

Progressive but strategically naïve: how the left threw away (another) General Election

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As the dust settled on the 2019 General Election, social media went into overdrive. A forlorn Boris Johnson, looking more dishevelled than usual, walked out of Downing Street for the last time. His was the ignominy of being the shortest serving PM in modern history. A failed campaign of gaffes and untruths lay behind him as he begrudgingly handed the reins over to a jubilant Jeremy Corbyn and Deputy PM, Jo Swinson. Despite machinations of his comms supremo, Dominic Cummings, Johnson had to accept he had been strategically outflanked in the campaign.

In the final weeks before the vote, a four-way, left-wing coalition had been agreed between Labour, Lib Dems, SNP and Green Party. A single candidate from amongst these parties, the one most likely to contest in the relevant constituency, stood against the Tories and their challengers, Farage's Brexit Party aggressively chewing at Johnson's heels so anathema to them was his renegotiated 'vassal state' withdrawal agreement.

The cost was an agreed second EU referendum on the basis of Johnson's deal – no further renegotiation – a second Scottish independence referendum, and an open debate and vote in the Commons on electoral reform to a PR system.

Well, almost...

How easily history could be rewritten. The reality is of course the exact opposite of this. Labour and the progressive parties, the Remain supporting parties, were themselves outflanked by the Tories manoeuvres, their strategically base chant of 'get Brexit done', and the shrewd deal agreed with Farage. And of course, regardless of the polls, this should come as no surprise.

In the fallout of the election there has been a significant narrative on social media focused on two key subjects. The first of these is the weaponizing of disinformation and the strong media bias toward the Right. Second is the fundamentally unfit-for-purpose electoral system that unevenly rewards votes: at this election a Conservative seat cost 38,000 votes, a Labour one 50,500, and a Lib Dem 336,000. Spare a thought here for the Brexit Party: 642,000 votes here and nothing to show for it. Shame...

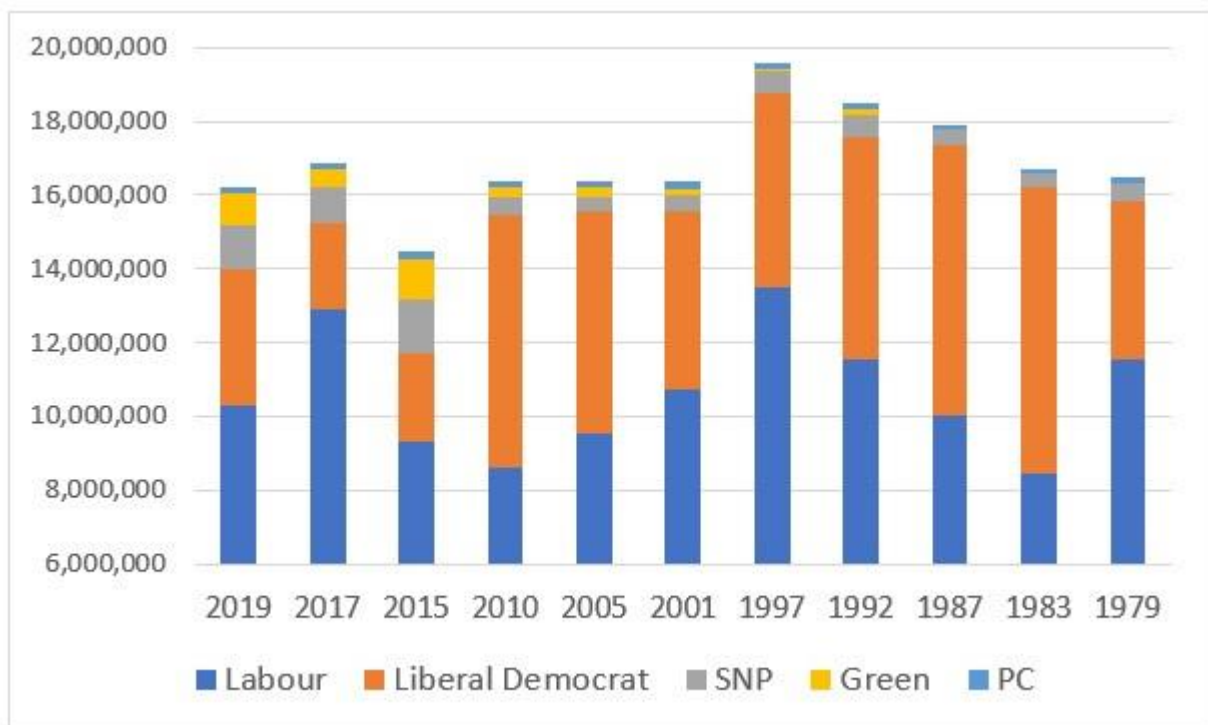
I want to raise a slightly tangential question however. How is it the Left, the socially liberal, the progressives in the UK keep losing elections? We can bemoan the pressing need for electoral reform, but in 2019 the socially liberal had the numbers. Despite the campaign of disinformation, the Right-wing bias of the press, the vilification of Corbyn, Swinson, Sturgeon, socially liberal parties represented over 50% of votes cast. In a FPTP system, this is a majority, and not an insignificant one: bear in mind in 1997 Tony Blair won 418 seats, a majority of 179, on just 43% of the vote.

