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Britain

Theresa May's Katrina: Grenfell Tower and the Election Outcome that Wasn't Supposed to Happen

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We live in a north London street which, despite its impressive 19th century architecture, is peopled mainly by “council tenants” (public housing residents). This is largely due to the left-of-center politics of the local council (government), which bought up large areas of such housing in the 1970s, limiting “development” and gentrification, and preserving much of the working class population. Perhaps as a result Labour MP Emily Thornberry, a strong supporter of Jeremy Corbyn, was re-elected with an increased majority of over 20,000 votesâ€”63% against the Conservative’s 21%. Nationally, Labour won 30 new seats and increased its vote by 3.5 million and the Conservatives lost their majority.

Despite this, one working class neighbour was disappointed that Corbyn had failed to lead Labour to victory and become Prime Minister. In fact, of course, Tory Theresa May’s lackluster “victory” and Corbyn’s unexpectedly effective campaign was such good news for Britain’s beleaguered left that the election outcome was hailed with cheers and clenched fists. Still, the unlikely reality of a bearded, unashamedly socialist (of sorts) MP winning the affection of working class voters countrywide calls out for further investigation.

The big media story is the “Youthquake” in which the turnout of voters 18 to 34 rose from 41% in the 2015 election to 53% this year. Two-thirds of 18-to-24-year-olds voted for Labour, inspired by Corbyn’s honesty and radicalism. It isn’t just that they voted in larger numbers and proportions for Labour and its left program, but that the swelling number of activists among them, many members of the Corbyn-supporting group Momentum, stormed many marginal constituencies (election districts) to canvass for Labour. Indeed, they broke the older practice of focusing on known Labour voters and invaded areas and front doors of many working class people who had previously not voted, had voted for Brexit, or even voted for the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

Mass training sessions for Momentum activists were led by veterans of the Bernie Sanders campaign. To this was added Sanders style mass rallies of thousands during the final month before the election. Corbyn was everywhere. Mass grassroots campaigning and radical ideas long missing in mainstream British politics won votes for Labour that the experts, the media, Labour right-wingers, and Blairites said Corbyn could never attract. For example, young activists played a big role in winning Canterbury, a town that had been Tory since 1918, albeit by the slim margin of 187 votes.

The Workers Come Back

Even more important but less well known was a sizable return of working class voters that Labour had lost largely due to 13 years of the “Third Way,” pro-market, austerity politics of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

Polls taken a month before the June 8 election showed support for Labour at a disastrous 24% for skilled manual workers and 25% for the less skilled and unemployed. By the time of the election, after a month of mass canvassing and rallies, the poll showed the skilled workers had moved 13 points to 38% for Labour, while the less skilled moved 20 points to 45%. Given that some working class people continue to vote for the smaller regional parties such as the Scottish National Party, Sinn Fein, the Democratic Unionists in Northern Ireland, or Plaid Cymru in Wales, this means that the rise in Labour Party/Corbyn support actually comes close to being a majority of the two major-party vote among the skilled and a clear majority among the less skilled workers.

The UKIP vote, which had previously attracted significant white working class support, collapsed from nearly four million in the 2015 election to just under 600,000. It is also clear that Labour’s relatively radical manifesto/policy statementâ€”calling for nationalizing the railways and utilities, building more council or social housing, an end to

austerity, and a halt to the creeping privatization of the National Health Service” attracted working class voters.

In many working class areas this meant an increased Labour majority. In Hartlepool in the northeast, a largely working class town that voted 70% for Brexit, where UKIP came in second with over 11,000 votes in 2015 and thousands of steel jobs were lost just two years ago, Labour more than doubled its majority from about 3,000 in 2015 to 7,600 this year. Corbyn drew 10,000 to a rally in the rain. UKIP's vote fell to 4,801. Similarly enlarged Labour majorities occurred across the country.

More important, of course, was the gain of some 30 seats, many in the heavily working class Midlands and North with largely white populations that had gone Tory in past elections. For example, Derby North is an East-Midlands manufacturing town where the largest employers are Rolls Royce and Toyota and the population is about 87% white. It went Conservative in 2015, but returned to Labour this year with a majority of over 2,000. Bury North, which covers three old Lancashire mill towns and is about 88% white, went Tory in 2010 by 2,200 votes, but voted Labour in 2017 by a majority of 4,375.

