

PROGRESS.

ELECTION REVIEW

Progress response to the Labour Together general election 2019 review

Nathan Yeowell, February 2020

CONTENTS

ABOUT	2
REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION RESULT	3
CAMPAIGNING AND MESSAGING	5
THE MANIFESTO	6
BREXIT	8
THE LEADERSHIP OF JEREMY CORBYN	9
NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	12

ABOUT

Progress is the movement for Labour's progressives. We were founded in 1996 as a think tank and campaigning organisation dedicated to the promotion of modernising, progressive politics within the Labour party – and the election of Labour politicians across national, regional and local government.

I became the director of Progress in August 2019. Immediately prior to this, I was head of policy and public affairs at the charity think tank New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) and strategic policy adviser at the London Borough of Sutton. Between 2007 and 2012, I was head of the Labour group office at the Local Government Association (LGA), in which capacity I was a member of the national policy forum (NPF) and the party's election stakeholders' group. I am secretary of my local branch, a member of Vauxhall Labour's executive committee and chair of the Lambeth Labour party local campaigns forum (LCF). I am a former chair of Vauxhall and vice chair, campaigns, Battersea Labour party.

This response has been prepared in consultation with our members. In January, we toured the country with Labour First, speaking with over 700 party members and supporters; their views have been very much taken into account¹. We have also drawn upon polling and analysis by Lord Ashcroft², David Cowling³, Europe for the many⁴, Ipsos Mori⁵ and YouGov⁶.

Crucially, this report has also been shaped by conversations with voters during the 2019 general election campaign – those who stayed with us and those who did not. Progress staff and directors campaigned in constituencies including Bristol North West, Canterbury,

Castle Point, Croydon Central, Halifax, Ilford North, Thurrock, Torfaen, Vauxhall, Wakefield, Wolverhampton North East and Wrexham.

We have distilled and grouped our thoughts under five headings: **reflections on the election result, campaigning and messaging, the manifesto, Brexit and the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn.**

Nathan Yeowell
Director of Progress

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION RESULT

Whichever way you look at it, **the general election defeat was a catastrophe for the Labour party.** It was our fourth successive defeat since 2010, delivering Boris Johnson the Conservative's largest majority since 1987, and providing him with an opportunity to shape post-Brexit British politics as he sees fit. This was despite a decade of public sector austerity and its consequences, i.e. growing regional and inter-generational inequality; the return of homelessness and child poverty to levels not seen since the 1990s; child mortality the second highest in Europe; the normalisation of foodbanks and schools operating four-day weeks; unprecedented cuts to local government spending – ironically, yet intentionally, married to the decentralisation of responsibility away from Whitehall. And it was despite the fact that, going into the election, Mr. Johnson had the lowest satisfaction rating of any new prime minister since records began (a net satisfaction of 7 per cent), and his administration the lowest net rating of any new administration (and comparable with the dog days of both John Major and Gordon Brown).

We lost 60 seats, leaving us with 202 MPs – the lowest number since 1935 (although at least in 1935 we were marching forwards, gaining 100 seats under Clement Attlee). Our vote share fell by 7.8 per cent, from 40 per cent in 2017 to 32.2 per cent (a loss of over 2.6 million votes in two and a half years on a reduced turnout), with an average 4.7 percent swing towards the Conservatives across great Britain.

To quote directly (and in full) from David Cowling: **'Based on the current composition of the House of Commons, the party needs to gain 123 seats at the next election simply to secure a majority of one.** In order to secure a 40-seat majority, that might see a reforming government through a full term, they will need to gain 142 seats. Since 1900, there have been only three elections where Labour has gained more than 123 seats – 1929 (+126); 1945 (+199); and 1997 (+146). We eagerly await the Labour leadership election to see candidates emerge who match the calibre of the leaders who secured those three great victories – Ramsey Macdonald, Clement Attlee and Tony Blair. It promises to be a long wait. The truth is that the disastrous finale of Mr. Corbyn's leadership has exiled his successor to the political wilderness for at least the best part of a decade. Labour has not won an election in 14 years, and it will not win the next one: just as the sheer scale of Labour's victory in 1997 pre-determined that they would not lose the election that followed.'

The election was a rejection of Labour more than it was a resounding endorsement of the Conservatives. They won, rather, because of the tenacity with which they both held on to their vote and eclipsed the Brexit party – as well as the good fortune, for them, by which Labour's vote split in several directions.

