

Brexit Endgame: The 2019 UK Election

Written by Russell Foster

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RUSSELL FOSTER, DEC 14 2019

After nearly four years of wailing and gnashing of teeth, Britain has made up its mind. We're leaving the EU. At 22.00h on Wednesday 12th December 2019, the BBC/Sky/ITV exit poll opened the final chapter in Britain's Brexit saga. A crushing majority for Boris Johnson's Conservative and Unionist Party has redrawn the political map. Constituencies which have been Labour for decades have turned Conservative. The Brexit Party failed to gain a single seat but upset the voting balance. In my home city of Sunderland, had the Brexit Party not stood then a constituency which has been Labour since the First World War would have turned Tory. The Liberal Democrats not only failed to rally the remains of Remain, they actually lost a seat – awkwardly, the seat of their leader Jo Swinson. Following John Bercow to the House of Commons exit are high-profile Remainers Anna Soubry, Chuka Umunna, and Dennis Skinner – who lost his Labour constituency of 49 years to a Tory. Despite climate concerns being a big campaign issue the Greens have failed to achieve anything resembling a breakthrough. Meanwhile in Scotland, a huge surge for the SNP means that 2020 will be dominated by an existential struggle not over the future of Britain in the European Union, but the future of the 350-year old British union itself. British politics used to be boring. Not any more.

The immediate question is, "why?" There isn't a single answer, and at the headquarters of Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and even the Conservatives, heated debates on this question are now taking place. But one answer is that this wasn't so much a vote of confidence in Boris Johnson, it was a vote of no confidence against Jeremy Corbyn.

The signs have long been there. In 2015 Corbyn faced a vote of no confidence by his own party, and lost. His response was to do nothing. In 2017 Corbyn entered a general election, and lost to the robotic Theresa May. His response was to do nothing. In 2019 Corbyn faced a national vote in the European elections, and lost (even losing his own constituency's seat in the European Parliament, and on his birthday as well). He responded by doing nothing. Two by-elections showed a collapse of support for the Labour Party, and his response was to do nothing. Now, Jeremy Corbyn has led the Labour Party to its worst defeat since 1935. His response, for now, is to do nothing. Not even resign. This, coupled with Brexit, explains last night's election result.

Much has been said about the December 2019 election being a Brexit election. And undeniably, Brexit was a major factor. But despite a great deal of discussion and tentative polls about Remainers now having a bigger majority than Leavers (and the former head of YouGov's disturbing rhetoric in January 2019 about "Crossover Day", whereupon enough Leave voters had died that a second referendum should be held to return a Remain result), there was not a surge in support for Remain options. The answer to this is Brexhaustion and the clarity (or lack thereof) of party leaders' positions on the biggest peacetime political issue the British have faced since the stirrings of revolution in 1832.

Under Boris Johnson, the Conservatives advocated an "Oven-Ready Brexit"; not so much a gourmet *a la carte* Brexit option but a lukewarm, reheated version of what Theresa May had offered four times before. This was not a Remain option, but neither was it a crash-out Hard Brexit option. Jo Swinson's Liberal Democrats evolved from calling for a second referendum to simply offering to revoke Article 50 and cancel Brexit. Nigel Farage's position of immediately leaving the EU under WTO rules was, at best, vaguely phrased. Jeremy Corbyn's position has long confused people, until entering the election campaign with a promise of negotiating a magical, perfect deal with an irritated and

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impatience European Union in record time, holding a Leave/Remain second referendum, but not actually taking a side himself and leaving open the bizarre possibility of him negotiating a deal and then campaigning against his own deal. Anna Soubry's Independent Group for Change, which was stillborn to begin with, has become as politically relevant as UKIP or the novelty candidates Lord Buckethead, Count Binface, or Mr Fish Finger. Nigel Farage, now turning into the British equivalent of one of the USA's "perennial candidates" who won't go away, became an irrelevance as Boris took the limelight as the lead figure for Leave, gifting the Brexit Party a net total of zero seats in Parliament despite their success in the European Parliament earlier this year.

Forced to choose between the Conservative, LibDem, Brexit Party, and Labour options (the SNP's proposal being irrelevant for most British voters incapable of voting SNP), Johnson's seems to have been the least unpleasant option on the menu. Swinson's proposal to ignore more than half of the electorate and cancel the whole process has failed spectacularly, reflecting widespread concern in Britain over the last few months that this Liberal Democrat proposal was neither liberal, nor democratic. The Lib Dems failed to rally the remains of Remain, possibly because the British people are simply exhausted by Brexit and want it to end – one way or the other. And Corbyn's plan to be an "honest broker" favouring neither Remain nor Leave has backfired worse than anyone anticipated.

