Summary: British Prime Minister Theresa May, having lost her Parliamentary majority in the June 2017 election, is now grappling with the prospect of national humiliation and economic disaster in the Brexit negotiations with the European Union. Does Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party now have a chance to present an alternative to austerity and neoliberalis? - Editors

The British Crisis and the Corbyn Surge: A Perfect Political Storm in the Making

David Black

July 17, 2017

'Rise like lions after slumber
In unfathomable number
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep have fallen on you –
Ye are many, they are few'

– Lines from Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Masque of Anarchy', recited by Jeremy Corbyn at the Glastonbury Music Festival, 17 June 2017.

1 – The Roots of the Brexit Crisis

For the last two years Britain has been sinking into a political crisis that shows no sign of resolution. It began in June 2015, when Tory Prime Minister David Cameron called a General Election. The results for Cameron were a mixed blessing. The Labour Party was eclipsed in its Scottish heartlands by a Scottish nationalist party that presented itself as more social democratic. Labour also lost support south of the border because under the post-Blairite, 'centre Left' Ed Milliband, the party was perceived as having nothing to offer but more of the same (neoliberalism), only 'fairer'. Support for Cameron's Liberal Democrat coalition partners collapsed, leaving them with just a handful of seats. Cameron achieved his absolute majority in the House of Commons, but, as it turned out, he had paid too high a price for his victory. He had placated the 'Eurosceptics' on the

Right of his party, and rolled back the challenge from the far-right UK Independence Party by promising to hold a referendum on British membership of the European Union.

Cameron, a convinced Remainer himself, lost the referendum, stood down from office and resigned his seat.[1] His replacement, Theresa May (also a Remainer), accepted the referendum result as the 'will of the people' and declared 'Brexit Means Brexit': i.e. exit from the EU single market and customs union; abolition of Freedom of Movement principle within the EU; and disengagement from the European Court of Justice. The problem for Prime Minister May was how to achieve such a 'hard' Brexit without doing damage to Britain's manufacturing trade and financial institutions, and without having to pay off the £100 billion 'divorce' settlement demanded by the EU. May's statement in January 2017 that 'no deal would be better than bad deal' dismayed the pro- Europe business leaders and many in her own party, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Phillip Hammond.

In the event of Britain crashing out the EU in 2019 without a trade deal, prospects for the British economy, in the short term at least, would look grim: with customs and trade barriers immediately resurrected, goods and trucks would be stacked up at Channel ports, waiting for clearance; manufacturing employment would be hit by loss of exports and a price hike in goods from the EU; investment would

take flight; and financial institutions, shamelessly incentivised by the EU, would relocate to Paris or Frankfurt.[2]

2 – **Theresa May's Borrowed Time**

May, finding herself leading a Tory party deeply divided on the EU, decided to tear up the Five-Year Parliament rule brought in by her predecessor and call a general election. As almost the entire political class, including that of the centre Left, had expected support for the Labour Party to implode under the leadership of the 'naïve extremist' Jeremy Corbyn, May felt confident of increasing the Tory majority, and thus strengthening her hand in the Brexit negotiations. It was a gamble that failed miserably. Her party lost its majority and she was forced to rely on the ten MPs of the corrupt and reactionary Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, having bought them off with a promise for a 'special' £1 billion handout for local expenditure.

May's soundbite mantra for a 'strong and stable' Tory-run Britain fell on deaf ears. The reasons are many, but the most important factor was that for once the Labour Party, under Jeremy Corbyn's shaky leadership, managed to put forward a manifesto that actually offered a left-populist alternative to Tory austerity and growing inequality. Younger people, facing the prospect of lifelong wage-debt slavery to pay off

