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Britain

Johnson crashes Britain towards the abyss

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Less than one year after its resounding electoral victory over the Labour Party, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government is in turmoil - and crashing the country towards a social, health and economic disaster of unprecedented proportions. Combining incompetence with neoliberal myopia, Johnson is allowing a second wave of Covid-19 to explode. The ensuing economic crash merges with the disastrous results of Britain's departure from the European Union (Brexit) and threatens economic and social meltdown by Christmas. Politically, the hard right Conservatives are responding by trying to ramp up anti-migrant, anti-European xenophobia.

To see how the crisis is unfolding, we have to look at the virus disaster, Brexit and the political aftershocks from the December 2019 election - including the crisis and collapse of the left-wing Labour project around former leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Covid-19 disaster

Britain's record on the coronavirus is shocking. According to official figures, at the time of writing (September 2020) officially there have been 42,000 Covid-19 deaths, almost certainly an underestimate. One third of those deaths have been in care homes for the elderly. To put this in perspective, Britain has almost exactly 20% of the population of the United States, and about 21% of the number of deaths. In other words, the outcome so far is just as bad as Trump's in the United States, probably a bit worse, but in the same league. It is striking how some of the most hard-nosed neoliberal governments – the US, Britain, Brazil– have delivered some of the worst outcomes on Covid-19.

The underlying reasons for these UK results are the same as in the United States – a lockdown started too late, an easing of the lockdown too early, a completely inadequate privatised test and trace regime, and a failure to give clear advice about mask wearing and social distancing.

Britain went into lockdown on March 23, by which time the number of infections was doubling every four or five days. As the virus overwhelmed hospitals, with 120 deaths among healthcare professionals, the government told hospitals to make space by sending elderly Covid-19 patients who were apparently 'recovering' back to their care homes. The predictable outcome was a eugenic massacre of the old and sick. Deaths reached alarming levels among essential workers, especially in the public transport sector – for example 29 deaths among London bus drivers.

The lockdown had a devastating effect on the economy in Britain, hugely dependent on the hospitality/tourism sector and retailing. And when people don't go to shops and offices, neither do they buy from sandwich shops, cafes and burger chains. Pubs and restaurants took a massive hit.

In March the government chief finance minister Rishi Sunak decided to pump up to £500 billion into supporting businesses large and small, and into a furlough scheme that paid 80% of the wages of millions of laid-off workers. Even so, the lockdown detonated an explosion of redundancies, now in the hundreds of thousands. It is expected that as the furlough scheme ends next month, unemployment will rise to around five million. During the lockdown, the government put a ban on evictions for non-payment of rent. This restriction is now being removed, and tens of thousands risk losing their homes. Mass destitution is a real prospect.

But at every stage key lockdown measure have been opposed by the Conservative right-wing, including the rabidly reactionary *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, as a breach of personal liberties that was wrecking business. Thousands took advantage of a partial easing of lockdown in the August sunshine to flock to beaches where little social distancing was in evidence. May thousands took late summer holidays to Greece and Spain, where countries getting on top of the virus had it re-exported to them by British tourists.

Now, with schools and universities allowed to return and people encouraged to go back to work, infections are once again doubling every four or five days. The notion that school kids don't spread the virus has been shown to be absurd – with, for example, more than 100 schools in Greater Manchester alone reporting positive tests and whole year cohorts sent home. The government is responding with local lockdowns, but is desperately trying to avoid another national lockdown.

As in most countries, the social geography of the virus is a map of poverty. Towns in the North West around Manchester have been badly hit, because they are centres of poverty and very crowded housing. This particularly affects the Asian communities, often living in small multi-generational houses. The same is true in other major conurbations.

Brexit turmoil mounting

How is Brexit going to compound the crisis? Britain left the European Union at the beginning of 2020, but little really changed. The country entered a year of transition, during which a trade deal would be hammered out and cross-border travel sorted, to make it as friction free as possible. In now looks as if there will be no deal by the December 31 deadline, as the British side raises more and more objections, so that economic relations between Britain and the EU will be like those with the rest of the world – i.e. with major new tariffs. On the face of it this seems like cutting off your nose to spite your face, and for many sectors of British capital it surely is. But Brexit nationalism and xenophobia has reached levels that override even capitalist rationality. How so?

