

It's been a funny old election!

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The title of this blog is derived from a line used by English stage and film actor, comic and singer Stanley Holloway (1 October 1890–30 January 1982) who kept spirits up by entertaining during the second world-war. That this election is, largely, concerned with the issue of Brexit is unsurprising. Perhaps we could do with having our spirits raised as man feel we've been in a situation not unlike war since the outcome of the June 2016 referendum on continued European Union (EU) membership.

One of the dubious 'joys' of a General Election (GE) is in analysing the contents of each political party's manifesto and comparing their contents. According to the Cambridge Dictionary a manifesto is defined as "a written statement of the beliefs, aims, and policies of an organization, especially a political party" and derives from the Latin word *manifestum* meaning clear or conspicuous.

That this is a peculiar election goes without saying. It's the third in four years because of David Cameron's decision to include a commitment in the 2015 Conservative Party election manifesto to have a referendum on EU membership. Cameron is accused of having assumed that this referendum would be easy to win on the official government line of remaining with the EU.

An election involving the Tories led by Johnson, and Labour led by Jeremy Corbyn, has long had commentators salivating. Johnson, who'd enjoyed a privileged upbringing, and who'd been a significant leader of 'leave' in the referendum, would be against Corbyn, a man whose socialist principles have remained steadfast all his life.

Which brings us to the manifestos that each of the two main parties have launched in the last week; here at Birmingham City University (Labour on Thursday) and Telford on Sunday (Conservative). Though the two manifestos have the personal imprimatur of its leader, Labour's is imbued with Corbyn's ardent belief that inequality and

poverty in this country can only be ended by what many contend is potentially ruinous public spending.

Labour's costing for the commitments in its manifesto state that it would spend £83 billion more than existing government plans in "day-to-day" spending by 2023-24. The £58 billion compensation over five years to women affected by the change to state pension age; "WASPIs" (Women Against State Pension Inequality) is not included. As was spelt out by Labour, it believes that the £83 billion additional spending will be neutral in that this amount can be raised through increased taxes by targeting the top 5% of earners (in excess of £80,000 pa), the extremely wealthy and a hike in corporation tax from its current 19% to 26%.

There is no doubt that what Labour intends to achieve through its manifesto commitments is a radical transformation of the capability of the economy that would have the potential to vastly improve the prospects of every member of British society. Though psephologists, notably Professor John Curtice, consider a Labour majority under Corbyn and his manifesto to be virtually impossible, stranger things have happened.

Many suggest the current Labour manifesto should be compared to the commitments implemented by Clem Atlee's government after it won the general election in 1945. Atlee's victory is considered as monumental; some use the word "earthquake". It was against an incumbent Conservative PM, Winston Churchill, who, only three weeks previously, had announced as PM the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany.

Election shocks do occasionally occur but Corbyn winning by the sort of margin achieved by Labour under Atlee in 1945 with 47.7% of the vote and gaining 393 seats against the Conservatives under Churchill which achieved 39.7% of the vote and 210 seats would be off the scale of credible.

To complete the trio of the three major parties that existed in 1945, the Liberal party led by Archibald Sinclair achieved 9% of the vote and won just 12 seats. For a party that had governed the country less than quarter of a century earlier this was ignominious. The Liberals (now

LibDems) have remained an 'outlier' third party ever since enjoying power once as part of the coalition between 2010-15.

If Labour's manifesto was notable in its lack of reference to Brexit, this cannot be said of the Conservative's. It glories in the desire to complete a task that defied Theresa May. The front page of The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019 boldly states what it considers to be the overriding objective of this election; "Get Brexit Done Unleash Britain's Potential."

Apparently chastened from its experience in 2017 when the May manifesto was considered to be far too ambitious and included commitments stymied by her involvement in trying to achieve Brexit, Johnson's ambitions are modest in comparison. Indeed, though signalling an end to the austerity introduced under Cameron when in coalition with the LibDems under Clegg some assert that it would not be considered incongruous as a New Labour manifesto, when compared to Labour's manifesto it is positively parsimonious.

The Conservative manifesto commits to spending an extra £1.5 billion on public services in 2020, £2.8 billion in 2021 and £2.9 billion thereafter. Labour's commitments to spend £83 billion by 2024 is a ratio of 28:1 when compared to the Tories' £2.9 billion. For completeness the LibDems manifesto commitments would be, by the end of a five year Parliament, £63 billion.

Little wonder that many consider the Conservative manifesto to be a 'steady as she goes' approach eschewing anything too contentious such as May's 'dementia tax' in 2017. As Paul Johnson, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, acknowledged when comparing it to the "scale of ambition" of Labour and the LibDems: "As a blueprint for five years in government the lack of significant policy action is remarkable."

But, as many who've analysed Johnson's ambitions point out, there are inconsistencies; not least that an additional 50,000 nurses would work for the NHS by 2024. Conservatives had to admit after the manifesto launch that this number included 18,500 nurses who already work in the NHS and would be "retained".

This admission inevitably draws attention to the character of Boris Johnson. Johnson is someone, according to hugely influential journalist and historian Max Hastings, from whom he worked at *The Telegraph*, when writing in *The Guardian* in June, unable to “recognise truth, whether about his private or political life, if confronted by it in an identity parade.”

Perhaps the single manifesto commitment that Johnson wants to be judged on is that after 2020 the Brexit transition period will not be extended. However, assuming Johnson wins the election and puts the Withdrawal Act Bill he temporarily withdrew a couple of weeks ago, has stated he'll put it back to Parliament so the UK leaves the EU by 31st January. This would leave 11 months to negotiate a free trade agreement with the UK by 31st December 2020, a timetable considered extremely difficult by experts.

Speaking on Monday in a lecture at Glasgow University, former UK envoy to the EU, Sir Ivan Rogers, asserts achieving such a deal could easily take a decade. Rogers believes that by the end of next year the UK will face its “biggest crisis of Brexit to date”.

One wonders how anything Johnson states can be believed as, if the circumstances dictate, he has shown himself to be perfectly happy to abandon promises he's made. Johnson is equally notorious in his abandonment of those considered superfluous to his personal ambitions. Recall the utterly damaging comments made about him by his 'leave' campaign colleague Michael Gove in the contest to replace David Cameron.

Max Hastings made abundantly patent his contempt for Johnson as someone who could lead the UK to better times. He believed that Labour under Corbyn was the only reason that Johnson might win a general election. However, this would lead, Hastings argued, to a Johnson premiership “shambling from one embarrassment and debacle to another, of which Brexit may prove the least.”

Lord Heseltine, a genuine 'heavyweight' Conservative who was once considered the natural heir to Margaret Thatcher has once again intervened in warning that the UK faces “another year of uncertainty' under Johnson's Brexit plan”. Speaking at an event in Buckinghamshire on Monday, he pulled no punches in his belief that

Johnson's catchphrase of getting Brexit "done" by January is "nonsense" and, besides, would mean the risk of a no-deal exit still exists.

In stating his preference that lifelong Tory voters who don't want Brexit should vote for "defrocked Conservative candidates" or Lib Dems means he won't be welcome in Downing Street should Johnson become PM after 12th December. On Tuesday morning, Heseltine made clear on Radio Four what he believes is at stake in this election:

"It is the prosperity and world influence of this country. Our relationships with our neighbours in Europe. This is transcendently the overarching issue at stake in this election and I cannot vote or support people who are going to make this country poorer and less influential."

There are still over two weeks before we go to the polls. This peculiar election may get even stranger. Unfortunately, should the opinion polls published recently prove correct, the result may not be so funny for the prospects of the UK in the future.