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Hard Labour

Labour's electoral debacle shows European social democracy's coalition-building challenge. It needs both the small-town and big-city worker

In British politics, the proverbial penny has finally dropped. With Labour's abject defeat in the Hartlepool by-election, the party's loss of council seats in working-class areas — not just to the Conservatives but to the Greens and progressive nationalists — and the increased majority in the Scottish Parliament for parties supporting independence, the post-Brexit landscape is becoming clear.

Values, not direct economic interest or traditional allegiance, now define British electoral behaviour. The winners on 6 May, in the biggest round of local and regional elections ever simultaneously held in England, Scotland and Wales, were the parties whose vision matched the cultural values of a section of the electorate. They were the Scottish Nationalists, the nationally and linguistically rooted social democrats of the Welsh Labour Party, the Greens (who gained more than 80 council seats) and, above all, Boris Johnson's Conservatives.

Grimly fashionable

Johnson has made greed, white victimhood, corruption and xenophobia not only respectable but grimly fashionable in the ex-industrial small towns of England. Fifteen thousand voters in Hartlepool, a working-class town which polled 70 per cent for Brexit in 2016, backed a Conservative candidate who demonstrated zero connection with their town. This was in the context of the Tories having overseen one of the worst death tolls in the world during the pandemic, and with Johnson's administration mired deep in corruption allegations.

Labour, by contrast, could mobilise fewer than 8,000 of those who had voted for it in the 2019 Westminster election. Despite the fact that Labour's candidate was a local doctor, working on the front line of the epidemic, voters preferred the politics of corruption and elitism.

‘How can they back the Tories when a quarter of their own children live in poverty?’ was the lament of one liberal commentator on Twitter. The answer is obvious to anyone who has knocked on doors: socially conservative working-class voters despise the poor, just as they despise ‘students’, ‘wokeness’, refugees and human rights.

Their politics are now dictated primarily by their identity, not their economic interest. They perceive themselves as in competition with migrant workers. They perceive their town as in competition with the big cities for what meagre growth can be generated in our damaged economy. And when they rail against ‘students’ they mean a world in which learning, tolerance and openness are valued more than community, locality and the patriarchal family.

If these are the ‘new heartlands’ of Labour — big cities, university towns and places with large-ethnic minority or LGBT+ populations — the support for Labour is fragile and conditional.

Above all, they have accepted the post-2008 logic of neoliberalism — that because the wealth of the super-rich is untouchable and always growing, redistribution can only happen between sections of the working class. As homeowning, older white people they have no desire to see social justice for younger, more educated, more cosmopolitan workers, who cannot dream of owning a home. Since there is now free money flowing from the Treasury and the Bank of England, in the form of pork-barrel political giveaways, they understand the easiest way to get it flowing to their town — in the context of England’s still remarkably centralised politics — is to vote for Johnson.

They are by no means a majority, even in the towns where their votes are handing power to the Conservatives. But they do not need to be a majority. With Labour incapable of projecting a clear, unifying narrative of its own, the support base for progressive politics is subdued and disoriented. The 8,000 voters Labour lost in Hartlepool between 2019 and 2021 did not mainly turn to the Conservatives — they just didn’t vote.

Fragile and conditional

In London, on election day, I stood in a 50-strong queue of working-class people, in my home constituency of Lambeth & Southwark, who looked and sounded like they were there to do one thing: put Labour and the Greens into firm control of the Greater London Authority. Their votes delivered a local landslide for Labour’s incumbent mayoral candidate,

Sadiq Khan, who went on citywide to re-election. More interestingly, around half of these loyal Labour voters took the trouble to give their second preference to the Greens, allowing the Green Party to come second in the local race.

If these are the 'new heartlands' of Labour — big cities, university towns and places with large-ethnic minority or LGBT+ populations — the support for Labour is fragile and conditional. Voters here want a liveable city and a politics of tolerance and decarbonisation. Though their cultural values are diametrically opposed to the majority of voters in Hartlepool, these are equally rooted in their own milieu.

In their world, community and locality matter in a different way — the communities they live in have to be created and re-created every day, amid a landscape of rapid and relentless change. There is little place for tradition, nostalgia or sentiment in their lives, because modern, urban survival tactics leave no space for them.