To stay in a trading bloc with the EU, Britain would be forced to accept many of the Union's regulations concerning the environment and working conditions, which the ultra-neoliberal Tory right wants to get rid of. Perhaps more importantly the Conservative right is staunchly pro-American, and wants a trade deal with the United States, opening up a sort of North Atlantic free trade area. To do that of course means accepting not EU regulations, but those demanded by US government negotiators, bluntly explained in an astonishing US government document. [1] Britain will have to open up its National Health Service (NHS), indeed all government financed bodies, to bids from US corporations, and outcomes must be decided by commercial criteria only. Joint oversight committees must be established to ensure 'fair accesses' to the whole of the British economy. For a government obsessed with asserting Britain's 'full sovereignty' is seems obvious that lots of it will be given away to US capitalism.

After the end of 2020, with a 'no deal' Brexit there will be chaos. Many businesses depend on EU workers, who will not be able to come. There are likely to be massive queues of lorries at Dover and other key ports as customs documentation is checked. Britain depends on hundreds of trucks a day delivering food and other key supplies from the EU, and shortages of some food items are on the cards.

Trouble at the borders

But a 'no deal' Brexit has many other implications, particularly in Ireland. Northern Ireland is of course part of the

United Kingdom, but economically very integrated with the Irish Republic. Travel across the border is unrestricted and in many places it is difficult to detect where the border actually is. But the Irish Republic is a staunch member of the European Union, which creates a thorny problem for Brexit, if goods and services can flow freely across the border, and then across the Irish Sea to mainland Britain.

The deal worked out so far is that Northern Ireland will remain economically in the EU, but goods and services going between the North and the rest of the UK will have to be checked and EU goods given the appropriate tariff. For hard-core Brexiteers this is an outrage since it means that Britain no longer has full sovereignty over Northern Ireland. In a no-deal Brexit, a 'hard' border with the Irish Republic will be re-established, with border posts and customs checks. The conclusion is – expect big trouble and a massive resurgence of the Irish national question, putting the 1997 Ireland Peace Agreement in question. As veteran Derry socialist Eamon McCann puts it, "If they re-establish border posts, within six weeks there will be people shooting at them." The border will be widely defied, with local business people, cross-border workers and Dublin shoppers all finding informal routes to evade it.

Brexit is also causing a surge in support for the moderate social democratic Scottish National Party (SNP), which leads the devolved Scottish government, and for its proposal for a new referendum on Scottish independence. The politics of the SNP are moderate social democratic, not right wing nationalist. Scotland's First Minister, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon, is seen as having dealt with the pandemic north of the border much better than Boris Johnson in London. Actually Scotland's death rate is only marginally better than England's, but Sturgeon is seen as more open and honest than the evasive and blistering Johnson.

For the moment the devolved government has limited sovereignty over some Scottish questions only. A new referendum for full independence would have to be agreed by the British government and for the moment this seems unlikely.

At first blush it seems unlikely that leaving the European Union could have been the key mechanism for the hard right seizing control of the Conservative Party, or indeed pushing British politics overall sharply to the right. The key to the Brexiteers' long offensive was to link the European Union with immigration, summed up in the Brexiteer slogan at the 2016 referendum 'take back control'. Wilfully and obviously misconstrued by sections of the British Left as meaning taking back control from European capitalism, in fact it was (rightly) understood by the electorate as 'take back control of our borders', i.e. keep the immigrants out.

Anti-immigrant racism

Fifteen years ago Brexit was very much a minority concern inside the Conservative Party, but pushed forward by a coalition of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and its then leader Nigel Farage. Farage was strongly backed by Rupert Murdoch's newspapers and indeed the whole of the right wing press. Farage became the leader of a sort of 'external faction' of the Conservative Party, which was highly effective in shifting the balance of forces within the party and pressurising public opinion, especially after the 2007/8 financial crash and the ensuing years of austerity.