University tuition fees, were activated by Corbyn's promise to abolish them. May's proposal for public-private financing of care for the elderly was greeted with horror by older voters and immediately labeled the 'Dementia Tax'; this in contrast to Labour's promise to hike pensions and stop privatisation of the National Health Service. Many voters, including former UKIP and Brexit supporters disillusioned with the endless and fruitless negotiations with the EU, drifted back to Labour as the best bet to deliver an effective 'soft Brexit' deal, which would indeed be better than none: one which would protect civil and employment rights enshrined in current EU law and extend them. Public service workers, fed up with the 1% annual cap on wages voted for an end to seven years of austerity, which has seen income inequality widen to gross proportions. Lastly, May's servile loyalty to Donald Trump was 'not a good look' in summit meetings at which her European counterparts showed barely hidden contempt for the toxic U.S. President and his climate denialism and alt-right nationalism. Furthermore, Trump's promise to May that a 'very big deal, a very powerful' trade deal will happen 'very, very quickly' once Britain leaves the EU single market and customs union in 2019 is hardly be taken seriously by anyone; it is doubtful that even staunch Washington loyalists like Theresa May and Boris Johnson trust him to deliver anything except chaos.

The Liberal Democrats, who called for a re-run of the EU Referendum, failed to mobilize centrist 'Bremoaner' supporters and saw their vote decline to 7.4%, down 0.5% from 2015. In short, proving how wrong the predictions of the political pundits were about populism and nationalism breaking up the class-based two-party 'system' of Tory-versus-Labour, the old divide has returned with a vengeance

3 – The Grenfell Tower Massacre

Just one week after Theresa May's 7 June electoral setback at least eighty working class residents of the Grenfell Tower perished in a fire. Hardly anyone doubts that the disaster was caused by the neglect and corruption of rich developers and politicians, who have for years been engaged in what working-class residents regard as 'social cleansing' (the polite term is 'gentrification'). The horror of Grenfell has exposed the fact that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of similarly unsafe residential tower blocks all over the country. Elected local authorities, who have seen their social housing budgets cut by central government, can ill-afford to make them safe. There are also widely-held suspicions that the judicial enquiry the government is setting up will whitewash the perpetrators of the atrocity (especially those at the top of government and big business) and allow them to walk away without doing any of the prison-time they deserve.

It is likely, if the opinion polls are anything like accurate, that if the election had been held after the Grenfell fire happened, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party would have won a parliamentary majority. There is no doubt that many of May's colleagues would like to see the back of her, but they do not appear to have a replacement leader in the wings who might reverse the losses suffered at the election. The election saw a 10% swing to Labour, which gained thirty new parliamentary seats, including six taken from the Scottish nationalists. Support for the right-wing, anti-immigrant UK Independence Party collapsed. Having gained nearly four million votes in 2015, this time UKIP got less than 600,000 and lost its only MP. Again the 'Trump Factor' was in play. UKIP's de facto leader, Nigel Farage, is idolized as 'Mr. Brexit' by Trump, who ludicrously called on Theresa May to appoint the buffoon as British Ambassador to Washington. After the 2016 Referendum, Farage, egged on by Trump, confidently predicted that the EU would fall apart, with other countries following Britain's example. That didn't happen (if anything, Britain's Brexit and Trump's liking for right-wing nationalists such as Farage and Le Pen has reinvigorated support for EU loyalists). UKIP, for now, is defeated and marginalised.

4 – Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland vote has onerous implications for Theresa May's attempt to pull off a trouble-free Brexit. The seats were divided almost equally between Sinn Fein (whose MPs refuse to take the oath to the Queen that would allow them to take their seats in Westminster) and the Democratic Unionist Party (who are now sitting at Westminster with the British Tories). A glance at the new electoral map shows Sinn Fein taking all of seats in the west and south of the province, and the Democratic Unionist Party taking all the seats in the north and east (with the exception of West Belfast, which went to Sinn Fein). As Sinn Fein are Remainers and the DUP are Brexiters, there are fears in Westminster that a 'hard Brexit' will reopen the 'Border Question'. Sinn Fein, which until twenty years ago was at war with the British State, may, in the event of a hard Brexit, call for a 'Border Poll', i.e. a referendum on Irish unification. Sinn Fein president, Gerry Adams has declared, 'Within a few short years the potential for a vote to end partition and unite Ireland is a very real possibility'.[3]

5 – Corbyn: For the Many Not the Few?