The nation has been glued to opinion polls throughout the campaign, anxiously and excitedly watching as the Lib Dem and Brexit Party vote share collapsed, while the Conservatives and Labour raced upwards. But hopes or fears of Corbyn achieving the same as in 2017 – of eating into the Conservative majority just enough to cause a hung parliament – failed to materialise. 2019 is not 2017. The Conservatives are no longer led by a reluctant Remainer and mediocre politician, but by an admittedly charismatic leader and enthusiastic Leaver. The Brexit Party became irrelevant once their far bigger rival came under Leave leadership. The Lib Dems' policy was clearly unpopular with many Remainers uncomfortable at the idea of just cancelling the biggest democratic decision in British history, regardless of their own views. But while the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, and Brexit Party all clearly stated their Brexit positions and evolved them, Labour did not. The Brexit option offered by Jeremy Corbyn remained more or less the same as his position during the 2016 EU Membership Referendum campaign itself – vague and unclear to everyone.

Labour's mistake was to frame the December 2019 election around domestic issues. Twelve years after the Global Financial Crisis and ten years after the start of state austerity, Britain is in a shockingly poor condition. Unemployment, growing child poverty, the spread of zero-hours contracts, public services from hospitals to bus routes to police stations being financially eviscerated, intense housing pressure, skyrocketing levels of personal debt – all of these are real, and urgent, and Labour was right to draw attention to them. But Labour was wrong to believe that these were more important to the British people than Brexit.

For the last three (now, nearly four) years, Brexit has colonised British consciousness to the point of complete saturation. Since the beginning of David Cameron's referendum campaign in 2016, "Brexit" has been a word which the British people have been unable to avoid on a daily basis. Love them or loathe them, Swinson, Farage, Johnson, and Sturgeon at least had a clear position on an issue which has not simply dominated British politics, but has been the entirety of British politics, since 2016. Corbyn's attempt to focus on domestic issues while treating Brexit as a footnote, was misguided. He wasn't helped by the poisonous atmosphere of British politics and the polarisation of the British population into warring camps who see the other as not merely different, but evil. He wasn't helped by his unclear promises on a second Scottish independence referendum, nor by his commitment to scrapping Britain's nuclear deterrent, nor by his past associations with groups whose commitment to peace and cooperation is, to say the least, highly questionable. He wasn't helped by a manifesto which promised too much and which was offered by a man whose complete inability to deal with the foul anti-Semitism scandal in Labour gave a widespread impression that if Corbyn can't manage his own party, he can't manage an entire country. And he certainly wasn't helped by a broad perception that the Labour Party (even before he took control) has come to represent the London middle class, rather than the British working class. But as 2017 demonstrated, Corbyn at least had the ability to muddle through these issues, and in the 2019 campaign his past associations with terrorist groups, or his position on Trident nuclear submarines, was barely mentioned compared to 2017. What felled him in December 2019 was a public lack of trust in him and his Brexit position, and a public desperation for Brexit to end, one way or the other.

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Britain is now approaching the Brexit endgame. Corbyn will linger on for a while longer, until he steps down in favour of another radical socialist who will lead a remnant of the Labour Party in opposition against a huge Conservative government more preoccupied with the SNP than the Labour MPs sitting across from them. The leaderless Liberal Democrats will wander in the wilderness until reforming as a party dedicated to rejoining the European Union. Nigel Farage will follow Tony Blair into the lucrative job of an after-dinner speaker. In the meantime, Boris Johnson will deliver Brexit. But potentially, a Brexit which is not as harsh as many Remainers feared.

With such a huge majority, and with his rivals and opponents trounced, Boris is not in the same position as Theresa May – trapped by hardline Eurosceptics in the ERG and held to ransom by Arlene Foster's DUP. 2020 will be dominated by a race against the clock to negotiate a trade deal with Brussels, and the looming war of words between a significantly strengthened case for Scottish independence versus a significantly strengthened case for One Nation Conservatism. But Boris can now comfortably ignore demands for a Hard Brexit and deliver a softer version which will disappoint everyone. But perhaps everyone being disappointed is preferable to half the country being furious. In his speech on the morning of Friday 13th December, Boris acknowledged that much of his vote, like the 2016 Brexit vote, came from the vast and mysterious land beyond London, called "Britain", whose people are tired of being ignored, tired of being left behind, and eager for remedies to a broken economy and a broken political system. Brexit is coming, and nothing can stop it now. But maybe, just maybe, a majority government aware of the need to placate four angry nations, and aware of the need to strike a good deal with the EU to prevent the further polarisation of the country after January 31st 2020, can do what the British do best, and half-heartedly muddle through.

About the author:

Dr Russell Foster is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in European Studies at King's College London. Prior to this he was a Marie-Curie International Fellow in European Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Russell studied History at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge; International Relations and Human Geography at Newcastle University, UK; and he was a Visiting Scholar in European Studies at Virginia Tech, USA. His research interests include nationalism, identity, the EU as empire, and the emergence of new identities in Europe. His first book, *Mapping European Empire*, was published in 2015. He is currently researching the emergence of the New Right in Europe, the changing nature of white identities and masculinity in the West, the role of symbols and icons in shaping Western identities, and the relationship between politics and fiction. His website is www.russellfoster.com.