Today the anti-immigrant hysteria is focussing on the alleged flood – in reality a trickle – of 'illegal' migrants taking advantage of mild summer seas to cross the English Channel from France in rubber dinghies and makeshift rafts, the so-called 'death route' . [2] Home Secretary Priti Patel has mobilised the navy to aid the border patrol in pushing them back into French waters. Britain and France accuse one another of being responsible. Patel has also announced a new programme to rapidly remove thousands of asylum seekers whose claims have failed.

Labour's weak response

Government disarray continues mainly unscathed because of the failure of the opposition Labour Party, now led by Jeremy Corbyn's replacement, Keir Starmer, to effectively oppose it in Parliament. That has to be explained in terms of labour's electoral defeat in December 2019, and the collapse of the Corbyn project. While there were key policy issues on which Corbyn and his leadership team fumbled, in fact their whole approach was flawed from the beginning, undermined by structural weaknesses disguised in the left-wing euphoria following his 2015 election as party leader.

In the first place, Corbyn's election was partly an accident. In 2014 the right-dominated party bureaucracy agreed to a new method of election for the leader, which allowed anybody to register as a party member online for Â£3, and then vote in the leadership election. Hundreds of thousands did, and most of them voted for Corbyn. This of course represented the radicalisation of many young people in the face of grinding austerity, the other side of the polarisation boosting the radical right. But the right wing of the Labour Party, hugely dominant in the Parliamentary Labour Party, never accepted the Corbyn leadership and determined to do anything, anything at all, to get rid of it.

The Corbyn team set up an inner-party campaign arm, Momentum, which rapidly recruited more than 40,000 members. But they failed to do anything useful with it, restricting it mainly to mobilising support in inner-party elections and getting out the vote in national elections. Corbyn and his team failed to grasp the need to wage war on the Right in Parliament and attempt to 'reselect' right-wing MPs at local level. While replacing all right wing MPs was an impossible task, this would have thrown the Right onto the defensive and made them less willing to attack the national leadership.

But more generally, Corbyn and his key deputies like MP John McDonnell and communications chief Seumas Milne, based their strategy on a fatally flawed assumption – that a compromise could be reached with the party's right wing, which would be forced into conceding support for the existing leadership and radical policies. It could not, and would not. There was never any hope of a Corbyn government pushing through radical left polices against a right-dominated parliamentary party, in turn supported by entrenched right-wingers in the national bureaucracy and among many local party officers.

A first attempt at a new leadership election was easily beaten back in 2016; then right wing MPs and union leaders pinned their hopes on Corbyn suffering a humiliating defeat in the snap election called by then premier Theresa May in 2017. To their chagrin, and that of the right wing press, he didn't. Although the Tories remained the biggest parliamentary party, Labour made substantial gains and the Conservatives lost their overall majority, having to rely on a parliamentary stitch-ups with the Northern Ireland Democratic Unionist Party to get their measures through Parliament. The prospect of Corbyn being the next prime minister was widely discussed.

This was the major turning point. From then on a major political slander campaign was launched against Corbyn accusing him of anti-Semitism, a campaign co-ordinated by the Conservative Party, the Labour Right and Jewish Board of Deputies, with strong links to Israel. What united all those slandering Corbyn was support for Israel and opposition to Palestinian rights, but also a simple desire to say anything that would undermine the Labour Left. In 2018 for example right wing papers accused Corbyn of having been a Russian agent in the 1980s, but in a libel court Conservative vice 'chairman' Ben Bradley admitted that it had been a simple invention of Conservative Party Central Office.