Tory Meltdown

Tory Prime Minister Theresa May had called this “snap” election believing she could increase the party's majority in Parliament. Although the Conservatives got the most votes and seats in Parliament, May's highly personalized and repetitive campaign was a disaster that cost them their previous majority of 12 seats. May had tried to make the election all about her “strong and stable leadership” to negotiate Brexit, but Labour's left program undermined that strategy. Nor did the three terrorist attacks on the UK in the previous three months boost the Tories' chances of gaining a bigger majority.

As a result, the Tories are now cobbling together a deal with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which has 10 MPs, enough to give the Tories a slim working majority on major issues. The DUP is a right-wing, Ulster loyalist party that opposes abortion and same-sex marriage. Some of its leading figures are also climate change deniers.

Aside from UKIP, the other major loser was the Scottish National Party (SNP), which lost 21 seats due largely to SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon's emphasis on a second independence referendum. The Tories gained 12 seats in Scotland, Labour 6, and the Liberal Democrats 3.

The Grenfell Tower fire

Just six days after the election, a 24-story council high-rise went up in flames. Grenfell Tower housed 600 mostly poor tenants, many of whom were people of color. The outside cladding that had recently been installed by a string of private (corner-cutting) contractors was not fireproof and became the conduit that turned the entire building into an inferno within 30 minutes.

The tenants' association along with many experts had long argued that these 1970s high-rises were unsafe. Fire alarms didn't work, there were no sprinklers or fire extinguishers, and these buildings had only one stairwell and no evacuation plan. The material in the cladding used on Grenfell Tower has been banned in U.S. construction since 2012. By the weekend the estimate of the dead and missing were between 58 and 70.

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Located in Kensington, one of the richest boroughs in Britain, the poor neighborhood in its midst instantly became the symbol of class and race inequality. Firefighters and health workers responded rapidly, people from the neighborhood and beyond rushed to the scene with food, clothing and bedding for the survivors, but government at all levels appeared paralyzed. The local Kensington Council made no effort to coordinate food and clothing distribution or to locate shelter for displaced residents. Survivors could not get information about friends and relatives either in hospitals or trapped in the building. Sorrow turned to anger.

Jeremy Corbyn visited the scene talking to residents and demanding answers from the authorities. London's Labour and Muslim mayor Sadiq Khan came flanked by police, but at least stayed to respond to the angry crowd. Theresa May finally appeared the next day but ignored residents and spoke only to emergency staff. She returned on Friday to speak at a meeting of residents in a church, but when the audience turned angry she fled. The *Guardian* newspaper termed her response to this horrific tragedy "Theresa May's Hurricane Katrina" (June 16).

An enraged crowd stormed the Kensington Council headquarters, but no councillors were to be found. Eventually they marched to the prime minister's residence at 10 Downing Street but got no answers. At all levels government did what it does best: promised inquiries and commissions. Eventually for survivors will come some money and housing, maybe nearby, maybe not.

As this was being written on Saturday morning, angry crowds were still milling around the area and the government has shown itself incapable of responding to the concerns of residents and their supporters. This may be one more nail in the coffin of the Tory government.

Growing Shift to Labour; And Then?

In the wake of the election, even before the Grenfell Tower disaster, over 35,000 people had joined the Labour Party. A poll taken two days after the election asking how you would vote if the election were held that day actually showed Labour getting 45% of the vote. Given that third parties take up nearly a fifth of all votes, this would mean a clear majority of votes for Labour. The same poll showed that 49%, including many Tories, thought May should resign. What must that opinion be now!

Given the shaky nature of the Conservative/DUP alliance, the inevitable difficulties in the Brexit negotiations, the problems May will have in continuing austerity, and now her own Katrina, it is entirely possible that another election will take place well before this government serves out its five-year term. While the Labour Party is on permanent campaign footing, it is still deeply divided despite Corbyn's new prestige and his support among the members.

Given the ferocious opposition of "The City" (the powerful financial services industry) and capital in general, if that happens and Labour wins, it will be a test not only of Corbyn and the party's activist base, but of "parliamentary socialism" itself. Stay tuned.

June 21, 2017, This article was written before the evening attack on a London mosque.

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