Election-winning alliance

Labour's task — as with all European social democracies and left parties — is to construct an election-winning alliance from these two demographics: the small-town workers and the big-city salariat. Labour's poor showing — not just in Hartlepool but in the loss of more than 200 council seats in similar areas of England — shows how badly it has failed in that task so far.

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Much of the soul-searching will focus on Labour's newish leader, Keir Starmer. It was his choice to delay work on any kind of policy platform, leaving the party's candidates improvising variations without a theme during the campaign. It was his office that imposed an anti-Brexit candidate on Hartlepool, and which ran the campaign.

But the problems of progressive politics in Britain go much deeper. Brexit may be 'over' as far as the future trade relationship is concerned, but it is not over in terms of its impact on domestic politics.

Sectarian revival

The erection of a soft trade border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, dividing the UK into two jurisdictions for the trade of goods, has

already triggered a revival of sectarian rhetoric in the region. Police and security forces in the Republic of Ireland and the UK are eyeing the approaching summer nervously. It 'traditionally' kicks off with sectarian rioting on 12 July, as (Protestant) 'loyalists' celebrate Catholicism's defeat at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, and builds to a crescendo on 9 August, when (Catholic) 'republicans' light bonfires to commemorate the introduction of internment without trial in 1971 — often leading to violence.

In Scotland, meanwhile, there is now a majority in the Holyrood parliament for a *de facto* coalition of the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Greens, both of which are committed to an independence referendum within two years. Johnson will refuse such a referendum but Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish first minister, has threatened to legislate for it anyway, and take the fight to the Supreme Court in London.

Unlike in Spain, there is a clear constitutional precedent for Scotland's right to self-determination: the 2014 referendum was regarded as legitimate by the state. If it comes down to the Scots staging a rebel referendum, in defiance of Westminster, there is thus a chance that 'the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' will be no more.

So rather than 'solving' the unresolved problems of Brexit, Johnson's advance across small-town England exacerbates them. It leaves the rising generation of Scots, who the polls show are enthusiastic for independence, more determined to have it. It leaves the core of the Welsh urban communities firmly under the hegemony of Labour, which due to its devolved powers was able to take full control of the pandemic response and benefited from that electorally. And it leaves Labour in England looking over both its shoulders — to the right, with the threat of further voter defections to the Tories, and to the left, towards the growing challenge from the Greens.

Divided and paralysed

Amid this crisis, British social democracy looks, if not clueless, so completely divided that it is paralysed. A section of its old right wing, the pre-Blairite social conservatives who still hold about one sixth of the parliamentary seats, want a return to pre-1968 politics: immigration control, tough policing and expeditionary warfare across the world. The Blairites want a return to Tony Blair. Revelling in Starmer's reversals, large numbers of supporters of Jeremy Corbyn — who resigned after the 2019 defeat — want a rerun of Corbynism. As for Starmer himself, because he has not built a mass base of his own, he is buffeted between

the factions.

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And yet there is a way forward. For all Labour's bad headlines, the Conservatives' projected national vote share remains 36 per cent. With Labour on 29 per cent and the Liberal Democrats boosted to 18 per cent by the 'winnability' factor in local and regional elections, it is entirely within the grasp of the opposition parties to defeat Johnson when he chooses to call an election.

Labour's Plan A remains for Starmer to hoover up the votes of Greens and Lib Dems at a general election, bringing enough socially conservative workers back to Labour to unseat Johnson. If that doesn't work, Plan B — advocated by the left-wing Norwich MP Clive Lewis and his supporters on the pro-Remain wing of Labour — is to seek a formal electoral alliance with the Greens and Lib Dems in England, which has the mathematical possibility of destroying Johnson in a single blow.

Confusing facts

As a journalist covering these tactical and strategic dilemmas from the inside, what is startling is how few professional politicians understand them. They experience it all as a welter of confusing facts, inconveniently upsetting the world they were trained for.

When Labour could 'weigh' rather than count its loyal votes, there was no need for political theory, political science or even strategy. Few frontline Labour politicians studied politics, or attended the British equivalent of the *grandes écoles* — 'reading' PPE (philosophy, politics and economics) at Oxford. Having failed to study even their own party's history, many lack basic historical reference points, and look lost in the world of challenging political ideas, technological change, populism and rising hate speech.

French, Dutch and German readers know only too well how that story ends. The fight to reorient Labour to the point where Starmer's strategy actually works is thus less a battle over the programme — more a struggle for understanding.

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