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British elections

Disastrous election result in Britain

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The British election on 12 December was, as politicians and commentators on all sides agreed, the most important for many decades. It pitted Labour's Jeremy Corbyn – an extremely radical social democrat at the head of a party that had grown massively under his leadership during the last four years – and a manifesto based on public services and social justice against Tory Boris Johnson, dripping privilege, racism, sexism and contempt for people who are socially excluded. There was a huge level of mobilization with hundreds of Labour canvassers turning out, especially in marginal seats.

But Johnson not only won but did so decisively – taking seats in the deindustrialized north of England which had always been Labour. At the beginning of the election the Tories were way ahead in the opinion polls but the gap narrowed significantly in the last weeks of the campaign. The scale of the defeat was thus a real blow because the campaign felt similar to 2017 when Labour took away the Tory majority of 17, forcing it to govern as a minority government and as a result it was unable to implement Brexit. While Corbyn did not win in 2017 the campaign was a triumph for him and he came out of it stronger than he went in.

Johnson's slogan throughout the campaign was "get Brexit done" – an empty slogan which is of course impossible to carry through but whose simplicity made it attractive. Britain opted for a "strong" leader – at least in appearance – in the mould not only of Trump but of Bolsonaro, Modi etc.

The programme of the new Tory government is not much more than this. The left is sure that it intends to further undermine what remains of public services – in particular the NHS, to further attack what remain of very limited trade union rights, and to ally Britain even more closely to the US under Trump, but in fact the Tories consistently deny most of this.

Indeed, since the election itself Johnson has promised more spending on infrastructure in the North – as well as enshrining increased NHS spending in law. His EU exit deal will be put to Parliament again before Christmas – and will clearly sail through on the basis of newly elected members, so Britain will leave the EU by 31 January 2020.

One major difference with the 2017 campaign was the pernicious role of the media. Normally once an election is called the parties are given equal exposure and treated to the same level of scrutiny. Not this time. Not only did the vilification of Corbyn continue but footage was doctored in Johnson's favour. It should be noted that false accusations of antisemitism – which Corbyn did not deal with well – were a significant part of this attack as they have been throughout his leadership. This level of bias was particularly striking when it came from the supposedly impartial BBC.

The outcome of the election has implications for the stability of the United Kingdom over the years ahead.

In Scotland the Scottish National Party (SNP) got a very good result (48 seats of 59) while the Labour Party had a disastrous result – 1 seat – because they essentially back the Union. A majority in Scotland voted to stay in the EU, the election result expresses a mandate for a new referendum on independence. But it is not clear what SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon will do. Would the SNP do a Catalonia and organize a referendum without authorization from Westminster? They have always said they will not, but their options are being narrowed. [\[1\]](#)

The North of Ireland also voted to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum. For the first time this election returned

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more pro-united Ireland and pro-remain MPs than Unionist pro-Brexiteers. A pact between the nationalist SDLP and republican Sinn Féin in Belfast brought one seat each, in Derry the SDLP won back one seat from Sinn Féin, so the SDLP has 2 seats, and Sinn Féin has seven. The pro-remain Alliance party won 1. The DUP which propped up the previous minority Tory government with 10 MPs is down to 8.

In the opinion of the NI Alliance Party leader: "If Boris Johnson chooses to use his mandate to pursue a no-deal or a hard Brexit then it is inevitable that Scotland will push for a second referendum on independence and it is almost inevitable that there will be a push for an Irish unity referendum."

The perspective for the left must be to redirect the energy poured into the Labour campaign into campaigns to defend public services, to support workers in struggle – such as the railworkers on strike against driver-only trains, in solidarity with migrants, and into building a massive mobilization around COP 26 to be held in Glasgow in November 2020.

14 December 2019

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[1] For background on the elections in Scotland see *Socialist Resistance* 9 December 2019 "[General election 2019: Exeunt Scottish Socialist Party, stage left](#)" and 5 December "[General Election: Scotland at Crossroads](#)".