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Britain

Corbyn confounds the plotters

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Elections took place across Britain on Thursday 5 May, they included the election of more than 2600 local councillors, elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies and elections of directly elected mayors in some cities including, most notably and most importantly, London.

These elections took place in a context of strong attacks on Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn over supposed antisemitism in the Labour Party from a combination of Zionists and Labour rightwingers which peaked less than a week before the polls opened. These were the latest of many attempts to undermine Corbyn's leadership. Against this background the results are a remarkable testament to his leadership. They are also a strong indictment of a massive media campaign around some ill-advised remarks by former London Mayor Ken Livingstone and Facebook comments by other Labour Party members [1] about Israel whilst largely ignoring an extremely Islamophobic mayoral campaign in London publicly endorsed by Prime Minister David Cameron and former Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson. [2]

Labour's Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell was absolutely right to point out that the benchmark against which these elections need to be measured were last year's disastrous results which saw a majority Tory government come to office. [3] Corbyn has had only eight short months to turn the party round.

Prominent Corbyn critic and witch hunter, John Mann MP, was forced to concede on Radio 4 that there would be no leadership challenge for now, although the argument is still being pushed by the right that Corbyn did not do well enough. The debate is not whether Labour needs to win those not currently convinced – but how to do that. The right want to return to the failed strategy of former Labour leader Ed Miliband of adapting to Tory policies and ideas. In fact, it is by arguing unstintingly for radical policies that Labour can build on Corbyn's unexpected and striking victory in the leadership race. [4]

The plotters on the right and centre of the Labour Party, who were clearly prepared to sacrifice Labour victories in their cause, have not drawn the blood they wanted. There will be no contest until at least the summer. Those Corbyn supporters who have begun to challenge their divisiveness are absolutely right to do so. And Labour's new London Mayor, Sadiq Khan's statement that "Labour only wins when we face outwards and focus on the issues that people care about" is a sign that he's telling the plotters to shut up. Of course, he's also positioning himself for a potential leadership bid in the next few years. His appointment of arch-Blairite Andrew Adonis and his comments about the direction Labour needs to take to win in 2020 illustrate the problems with his approach. [5]

The majority of those standing on May 5 for Labour were most probably selected before Corbyn's election. In many parts of the country Labour still organises in the apolitical ways introduced under Blair where traditional canvassing which attempted to engage those who weren't sure how (or whether) they would vote in political discussion are replaced by 'voter identification' in which people are just asked how they will vote and then ignored. The London Labour Party went further and told supporters not to bother turning up to identify voters at polling stations – something that was fortunately ignored in some constituencies, notably Corbyn's own Islington North. [6]

As leader, Jeremy Corbyn has had to contest a constant stream of vitriol not only from the right wing inside Labour but an incredibly biased media. Gary Younge put it "When it comes to assessing Labour's electoral fortunes, Corbyn is treated with all the due process of a 17th-century woman accused of witchcraft and dunked in a river. If she drowns she's innocent; if she floats she's guilty and condemned as a witch. Either way the verdict is never in her favour." [7]

Labour holds ground

Labour's Sadiq Khan decisively defeated Conservative Zac Goldsmith in the high profile race for London Mayor after a blatantly Islamophobic campaign by the Tories in which they strongly suggested that electing a Muslim to public office was a security threat. [8] Khan won 57% against Goldsmith's 43% to end eight years of Tory rule at City Hall. Voters in London showed their contempt for the Tory divide and rule politics that Cameron himself employed in the House of Commons in the run up to the vote. The Green's Sian Berry came third with 5.8%. Turnout at 45.6% was up by 7% on 2012 and above the previous high of 45.3% in 2008. Tory racism as well as support for Corbyn drove many to work harder for Khan than they might otherwise have done. This electoral victory in London by Labour was strongly welcomed by [Left Unity](#).