The Labour membership figures after 2015 had shot up to more than half a million, and they all had access to the Internet. There were, it turned out, some dozens of people in the party who had posted anti-Semitic sentiment on social media. But that was a long way from saying the party as a whole, the Left or Corbyn himself was anti-Semitic, or presiding over an anti-Semitic party. The Labour leadership made a fatal error. Instead of robustly rejecting the

slander, they decidedly to apologise – the worst thing you can do when accused of an egregious offence. This was a tactical move disastrous in itself, but irresponsible towards the whole Left, and the Palestinian solidarity movement, who could all be tarred with the anti-Semitism slander

A second failure was Labour's total incomprehension of the national question in Scotland, which has been boosted by a revolt against neoliberal austerity, seen as emanating from London. Because Labour strongly opposed independence or substantial greater autonomy, it has collapsed north of the border. Twenty years ago Labour elected 71 MPs in Scotland. Now that figure is down to one. No Labour government has ever been elected without a strong contingent of Scottish MPs. Now the left-of-centre ground is dominated by the SNP, including in Glasgow, one of the most radical cities in Britain. Corbyn failed to break through Labour's image as a 'unionist' party.

Third, the Labour leadership was incapable of dealing with the Brexit issue, as was a whole swathe of the Left to the left of Labour. Caught between older white working class communities that were strongly pro-Brexit, and many inner city multi-ethnic communities with large numbers of young people that were strongly anti-Brexit, the Labour leadership dithered. In the 2019 election campaign, Corbyn came up with the preposterous position that Labour would hold new negotiations with Europe, and then organise a new referendum, but refused to say in advance which way he would vote which would depend on 'circumstances'.

In truth many older Corbynistas, in the party and the unions, were in favour of Brexit. Opposition to the EU - 'bosses' Europe' – had a long tradition in the British Left since the 1975 referendum which confirmed Britain's membership. Indeed the EU is a capitalist alliance, but a left-wing exit ('Lexit') was not available. Lexiteers, who included the Communist Party and the biggest far left organisation the Socialist Workers Party, failed to grasp that Brexit was the key banner of the Tory right, would deliver Britain to further political and economic domination of the United States, and was justified above all by anti-immigrant racism, in particular immigration from countries like Poland and Romania, allowed to live and work in Britain by the terms of EU free movement. [3] And that opposition to EU regulations from the Tory right focussed on the most progressive aspects of the EU's regulations on the environment and workers' rights. Turning Brexit into a left-wing Brexit was impossible, and the Left's relatively tiny voice was drowned out in the avalanche of anti-immigrant racism. Reflecting changes in the ethnicity and occupational structure of the working class, all the major cities with the exception of Birmingham returned big anti-Brexit majorities in 2016. Former industrial towns in the North and Midlands, much less ethnically diverse and like the US rust belt including many areas of desperate economic and social desperation, voted heavily for Brexit and did many rural areas and middle class suburbs. Brexit successfully split the working class and polarised many older white workers towards racism. Three days before the Brexit referendum, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon astutely characterised it as 'an attempted putsch by the right wing of the Conservative Party.'

In any case Labour would have done better in the 2019 election with any definite view on Brexit; Corbyn's dithering made his leadership look weak and incompetent, and contrasted with the Conservatives' simple 'Get Brexit done' slogan.

With the Left reeling from the 2019 election defeat, a much more moderate social democrat, Keir Starmer, was elected leader. His decision to engage in only 'constructive' criticism of the government has let Johnson off the hook in his many failures. The Left, much of which has remained in the Labour Party, faces a long period of political and organisational renewal and some of it is clearly shell-shocked. It will have to engage in campaigns to defend the NHS and other public services, as well as oppose anti-immigrant racism and new signs of fascist mobilisation in anti-lockdown rallies organised by anti-vax and conspiracy theory groups. [4] And the Left will have to grasp the central strategic lesson of the last period: a moderate social democratic party cannot be seized by the Left and used as an instrument for radical social change without a bitter internal civil war. Such a fight for change can only be successful in a period of working class upsurge and mass radicalism.

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[1] Office of the United States Trade Representative February 2019 "United States-United Kingdom Negotiations - Summary of Specific Negotiating Objectives".

[2] *The Local*, 18 September 2020 "'The death route': How migrants make the perilous Channel crossing from France to Britain".

[3] A brilliant critique of left wing support for Brexit comes from a minority position within the SWP. *International Socialism*, 2 January 2019 "In a hole and still digging: the left and Brexit".

[4] See Mutiny, "The face of Creeping Fascism".