corbyn's message. If the election had happened a week later (that is, post-Grenfell) Corbyn would have won.

And then there's Brexit. The post-election civil-war within the Conservatives is beginning to turn the UK's planned exit from the EU into a farce. It's adding to the image of a clueless government clinging to power, as witnessed in the grubby deal with the Northern Irish DUP (a socially-conservative, pro-Brexit party with links to loyalist paramilitary groups).

**Former Labour leader, Ed Miliband, was also leading in the polls before the UK's 2012 general election, but then support for his party collapsed. How can Labour hold onto their lead this time around?**

On seeing Corbyn at Prime Minister's questions a few days ago, one witty commentator wrote that "no leader has exuded such absolute confidence about winning the election since Theresa May called the snap poll ten weeks ago".

Therein lies the huge danger for Labour – it benefitted from a late surge in support. Some of this was because specific policies, such as a proposal to scrap university tuition fees, and Corbyn's style of leadership, drove youth support. But more widely there was a sense of "give Corbyn a chance" as the focus on the Tory leadership kept the detail of Labour's policy out of the microscope. If the Tories can get their act together, probably by ditching May and being seen to get a grip on Brexit, then scrutiny of Labour's policies will increase and

their more controversial aspects, not least their unashamed commitment to "tax and spend", may start to hit the party's poll ratings.

**Does Labour's high poll rating mean it's finally winning back working-class supporters who switched to UKIP and the Conservatives in previous elections?**

In short, no. One of the key explanations for Labour's relative success was its ability build a coalition of the very poor and the well-educated. For the first time since the Iraq war, the 'liberal' vote came home to Labour – partly because it perceived Labour as hostile to Brexit, even if the party's official position was pretty much the same as the Tories. Huge swathes of the growing graduate, urban, socially liberal electorate went with Labour – the sort of voters who often back the Greens in Germany.

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Where Labour did badly was amongst the traditional skilled working class and the lower middle. It did do better than expected in attracting former UKIP voters, but most went to the Tories. Labour actually lost a handful of seats to the Tories and these were all in Brexit-supporting areas of the English Midlands, where Corbyn is seen as very London and "metropolitan".

New research we have done at Policy Network argues that Labour can win the next general election whenever it comes. However, to secure a decisive parliamentary majority that will sustain a Labour government in office for at least two terms, the Labour party will have to significantly expand its electoral support. Our analysis, based on an exclusive public opinion survey by Populus, indicates there are two political and electoral strategies available to Labour.

The first strategy is termed the "Bernie Sanders" approach, whereby Labour continue to expand their vote among the professional middle-class, economically precarious younger voters and those on the very lowest incomes. These voters comprised the core of the 2017 Corbyn coalition.

The alternative approach we have labelled the "Clem Attlee" strategy (named after the legendary 1945 Labour premier): this approach entails building support for Labour in all social grades and classes, and across the nation. The Attlee strategy means the party has to gain support among the lower and middle income voters who tend to populate "Communitarian Britain", and who are less convinced about Labour's programme and policy agenda. This voter group is defined

by their struggle to "make ends meet": they live on low to middle incomes and make just enough to get by through careful management of their household budget. The 64 parliamentary seats that Labour has to win next time to secure an outright majority are disproportionately populated by these voters, in the C2 social grades, who tend to earn approximately £21,000-34,000 a year. The aim should be not just to sneak past the winning post with 'one more heave', but to achieve a significant mandate through which Labour can transform the country for the benefit of "the many, not the few" (their 2017 election slogan).

**Labour's election manifesto stated it wanted to "end freedom of movement" with the EU whilst "retaining the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union" – an impossible situation according to EU officials. What is Labour's current strategy on Brexit, and has it changed since the election?**

The question brilliantly sums up the huge fault line in Labour's policy on Europe. It has tried to face two ways – reassuring those that voted Brexit that it won't stand in the way of the UK leaving, whilst simultaneously trying to offer a smokescreen to Remain voters that it will stand firm on the issues that matter to them, such as single market access.

Arguably it is Labour, not the Tory government, which is trying to "have its cake and eat it" on Brexit. And it's not an approach that is sustainable for long. As the long and messy parliamentary Brexit process gets under way, Labour will have to show its hand on the detail. If, as likely, it also becomes clear that the EU27 will be offering a tough deal or no deal, Labour will ultimately be forced to choose between backing a "bad Brexit" or calling for a second referendum.

This is likely to turn into a Brexit nightmare for Corbyn. He will be torn between his own decades of hostility to the EU and the unalloyed enthusiasm many of the new voters, and almost new Labour Party members, have for Britain staying in. As things stand, it could well be the hard choices their hero will be forced to take on Europe that finally risk tarnishing the Corbyn "love-in". He will also have to manage a parliamentary party of whom at least fifty MPs, all representing strong Remain areas, have no intention of voting to aid a hard Brexit. Punishing Labour MPs for voting with their consciences on the EU isn't going to enamour "Jezza" in the eyes of liberal opinion.

**How long will Theresa May remain in office?**

One thing is certain – there is no way Tory MPs will be prepared to

take the risk of her leading them into another election campaign. But neither do they want the risk of another snap-election that any replacement leader may feel duty-bound to call. The elegant solution to avoid that is to allow May to "deliver" Brexit and then to stand down in 2019. The truth is that May, now universally regarded as a "lame duck" leader, probably won't manage to hold party together for long enough to see Brexit through. The current war between the Brexit-sceptic finance minister and the rest of the cabinet indicates just how messy it is going to get inside the Tory party.

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**Matthew Laza**
London

Matthew Laza is director of *Policy Network,* a British think tank. Previously, he worked as senior BBC current affairs programme maker before becoming a senior adviser to Ed Miliband, former chair of the Labour Party, in the run up to the 2015 election.