

A Christmas (Election) Carol

By Jay Rowe, PhD Student at the Centre for Brexit Studies

At this time of the year, many Brits will undoubtedly revisit the 1843 Charles Dickens classic, A Christmas Carol. The timeless tale, in which the penny-pinching curmudgeon Ebenezer Scrooge transforms into a more generous and open-hearted man, received its first ever public reading here in the city of Birmingham in 1853.

Charles Dickens gave the performance at Birmingham Town Hall, and the immense success of the event spurred well over one hundred further readings of the work by the prolific, Victorian writer. For many actors, the filmic role of Scrooge would become one of their most iconic. From Reginald Owen in 1938 and Alastair Sim in 1951, to Michael Caine (accompanied by Muppets) in 1992 and a CGI Jim Carrey in 2009, the character has been interpreted by actors of many different styles and profiles.

In 2019, however, the character of Scrooge will be transformed from a money lender to a Prime Minister, and Victorian London is stretched out to cover the whole of Brexit Britain and Northern Ireland. Casting is almost complete. On December 12th, either Boris Johnson or Jeremy Corbyn will enter 10 Downing Street with a mandate to end almost-a-decade of austerity.

Like the narrative of A Christmas Carol, some visions of the last ten Christmases Past, and 2019's Christmas Present, show a British society suffering from underinvestment in a variety of public services; both the Labour and Conservative manifestos are packed with spending commitments to alleviate the struggles of millions of modern day equivalents of the hard-working, salt-of-the-Earth Cratchit family.

The original, miserly Scrooge was wary on parting with the fifteen shillings per week that Bob Cratchit earned for his sixty hours of labour, but both Johnson and Corbyn have promised to be a little more generous for the workers in contemporary Britain.

The Conservatives have pledged to increase the National Living Wage, for over-25s, to £10, while Labour's manifesto promised no

rises in income tax, VAT or National Insurance for the lifetime of the coming parliament. Each of these policies would benefit those in work, particular those in long-term, low-waged employment; however, as the 2017 General Election showed, young voters can have an enormous impact on the outcome.

One of the most poignant characters in Dickens' work is "Tiny" Tim Cratchit, the seriously ill son of Bob and Emily Cratchit. If a healthy Tim was preparing to vote in the upcoming poll, the Leader of the Opposition is offering to abolish tuition fees, restore the maintenance grant and give under-25s, across the UK, free bus travel.

The Prime Minister, on the other hand, has reneged on an earlier commitment to cut tuition fees to £7500, preferring a freeze on the current fee level of £9250 in England until 2025.

The young people who created the "Youthquake" that boosted the popularity of Corbyn, and kept the Conservatives from returning a majority, in 2017, will probably be more enthusiastic about Labour's offering compared to that of the governing party. Indeed, young people might shape this election like no other before it, but that doesn't mean that either candidate can afford to ignore older people either.

Winter illnesses and heating costs can be an enormous concern for older people around Christmas this year, and in many Christmases Yet to Come. Social care, in general, plays an important role in the offerings across Labour and the Conservatives.

Both parties have made manifesto commitments to reducing the financial burden for older people who require social care. Labour have promised 'free personal care' for eligible older citizens; this includes personal hygiene, continence, diet, mobility, counselling, simple treatments and other services.

The Conservatives, meanwhile, stopped short of a policy commitment, but their document contains the promise that "No-one will sell their home to pay for care". While, historically, older voters tended to favour the Conservative Party in General Elections, Corbyn's attempts to gain an outright majority will require support from voters in all age

range cohorts, not just the young core of his party's current membership.

Among the strengths of Charles Dickens' work was its ability to portray the concerns of people at varying points along the social spectrum. One of the issues facing the UK that cuts across gender, ethnicity, social class and region is... housing. Whether you aspire to celebrate Christmas in the family dining room of a grand Victorian town house or with friends around the telly in your first flat, worries about the security of the place you call home can be severe.

To address the UK's housing shortage, Labour's manifesto states that 100,000 rent-controlled council houses would be built each year if they achieved power, whereas the Tories have set aside £6.3 billion to improve the physical conditions of over 2 million existing social houses in some of the most disadvantaged parts of the country.

Regardless of which of these two politicians wakes up on Friday 13th December having secured the role of a lifetime, the twelve days that follow are unlikely to lead to a terribly enjoyable Christmas for the new Prime Minister.

With the country facing considerable social and economic problems, political divisions and the aftermath of the recent terrorist attack, the incoming Prime Minister is likely to greet those wishing him a "Merry Christmas" with the classic line from Ebenezer Scrooge himself: "Bah humbug!"