

A Brief Reflection on the 2017 UK General Election

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, JUN 10 2017

The 8 June UK general election resulted in a hung parliament, where no party is able to command a majority in the House of Commons. For readers unfamiliar with British politics or parliamentary systems, this means that the largest party (the Conservative Party – also known as the ‘Tory’ party) will be unable to consistently pass legislation unless they enter into an agreement or coalition with another party. Ostensibly, the result of the election is that Theresa May, the Conservative leader and UK prime minister, has established an agreement with a marginal party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and together they have a majority of just a couple of votes – but enough to govern. With the facts out of the way, the election has stirred up debates in the UK of which two issues are important to reflect on. Both are related and follow on from each other. They are also of interest to citizens from other nations.

First, the election is a watermark of the return of socialism in the British political spectrum. For a generation there has been no clearly discernible socialism evident in mainstream politics – as the party that traditionally identified with socialism (Labour) were taken into the centre ground by Tony Blair in the mid-1990s. Blair won three elections and while doing so caused a race to the middle ground among other parties as they sought to capture his electorate. For two decades, general elections in the UK were fairly guilty of the common lament “they’re all the same”.

By 2017, Jeremy Corbyn – a fairly radical political voice in the UK – had established and maintained control of the Labour party, despite massive opposition within the party who still favoured the middle ground logic of the Blair years. He then produced a manifesto that was within socialist principles. Highlights were free university education, nationalisation of utilities and railways, and a non-interventionist foreign policy. The media, experts and, to be fair, the bulk of the British population thought this would be a suicide note for the Labour party – harking back to the wisdom of the Blair years that you had to travel to the centre to win. Instead, Corbyn’s Labour did much better than expected and gained 40% of the popular vote, but still far short of becoming the largest party – never mind winning a majority. This result has made Corbyn more popular than ever, has vindicated him somewhat, and all eyes are on how he performs when next put to the test.

The return of socialism in the UK is welcome. If for any reason because social justice is needed more than ever. In many places, most notably the United States, socialism is a dirty word because it (traditionally) fell into the orbit of Communism... being just one step removed from its more extreme revolutionary cousin. This association is spurious in the modern era as communism is discredited globally as a political or economic model and unlikely to return. I (personally) cannot speak in seriousness to any person who does not believe that it is common sense to allow each and every person born in a society to have a fair chance at life. For that to happen the state should invest in quality education, healthcare and welfare. This should be paid for by whatever level of taxation is required, done in a progressive way to ensure that people are able to enjoy the rewards of their labour – while also ensuring they pay back into the society.

In the United States – long held hostage in its politics by the fear of communism (and rightfully so) – this debate is now entering the spectrum thanks to people like Bernie Sanders. In Britain, Corbyn has brought it back. Good news. But reason to celebrate.. not yet.

This brings me to my second point. Sanders lost in the United States (as did Hillary Clinton.. though she was not exactly ‘left’) and Corbyn lost in the UK. For this positive and wholly necessary social justice political agenda to gain

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power it needs to win an election. In the United States this is more difficult, so I'll leave that comment for another day. In the UK it is fairly simple. There is a fertile ground for Corbyn that will push him over the majority line in Parliament. It means, in tangible terms, he needs to win about 60 constituencies from the Conservative Party. Probably more than that to make a victory convincing. So, while Corbyn supporters are happy right now –*they are not in government*. To do so, they need to come up with a strategy to do what Tony Blair did a generation ago... win over voters in Tory areas. Doing this does not mean a return to the sterile middle ground politics of the Blair years. Corbyn has proved that his policies are welcome in the debate, and popular to an extent. But, to win an election the Labour party under Corbyn needs to remember why it is called the Labour Party and not the Socialist Party. It is a broad church that speaks to a traditionally working class voter, but more importantly to a large number of people from all walks of life who believe in social justice. The difficulty – or perhaps political courage/genius – of the time ahead will be in whether Corbyn and his team can find a way to keep their principles (and they should) while also finding a way to appeal to that 3-4% of the country that they still need to add to their electorate for them to win an election.

Corbyn supporters are invariably ideological purists and they have, as a result, suffered from quite hostile machinations from within the Labour party. But, the lesson of the 2017 election for the Labour party is that if they want to govern again, they need to unite again – and the starting point for doing so is respecting Jeremy Corbyn's brand of politics, while judging how it can be enhanced/evolved to win an election. So, it will be interesting to see if Labour's bigger hitters come back to the shadow cabinet and swallow their pride. They should. Not for themselves, but for the cause of social justice, which is somewhat lost under the Conservative party.

About the author:

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