In England and Wales Labour held ground – holding a number of English councils that they had been predicted to lose – including by those in the Parliamentary Labour Party who were hoping to use election defeats as a springboard to launch a parliamentary coup against Corbyn. Labour also held their seats in the two parliamentary by elections in Sheffield and in Ogmore and continued to hold the mayoralities in Liverpool and Salford.

Later there was the excellent result in the mayoral election in Bristol, where Labour's Marvin Rees, a strong supporter of Corbyn, roundly beat the incumbent independent, George Ferguson. A black mayor in Bristol, a city built on the slave trade, is worthy of more column inches than most of the British media have given it.

In the London Assembly elections, Labour held their ground with twelve seats despite putting all their energies into the Mayoral campaign. They won the constituency seat of Merton and Wandsworth from the Tories but then took one fewer of the London wide seats. UKIP returned to the Assembly with two of the London wide seats with the Tories and Lib Dems each losing one and the Greens holding their two.

In Wales, Labour remains the biggest party and held most of its existing seats – with the exception of the Rhondda [9]] which it lost spectacularly to Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood. Leanne Wood's victory shows against the prevailing establishment mood that it is possible for a left wing politician who gains a significant public profile to win strong electoral support.

There were also significant swings to Plaid in two other constituencies (Blaenau Gwent and Cardiff West). Turnout was up by nearly four percentage points – making this the second largest turnout in an Assembly election. With 29 seats, Labour are two short of the number they need for a majority.

UKIP have done well in Wales, as was predicted; taking seven list seats. The Conservatives lost three seats and Liberal Democrats four. UKIP have been showing strongly in Wales since the 2015 general election where their share of the vote leapt from 2% to 14% – not very different from the shares that they gained in the Assembly elections.

In England too, despite the council elections not falling in their strongest areas, UKIP have had some significant successes – with an increase of 25 councillors, coming second in both Westminster by elections and winning over 17% in the election for the Mayor of Salford. UKIP won seats from Labour in working class council areas like Thurrock, Bolton and Dudley and overtook Labour in Great Yarmouth. UKIP has probably taken as many votes from Labour as from the Tories. But in the situation where the referendum means that UKIP is scarcely out of the media attention this is no surprise – though it does certainly mean we need to step up campaigning for a 'Remain' vote against racism in the referendum. [10]

Scotland – problems for Corbyn

The news from Scotland is of course much more problematic for Corbyn and Labour with the Tories pushing them into third place in the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish National Party (SNP) did well to win their third consecutive term as Scottish Government. Their vote overall went up though the vagaries of the mixed electoral system [11] for the Parliament meant that they failed to repeat the absolute majority they won in the Scottish Parliament in 2011 or their constituency landslide in the UK General Election last year. But given an electoral system devised to prevent majority governments it is still an impressive result, especially their complete wipe out of Labour in most of its heartlands, including a clean sweep in Glasgow.

As *Socialist Resistance* has consistently argued, Labour will not succeed in Scotland while it continues to promote a Unionist agenda. The anger that was generated by Labour cosyng up to the Tories during Project Fear [12] and the lack of delivery over Devo Max [13] will not recede for a long time. These results show that amongst those who want to vote Unionist many think they might as well support the Conservative and Unionist Party (as the party is officially known), though Ruth Davidson's leadership and the distance she put between her direction and that of Cameron and the Westminster Tories probably also played a role in her party's success.

The Scottish Greens did well with six list seats– pushing the Liberal Democrats into fifth place and meaning their support may well be critical for the SNP administration getting its proposals agreed by Holyrood. The Scottish Greens have won many of the more radical voters from the “Yes” side of the Independence referendum. Both Solidarity and the RISE grouping, in which the SSP participates, had very poor showings – with their best results in Glasgow where they only scrapped above 1% .

Scottish Labour and Corbyn should be looking at what the Scottish Greens have done – showing that it is possible to successfully criticize the SNP from the left if you also support them where they are putting forward progressive policies. And this is a lesson not only for Holyrood but for Westminster – where an anti-austerity alliance against the Tories involving the SNP, Plaid and the Greens would strengthen opposition to the Tories.