Turning to the **geographic spread of our losses** the Conservatives breeched and demolished stretches of the so-called 'red wall' of Labour seats snaking

northeastwards from north Wales, through the Midlands and onto Yorkshire, Teeside and County Durham. Longstanding Labour strongholds have been turned into relatively safe Conservative seats. Labour's modest 2017 gains in Scotland were reversed, and we ended election night back where started in the aftermath of the 2015 general election, with only one MP, the indefatigable Ian Murray in Edinburgh South. This was offset, very marginally, by the consolidation of our vote in some seats in southern England; for example, Canterbury and Portsmouth, and our victory over the Conservatives in Putney.

These results highlight the **demographic churn within Labour's support**. Again, to quote Cowling: 'In their own post-2017 election analysis, Ipsos MORI registered the biggest swing from Conservative to Labour among middle-class voters since 1979; and also, since 1979, the biggest swing from Labour to the Conservatives among white working-class voters. The 2019 Ashcroft poll suggested that, while Labour sustained negative swings among all social classes, their heaviest losses were, once again, among the white working class – the C2s and DEs (2 per cent swing from Labour to the Conservatives among ABs, 6 per cent among white collar C1s, 6 per cent among C2s and 9 per cent among DEs).' According to MORI'S 2019 analysis, Labour's vote fell the sharpest (12 per cent) amongst men aged between 35 and 54 (whilst the Conservative's rose by 5 per cent), with a 7 per cent swing to the Conservatives amongst all 35 to 54 year olds.

In short, the **very nature of Labour's support is changing**, away from its roots in (largely monocultural) former working-class communities, towards more rootless, cosmopolitan and densely urban centres of support. That this has crystallised under Jeremy Corbyn, ideological left-winger and avowed champion of the working-class, is ironic. It also speaks to the seismic cultural and

social changes that have been accelerated by austerity and flagged up, quite angrily at times, by Brexit. If the Labour party has any future as a relevant and credible political force, it has to grapple with and accommodate these structural changes to decide what and who it stands for in the decade ahead. These are potentially existential questions. The ascendancy of Boris Johnson could well lead to the re-ordering of British politics along American lines, with political allegiance determined by cultural identity and the country divided between 'metropolitan elites' and the 'left behind.' (The economic impact of the climate crisis and how we adapt to it could easily exacerbate this split.) Labour needs to decide whether it is happy to collude in this – or whether it has the appetite to recast itself as a genuinely universalist political project committed to bringing the country together.

These are questions for the new leader following their election on 4 April 2020. Let us now turn to some of the issues that impacted on the 2019 result.

CAMPAIGNING AND MESSAGING

The campaign itself was unfocused and founded on a monumental strategic mistake – that we were fighting an offensive election. We have to believe that this was a genuine mistake, as the only alternative is to assume bad faith on the part of those who directed that campaign. That said, senior figures at party HQ knew the polling was horrendous and still chose to leave endangered MPs dangling in the wind at the expense of their favoured candidates in no-hope Conservative seats.

Messaging was also problematic. The party lacked a strong narrative arc, either to combat the Conservative's mantra, 'Get Brexit Done', or provide a positive, optimistic set of reasons to vote for us. Instead, **messaging was largely negative, populist and punitive, based on stark, binary visions of politics and country:** 'them and us', 'the many not the few,' a nation of food banks and billionaires etc. (For more on Brexit, see page 8)

The loss of longstanding staff with significant campaigning experience has become marked in recent years. HQ has seemed happy to sub-contract campaign innovation to Momentum, whilst community organising has been prioritised and directed by senior staff instead of being devolved to regional offices and local Labour groups. **The election exposed just how far the Labour party has been transformed, quite purposefully, from an organisation devoted to the planning and winning of elections to one remodelled as a movement to support the incumbent leader.**

'It was a clusterfuck of an election. The biggest problem was organisational – locally, regionally and nationally. The party has forgotten the basics of campaigning' and has become a talking shop. Coventry's activists were sent to Nuneaton on polling day, instead of defending our seats here. It was unbelievable. Unless something is done, the centre left will be forced out of local activism by the hard left. Things have become very uncomfortable in Coventry.'

Councillor and election agent, Coventry North West

'Activists came into the seat who were oblivious to the sensitivities and complexities we'd been dealing with. What was worse, we had some come in who were very rude about Luciana Berger, which I found really hard to deal with. Our PPC looked like he'd been taken hostage and used as photo fodder for Momentum.'

Activist, Finchley & Golders Green

'We were crying out for help the weekend before polling day, but no one was listening. To then read online about the hundreds of activists milling around Chingford with nothing to do that same weekend was like a kick in guts. We felt like HQ had sacrificed us in favour of true believers – that maximising a hard-left rump in parliament was more important than getting Jo re-elected.'