This is not an uncommon phenomenon in the UK. In every one of the 10 elections between 1979 and 2017, the sum of the Labour and Lib Dem vote, parties I class as left-of-centre (not everyone will agree here), outstrips the Conservative vote. Add in the SNP, Plaid Cymru, and the Greens and this is further increased. And yet on only 3 of these occasions have we not seen a Conservative government.

If you ask how this can happen, the answer really is simple: coordination. Political journalists fixate on stories about conflict between factions within the main parties and speculate on their possible fragmentation and ongoing disarray. What is discussed less is the general fragmentation of the Left within the UK.

The Left here is a broad church, through which civil society and citizen rights and welfare objectives are pursued by means of centralisation or devolution, state ownership or market regulation, social or environmental justice. It should come as no surprise that the progressive and socially liberal side have a panoply of ideas and options on how to govern in comparison to the rather staid methods employed by the Right. The outcome is thus a number of factions in comparison to a singular entity representing the socially orthodox.

This however has a fundamental effect on electoral performance. Consider the figure below: it outlines the distribution of the Left-wing vote in UK General Elections since 1979. Since 2001 – 2015 notwithstanding – the figure has stayed relatively consistent. The distribution between parties has however varied quite notably. The result is parties on the left are spending too much time and effort simply trying to poach votes from one another, rather than addressing their primary collective concern of preventing a Conservative government.



The result is a fundamental misrepresentation of the British both politically and culturally. Over the past three years, the enduring message is the UK (or England specifically) has turned into a nationalistic, openly bigoted, and increasingly racist nation. But the reality is we are still hugely socially liberal, and the voting tendencies of the majority of UK citizens reinforces this view. The problem is we do not have a political system – or more importantly a well enough organised form of social liberal representation – to ensure this is carried from the electorate via ballot box into government.

We can point the finger at certain institutions; the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn in particular can be accused of fundamentally putting party before country and citizens in efforts to emotionally blackmail

voters from supporting other socially liberal candidates. But in truth, the Left in general needs to raise its game now. Because we are seeing time and again a strategic naivety from which they rarely learn. And against a world of ruthless men without conscience – the Johnson's, Farage's, Cummings' – this is costing them time and again.

It's a key but simple lesson to learn. If you want to win an election, don't play PR politics in a FPTP system. If the Left truly want to address the plentiful enduring social injustices in the UK, they need to be more strategically focused, more willing to compromise, and get a bit more ruthless. Because if you win a landslide majority – as a coordinated Left, a social liberal alliance would – and implement electoral reform to PR, then the Right which has dominated British politics for so long through minority elected majority government is locked out.

The fight for placing civil society and citizen welfare centre stage is won. Once you have won the battle for the soul, it's only then the battle for hearts and minds can begin.