Apart from their strong showing in London, the Greens in the England and Wales council election had only modest results given the undemocratic first past the post system, though many of their existing councillors increased their majorities and they were key to toppling the Tories in Worcester by winning an extra seat.

In the Six Counties of the north of Ireland, where 46% of potential voters stayed at home, a general picture of “business as usual” was upset by the election of two People before Profit candidates to the Assembly, with Gerry Carroll topping the poll in the Sinn Fein heartland of West Belfast and then veteran SWP member Eamonn McCann (with Bernadette McAliskey as his election director) taking a seat in Foyle. Having two left wing socialist voices in the Assembly puts pressure on Sinn Fein to break with their role of implementing austerity.

So of course there remains much work to be done if Corbyn is going to lead Labour to victory in the 2020 general elections. No one could argue anything different.

Plotters under pressure

Corbyn needs to build on the successes he has had at the polls as in the London Mayoral elections and all the by elections since he took office – which some of his opponents in the party seem to have done their best to prevent happening.

At the same time both he and his other supporters need to loudly echo John McDonnell's demand of the plotters to "put up or shut up" i.e stand a candidate against Corbyn now or stop trying to undermine him . The left within the Labour Party needs to seriously consider the next steps in wresting control of the machinery which is repeatedly used against it.

And the increasing voices raised against the bias of the mainstream media against the Corbyn leadership need strong support. Serious allegations over electoral fraud by the Tories during the 2015 election in relation to their battle bus campaign have received little exposure for example. The BBC's political editor Laura Kuenssberg's commentary has become little more than a constant stream of abuse against Jeremy Corbyn and the general perception is that she is the voice of the Tory HQ on the TV and radio.

In the referendum campaign which will move centre stage now these elections are over, Corbyn has rightly explained that it is absolutely possible to be deeply critical of many of the policies and much of the direction of the European Union and fight for an internationalist, anti-racist "remain" [stay in] vote

Like John McDonnell, who signed a declaration calling on Labour to back proportional representation [14], Socialist Resistance also believes that Labour needs to go on the offensive about the undemocratic nature of the election of the Tory Government, which will be further worsened by the forthcoming Westminster boundary changes. Labour needs to embrace and campaign for PR to stop the Tories winning another term so undemocratically.

Going into the 2020 General election campaign with a manifesto committed to proportional representation would greatly strengthen Labour's prospects. This would be big tent politics but of a radical kind – reaching out to supporters of other parties who are rightly critical of the first past the post system, as well as many who may traditionally not vote at all. To achieve this will require those on the Labour left who defend the existing Westminster system to break with that position – but with the existing patchwork on electoral systems in these islands and the influx of younger members into the party as well as McDonnell's stance this seems more possible than it has done in the past.

United action

A critical task in going forward to a Labour government is in successfully fighting Tory policies which are devastating people's lives.

The latest government U turn over forced academies [15] is a sign of how unpopular measures can be thrown out – through united action from trade unionists and communities with support from political parties. Of course the campaign against forced academisation is not over despite this victory – education activists know that the notion of 'failing schools' is used against those working in communities with greatest need – who could still be at risk And the Education White Paper contains many other objectionable proposals – not least the 8% cut in education funding.

After refusing to talk for months, Jeremy Hunt has been forced back into discussions with the BMA after the most determined action by the junior doctors in the history of the NHS continues to sustain massive public support. [16]The publication of the Oxford University study of the so-called weekend effect showing how data was miscoded has further strengthened the argument made by NHS staff and campaigners from the beginning that Hunt is talking nonsense. And Corbyn delighted housing campaigners on May 3 when he unexpectedly attended a meeting in the House of Commons organized by the Kill the Bill campaign and reiterated his absolute commitment to defeating the bill. [17]

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The Queen's speech to parliament on Wednesday May 18 will set out the next phase in the Conservatives' onslaught on the welfare state and the working class. As a result of these elections, Corbyn and Labour are in a stronger position to oppose these measures inside Parliament and support resistance outside.