Activist, Leigh

'We had no focus, no direction, no central vision, no defining organising principle.'

Activist, South London

THE MANIFESTO

At the time of publication, much was made of the manifesto and how popular its individual policies were. And there were definitely reasons to cheer the document, at least as an aspirational, direction-of-travel-type tome. Here are the six policy areas we welcomed, specifically, in November 2020:

- Reversing cuts to Sure Start and promoting a ‘Stronger Families’ agenda – we know that, when done right, early intervention can have a huge impact on the prospects of the poorest children;
- The promotion of national and regional investment banks – if we are ever to get to grips with creating structural economic change, we need to ensure it affects local communities across the entire country;
- The proposal for A Future Generations Wellbeing Act;
- The creation of a Cultural Capital Fund;
- Making misogyny a hate crime – recognising that women are systematically targeted due to their gender is the first step to real equality;
- A commitment to transforming the structure and nature of housing provision.

However, after careful reading, the **central tenets that emerge** – the centralising tendency, punitive policies, and a reversion to producer-driven interests – **are worryingly regressive**. We need to be thinking more creatively about devolution and localism; policies that promote collective acceptance of the need for redistribution and empowerment; and how we prioritise local communities and our individual roles as both citizens and consumers. **Crucially, we need to tackle twenty-first century problems with twenty-first century solutions, not hark back to prescriptions from the 1970s and 1980s.**

There was also too much in the

manifesto, leading voters to question how realistic our commitments were.

Policy incontinence once the manifesto had been published exacerbated this problem, blowing a hole in what we had been assured were fully costed proposals. Ultimately, our policies did not add up (the Institute for Fiscal Studies judged Labour’s spending and taxation pledges to be ‘colossal’), and the sheer number of them undermined our credibility. This was felt on the doorstep, too.

‘We had an over-complicated manifesto with no clear narrative that the voters just didn’t believe was a deliverable package.’

Councillor Birmingham

‘My neighbour told me that the free broadband idea was “rubbish...complete pie in the sky.’

CLP Officer, North Wales

‘Didn’t strike me that there was much of an attempt to prioritise the stuff in the manifesto, and what we did was cock-eyed. We were going to make working-class people better off...we were going to spend all that money... but we weren’t going to do anything about child poverty... really?’

Activist, Clwyd West

‘The Tories will always come up with pork barrel politics, and we can’t compete. We needed a credible pitch. We didn’t have one.’

Activist, Leigh

'If I go home and I say we'll get a new car, that's popular. If I go home and say we'll also buy a holiday to Tenerife, that's popular. A new house – sure, that's popular too, as is a new car for the kids. If I say all that my missus will ask if I've been down the pub again.'

Councillor, North West

'We had an over-complicated manifesto with no clear narrative that the voters just didn't believe was a deliverable package.'

Councillor, Birmingham

BREXIT

The simplicity of the Conservatives' Brexit catchphrase stood in stark contrast to our contradictory and at times incoherent messaging. The absence of a distinct agenda and commitment to a clear set of values on this defining issue was a failure of leadership that ultimately caused both leavers and remainers to spurn us at the polls.

To lose leave-voting seats to the Conservatives on the scale that we did (52 out of the 54 seats that went from red to blue had voted leave in summer 2016) was devastating. But it was unsurprising given that, prior to the election, **only one in five Labour-leavers felt positively about Corbyn's neutral stance.**

Conversely, in the months leading to the general election, Labour remainers clearly favoured the strong 'Revoke Article 50' position taken by the Liberal Democrats⁷. Remainers' reservations about Labour's Brexit position were definitively expressed in the disaster of the European election results, six months prior to the general election, which saw the Liberal Democrats take 36 per cent of the remain vote, compared with Labour's 19 per cent – our share was on a par with that of the Green Party. **In the final analysis, we lost six remainers for every five leavers.**

Our contorted policy ended up pleasing no one. Remainers, leavers, the shadow cabinet, party members, ordinary voters. We weren't trusted on this fundamental issue of national importance. The Conservatives won three-quarters of leave voters and a larger proportion of remain voters than Labour managed to hold onto. Given that two-thirds of the

2015 Labour vote voted remain in 2016, winning less than half of all remain votes in 2019 was a damning failure - and we left the European Union because of it.

'Our position on Brexit was harder to understand than it is to nail jelly to the wall.'

Councillor, Coventry

'We knew going into the election that Brexit was going to be a tetchy subject but as a party we failed to educate the public as to just how bad no deal is going to be.'