The British Labour Party is now under 'new management' from the Left. An editorial in the Economist announced, 'The Labour Party now belongs to Jeremy Corbyn: The

Blair era truly ended on June 8' and commented, 'Tony Blair and his allies treated [Corbyn] as an irritant and an eccentric [not to mention 'terrorist sympathiser' and 'Marxist']. The vast majority of Labour MPs agreed with the Blair approach until only the other day'.[4]

Corbyn has successfully fought off the Blairites and so-called centre Left: first when he was elected leader of the Labour Party in 2015, and second when his leadership was contested in a second ballot in 2016. Corbyn won easily because most of the new members of the party support him (membership has doubled since 2015, and now stands at 552,000). The tolerance for the Blairites (in the interests of party 'unity') might well run out if they try on another anti-Corbyn coup. Such intrigue might result in moves to deselect Blairite MPs in constituency branches of the party.

Broadcaster Paul Mason, sitting on a panel at a conference of the Blairite Progress faction on 24 June, told the audience: 'Right now our leader is addressing a 200,000 strong crowd at Glastonbury who are singing his name...' In the debate Mason didn't mince his words regarding the choices facing Labour's right-wing:

'The question for people in this room is: it is now a left-wing Labour party... Do you want to be part of it or not? Because there is an alternative. There could be a British Macron [boos from the audience] Yeah, go on, keep going. There could be a British Macron, you could have a British

end Brexit second referendum party – run with it. It could do much better than the Lib Dems did. Now's the time.'

Although Mason stressed that Blairites were 'all welcome' to stay in the Labour Party, he added:

'If you want a centrist party this is not going to be it for the next ten years. if it's really important to you to have a pro-Remain party that's in favour of illegal war, in favour of privatisation, form your own party and get on with it!'[5]

Significantly, for an ex-Trotskyist who now describes himself as a 'radical social-democrat', Mason does not advocate 'socialism' or an end to capitalism. Like the former Greek finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis, in the Syriza government, Mason wants to 'save capitalism [and the EU] from itself' by curtailing the 'free market', in favour of 'social justice', and undermining anti-immigrant racism with a better-managed 'alternative' to Free Movement.[6]

In the event of Corbyn winning a general election called by Theresa May's successor (which might be sooner rather later, such is the precarity of her leadership) he would be faced with Brexit negotiations himself, with the same forces in the EU that forced Syriza to capitulate to the German-driven program of more – and worse – austerity. Britain however, with an economy more than ten times the size of Greece's, would be in a much stronger position. With the Tory Brexit negotiations facing descent into a national

humiliation, it may fall to Corbyn to 'save the day'; and business interests might conceivably decide that Labour, not the Tories, would be the 'best bet' for 'British interests'. And since Corbyn has, since the 1980s, opposed every imperial military adventure the USA has dragged Britain into, he will find the Trump cabal (should it survive much longer) to be a dangerous enemy in all areas of policy. Such are the uncertainties of British politics today.

[1] David Black, '**On the Perils of Populism: Brexit, the Left and the EU**', https://www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org/articles/discussion-article-perils-populism-brexit-left-eu-david-black

[2] Gideon Rachman, 'Brexit and the prospect of national humiliation', Financial Times, 19 July 2017

[3] Belfast Telegraph, 24 June 2017 http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/sinn-fein-mission-to-allay-unionist-fears-over-united-ireland-adams-predicts-end-of-partition-within-few-years-35861767.html

[4] Editorial, The Economist, 8 June 2017 https://www.economist.com/news/britain/21723193-blair-era-truly-ended-june-8th-labour-party-now-belongs-jeremy-corbyn.]

[5] Labour Feed, 'Paul Mason Versus Progress' http://www.labourfeed.co.uk/paul-mason-vs-progress-

decide-whether-you-want-to-be-part-of-this-party-full-report/ See also David Black, 'Chartists, Corbynistas and the Strange Death of New Labour England', 14 September 2015 https://www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org/articles/chartists-corbynistas-and-the-strange-death-of-new-labour-england-by-david-black

[6] Paul Mason, 'We can escape Brexit doom with one small tweak to free movement, Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/16/we-can-escape-brexit-doom-with-one-small-tweak-to-free-movement.