Labour's right has been praying that Khan would lose to Goldsmith and that the party would take a knock in the local government elections. Neither of these things happened. The task now is to consolidate the people who have joined, or rejoined the party and to act on what Sadiq Khan also says about issues such as the lack of affordable housing, transport infrastructure and fares, the NHS while developing an economic programme that explains how a Corbyn / McDonnell government will deliver improvements in the lives of the vast majority of the population in a socially just and ecologically sustainable way.

[1] See Jewish Socialist Group ["Statement on Labour's problem with anti-Semitism"](#) and *Socialist Resistance* ["Antisemitism, Zionism and the left"](#).

[2] See *The Independent* ["David Cameron attacked for joining 'Islamophobic' campaign against Sadiq Khan."](#)

[3] See *Socialist Resistance* ["A Catastrophic British election result, where do we go from here?"](#).

[4] See *International Viewpoint* ["Jez we did! – A political earthquake."](#)

[5] Khan said in an article in *The Observer* on May 8: "Campaigns that deliberately turn their back on particular groups are doomed to fail. Just like in London, so-called natural Labour voters alone will never be enough to win a General Election. We must be able to persuade people who previously voted Conservative that Labour can be trusted with the economy and security as well as improving public services and creating a fairer society." ["What Labour can learn from my victory: we can't ignore what voters want"](#).

[6] "Telling", as it is known, is a traditional method for all parties, but particularly Labour, for identifying known voters who have voted in order to then "knock up" others who said they would vote for you in order to make sure that no votes are lost.

[7] *The Guardian* ["Ignore the doom merchants: Corbyn has shown he's a viable leader"](#).

[8] They further implied that Khan had associated with someone who was a supporter of Isis and was therefore guilty by association. Suliman Gani, the man concerned strongly denies this is his position, while Khan's campaign also pointed out that the local Conservative MP had also regularly appeared on a platform with this person. *The Guardian*, 20 April 2016 ["Tories step up attempts to link Sadiq Khan to extremists"](#).

[9] The former mining area of the Rhondda was traditionally a Labour stronghold in Wales, though Plaid Cymru did win it previously in the Welsh Assembly elections in 2003.

[10] See *Socialist Resistance* ["EU Referendum: for a critical in vote against racism"](#).

[11] There are 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). There are two ways an MSP can be elected. Each elector (voter) has two votes. Scotland is divided into 73 constituencies and each constituency elects one MSP. These are known as constituency MSPs and are elected by 'first past the post' in exactly the same way as MPs are elected to Westminster. This is the elector's constituency vote. The regional vote is used to elect 56 additional members, also known as list seats. Scotland is divided into 8 parliamentary Regions and each region elects 7 regional MSPs. In the second vote the voter votes for a party rather than a candidate. The parties are then allocated a number of additional members to make the overall result more proportional. The regional MSPs are selected from lists compiled by the parties. These MSPs are also sometimes referred to as List MSPs.

[12] During the Scottish referendum on independence in 2014, leading Labour figures, notably former Prime Minister Gordon Brown appeared

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alongside Tories arguing that disaster would follow a vote for independence.

[13] Scottish Labour also claimed that it would introduce additional powers for the Parliament if independence was rejected but did not do so.

[14] See *The Independent* "[John McDonnell calls on Labour to back proportional representation](#)".

[15] See National Union of Teachers (NUT) [Education White Paper #TellNickyNO](#).

[16] See *The Independent*, 26 April 2016 "[Junior doctors strike: Majority of public support doctors ahead of first full walkout, poll shows](#)".

[17] The proposed legislation would reduce and make more insecure rentals in the public housing sector. See the campaign [leaflet](#).