Activist, Vale of Clwyd

'Labour leave is a fantasy, and yet we made no effort to expose that. Our policy was like saying we'd had a vote to punch ourselves in the face. We picked the worst possible course, trying to please everyone and in the end pissed them all off instead.'

Activist, Salford and Eccles

'We could maybe have survived the anger at either the leadership or our Brexit policy, but not both.'

Councillor, Birmingham

'Brexit was the door; Corbyn pushed them through.'

Activist, Ashton-Under-Lyne

THE LEADERSHIP OF JEREMY CORBYN

Jeremy Corbyn emerged as an unlikely paragon of hope in the summer of 2015, connecting with and inspiring hundreds of thousands of Labour party members and supporters who wanted a decisive break from the status quo. For many members, the party felt stale and directionless – and there was a genuine appetite for Mr. Corbyn’s promise of a more straightforward, honest politics.

He became the standard bearer of hope again during the general election of 2017, and Labour’s campaign marked some success in remaking the socialist case for strengthening the role of the state in reducing inequality and managing the economy. This vision was particularly resonant in contrast to the stern, downbeat messaging and leaden delivery of prime minister Theresa May, helping us significantly increase some of our existing majorities, and unexpectedly win a handful of new seats. However, the success of 2017 was overplayed by Mr. Corbyn’s team in the two years that followed. As MPs warned at the time, a closer look at the 2017 result quickly revealed that we were no closer to power, and that, in many crucial ways, we were further away.

An honest assessment might have spared us some of the losses of 2019, had we recognised the extent to which the Labour vote was shifting, and, while gaining in cities and big towns, among graduates and socially liberal middle-class voters, we were losing our traditional base. Instead, our complacency laid the groundwork for the disaster of 2019.

Whilst Labour was busy congratulating itself on a lost election, the Conservatives took seriously the fact they had only marginally won under Theresa May in 2017. By the autumn of 2019, they had organised themselves into a winning prospect, with a clear and decisive pro-Brexit campaign and leader.

Meanwhile, in spite of a terrible local election result in May, and a disastrous European parliamentary election in which the party achieved an historic low of 10 seats, with a negative 11 per cent swing in the vote share, Labour ploughed on with its disastrous compromise position and unpopular leader. The halcyon days of 2015 and 2017 were a distant memory.

Polling from the week of the general election showed a 14-point disparity between Labour’s popularity (35 per cent favourable) and that of its leader (21 per cent favourable); whilst Boris Johnson trailed his party’s popularity by only one percentage point (42 per cent to 41 per cent).⁸ The same survey evinced Mr. Corbyn as the most unpopular of all the party leaders at the time of the election (seen by 71 per cent of respondents as unfavourable, surpassing Nigel Farage and Jo Swinson on 63 per cent unfavourable apiece). This should not have taken the leadership or the party by surprise; MORI found in September 2019 that Mr. Corbyn was the most unpopular opposition leader since their records began in 1977, with a 76 per cent dissatisfaction rate.⁹

The decision to vote in favour of dissolution in November highlighted the hubris at the heart of the Corbyn project: the assumption that public opinion would turn in his favour, and that the righteousness of his cause would lead to a Labour victory. Given the consistently anti-Corbyn feedback from internal and external polling, the resoundingly negative results of both European parliamentary and local elections only months before, and the true implications of the 2017 result, a decision to grant the Conservatives a general election showed, at best, deep and dysfunctional denial; at worst, a complete disregard for the hardworking MPs, councillors, activists, members, and the people of Britain whom the Labour Party was created to serve.

Once the campaign got underway, voters proved to be conspicuously unconvinced of Mr. Corbyn's credibility when it came to implementing promises from the manifesto. On pledges unique to the 2019 election, like the four-day working week and net-zero emissions by 2030, fewer than one in five voters trusted that they would materialise under a Corbyn premiership. Over half of voters simply didn't trust that Mr. Corbyn's spending plans were affordable. On the fundamental question of the economy, despite support for many of Labour's individual manifesto pledges, only 16 per cent of voters trusted Mr. Corbyn to run the economy, with a staggering 57 per cent of respondents to a pre-election Yougov poll believing that Britain would plunge into a recession with him in charge.¹⁰

Mr. Corbyn's political and world view was irreconcilable with maintaining the support of our voters, particularly given the patriotism of our traditional base. The leader's historic sympathies with the IRA were toxic, councillors and activists reporting voters slamming doors in their faces and sometimes breaking down in tears on the doorstep because of this perceived support. Voters suspected

Mr. Corbyn of anti-British sympathies more widely, particularly in relation to regimes like Iran, Russia and Syria, and organisations like Hezbollah and Hamas. Voters expressed alarm and disgust with his equivocation on the issue of Islamist extremism, which he had, on previous occasions, attributed to Western military intervention, as opposed to flatly condemning it.

Compounding all this, the allegations of cronyism and intolerance associated with Mr. Corbyn's tenure as leader finally cut through in the latter half of 2019, e.g. the ascendancy of Unite within the party; the active decision to isolate and repudiate internal opponents and anyone other than true believers and fellow travellers; the actual and political nepotism surrounding senior appointments; stories of intimidation and an increasingly corrosive culture at HQ, culminating in the witch hunt conducted against antisemitism whistleblowers.

All of these issues – hubris, ideological and nepotistic favouritism, intolerance towards moderate and progressive elements, and a narrow, anti-Western foreign policy outlook – collided together to create the poisonous crisis of Labour party antisemitism. In their submission to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, the Jewish Labour Movement's description of the Labour party as 'institutionally antisemitic' highlighted a 'failure of leadership' in dealing with antisemitism. Reports of antisemitic abuse, ranging from local meetings to party conference, should have been met with a strong, unequivocal response from the leadership. It was not.

Antisemitism is not a factional issue. It is not an ideological cause, the importance of which ebbs and flows. It is a fundamental matter of dignity and humanity, and the leadership's

failure to confront it, which directly led to Jewish members feeling unsafe in their own movement, Jewish MPs leaving their party, and Jewish and non-Jewish voters feeling unable to vote for us. Distressingly, the party's organisational failure to sufficiently deal with consistent and damning instances of antisemitism, not least Mr. Corbyn's personal lack of engagement, responsibility or convincing concern, came to define us. It was raised with us on doorsteps from south Wales to west London, in Wolverhampton and in Canterbury, serving as a totemic issue to describe and explain the party's descent and defeat under Jeremy Corbyn.

'Since 2015 intolerance has become tolerated. We've always had tribes and political gangs, but the extent to which the party has become beholden to a very narrow factional interest has been staggering. And to make it worse, much of these new gang members are not good, old-fashioned Labour members – they're communists and refugees from Trot groupsicles. Not the bulk of the membership – I mean that cabal that came in with Corbyn after 2015. They've poisoned the well. If we continue with them in the driving seat for much longer... well, I think it will be the death of the Labour party.'

Former MP, South Wales

'The leader was toxic on the doorstep.'

North Warwickshire Councillor and CLP Officer

'We might have struggled to win without Corbyn, because of Brexit losing us votes on either side. But Corbyn secured our defeat, and he is responsible for the scale of the loss.'

Activist, Holborn and St. Pancras

'Giving Boris Johnson his election was a colossal error. The party wasn't prepared to fight a winter election and proved incapable of providing the sophisticated support we needed to accommodate local pressures. Defence, patriotism, antisemitism, Ian Austin's letter all had cut through.'

PPC, North Wales

'Last month was very different to 2017. We went from being idealistic to being divorced from reality. Labour has turned into a party that doesn't look like, and actually doesn't like, people you meet on the street. We gave off an aura that we didn't support our troops, our country, our own people. I lost count of the people in my ward who told me "I'm not voting for you as long as you've got that man in charge".'

CLP officer, Delyn

'Our stance on Putin, on Assad, on the Skripal murder were criminal, criminal.'

Activist, West Yorkshire

'We've had this rush from Corbynites to get seats on the NPF, on the NEC, on the WEC [Welsh Executive]. What have they done with it? They've wasted it and pissed away a lot of support and political capital. The last four years down the toilet.'

Activist, Torfaen

NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

¹ We held/took part in ten meetings between 2 January and 25 January 2020, in Connah's Quay, Coventry, Dartford, Kennington, Manchester, Pontypool, Warley, York and two in Westminster.

² <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DIAGNOSIS-OF-DE->

³ David Cowling, December 2019 election: No! Jeremy Corbyn, privately distributed, December 2019.

⁴ <https://www.europeforthemany.com/tdd-web.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2019-election>

⁶ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/23/their-own-words-why->

⁷ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/04/labour-leavers-un->

⁸ https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/x02rt85qzd/You-Gov%20Favourability%20ratings%20191214.pdf

⁹ <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/jeremy-corbyn-has-lowest-leadership-satisfaction-rating-any-opposition-leader-1977>

¹⁰ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/11/12/labour-economic-policies-are-popular-so-why-arent->

Thank you to Nathan Burns, Joseph Holland and Cerys Howell