Labour's post-Brexit electoral strategy

John Curtice

TWO PERSPECTIVES

Labour emerged from the December 2019 general election badly battered and bruised. In the wake of a contest whose principal purpose was to bring an end to the seemingly endless debate about how Brexit should be settled, it found itself with fewer MPs than at any time since 1935. It is little wonder that the party is debating how it can improve its fortunes now that Brexit has been resolved.

The search for an answer is, however, less straightforward than many in the party seem to appreciate. Although a dominant narrative as to the way forward seems to have emerged, there is an alternative perspective that raises questions about the viability of this approach. Both perspectives recognise that Brexit has reshaped the electoral landscape, and disrupted Labour's electoral coalition. However, whereas the dominant narrative reckons it is possible for Labour to reverse that disruption, the alternative perspective suggests that Labour faces a potentially difficult choice about the kind of voter on which it focuses its hopes in post-Brexit Britain.

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THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE

For many, the key challenge facing the party in the wake of the December 2019 election appears to be obvious. Above all, it crashed to defeat because it lost the support of many of its traditional, older working-class voters. Many of

these voters backed leaving the EU[1,2] and were disenchanted with the party's embrace of a second EU referendum. They also had doubts about the abilities, policies and patriotism of the party's leader, Jeremy Corbyn.[3,4] This depletion of much of the party's traditional working-class support was symbolised by the loss of many so-called 'red wall' seats – seats in the Midlands and the north of England where once the Labour vote was weighed rather than counted, but which this time fell into the Conservatives' lap. According to this analysis, the route back to power therefore rests on the party winning back as many of these lost 'traditional' votes as possible.

There is plenty of evidence that supports this analysis. Over the four years between the 2015 and 2019 general elections, when Brexit came to dominate Britain's politics, Labour gained ground among those who voted Remain, while it lost support among those who had backed Leave. According to YouGov, for example, in 2019, the party's support was six points up on 2015 among those who voted Remain, but was six points lower among those who had supported Leave, figures with which other polling largely concurs. Meanwhile, the British Election Study (BES) suggests that the party leader was even less popular among working-class voters than he was among their middle-class counterparts.[5] Against this backdrop it was not surprising that while the party's vote was five points up among voters in managerial and professional occupations, it was as much as 10 points down among those in semi-routine and routine occupations. This left the party no more popular among semi-routine and routine workers than it was among those in managerial and professional occupations, and behind the Conservatives in both groups.[6]

1   Curtice J (2017) 'Why Leave won the UK's referendum', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55(annual review): 19–37
2   Sobolewska M and Ford R (2020) *Brexitland: Identity, diversity and the reshaping of British politics*, Cambridge University Press
3   Labour Together (2020) *Election Review 2019*, Labour Together. https://electionreview. labourtogether.uk/
4   Mattinson D (2020) *Beyond the Red Wall: Why Labour lost, how the Conservatives won, and what will happen next?*, Biteback
5   A wave of the BES internet panel conducted during the 2019 election campaign, which asked respondents to say how much they liked or disliked Jeremy Corbyn by giving him a vote out of 10, found that while ABC1 (middle-class) voters on average only gave him a score of 3.1, the equivalent figure among C2DE (working-class voters) was 3.0
6   Curtice J (2020) *Was the 2019 General Election a Success?*, NatCen Social Research. https:// whatukthinks.org/eu/analysis/was-the-2019-general-election-a-success/

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These patterns were also in evidence in the constituency results. Support for Labour was 1.6 points higher in 2019 than in 2015 in constituencies in England and Wales where most voters supported Remain in 2016, but was 6.5 points lower in seats where Leave had prevailed. Over the same period, support for the party in constituencies with a relatively large working-class population fell by 6.3 points, whereas it fell by only 2.1 points in the most middle-class seats.[7] Nearly all the seats that Labour lost in England and Wales in 2019 were ones where most voters had backed Leave, while two-thirds were among the most working class in the country.

Labour, it is therefore argued, needs to focus on reversing its losses among traditional working-class voters by providing new leadership that steers away from the near anti-Brexit stance the party had come to embrace by the time of the 2019 election – and preferably away from the issue of Brexit entirely. This seems to have been reflected in the fact that the party's new leader, Sir Keir Starmer, only raised the issue of Brexit once in prime minister's questions during 2020. It then took an even stronger form when the leadership decided to vote in favour of the EU trade agreement that was unveiled at the eleventh hour on Christmas Eve 2020, arguing that backing a deal was better than the alternative of no deal,[8] while at the same time stating that the deal was a bad one for whose consequences Labour

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7   Working-class seats are those where, according the 2011 census, more than 13 per cent of the working-age population were in a routine occupation. Middle-class seats are those where more than 35 per cent have a professional or managerial job. Analysis is confined to seats in England and Wales

8   Although whether this necessarily was the alternative has been questioned: Cooper L and Fowles S (2020) 'Parliament should have a meaningful vote on the EU trade deal. But it did not', London School of Economics blog, 20 December 2020. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/uk-eu-agreement-parliament/. The legislation before the House of Commons on 30 December 2020 implemented the provisions of the trade agreement into domestic law. It was not a vote on the ratification of the treaty itself, which was signed by the prime minister, using the royal prerogative, some hours before the domestic legislation received Royal Assent. Of course, it would have been possible for the prime minister to indicate that he would not sign the treaty if the domestic legislation were defeated in parliament

would hold the government to account.[9] When finally forced to take a stance on Brexit, Starmer seems to have been keen to send a signal to both sides in the Brexit debate, in the apparent hope that this will encourage Leave voters to return to the Labour fold while not alienating the Remain supporters whose support it currently enjoys.

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However, the foundations of this argument rest on more than statistical analysis. It is also informed by an understanding of Labour's mission and purpose as a political party. It was founded in 1900 to provide working-class representation. Many in the party thus feel distinctly uncomfortable about the fact that Labour is no longer the most popular party among the working class itself. Meanwhile, in its attempts to represent the interests of the working class, the party emphasises the need for government action to reduce social and economic inequality; this debate has long been the principal ideological division between it and the Conservatives, both in parliament and in the electorate.

Brexit, however, is not a battle between 'left' and 'right'; it touches upon issues of identity rather than class, and divides social liberals from social conservatives.[10] This is why it has proved so disruptive of the traditional patterns of electoral support at the last two elections, as voters' views on Brexit came increasingly to be reflected in their choice of party. Indeed by 2019, whether someone voted Labour or Conservative was at least as much a reflection of whether they were a social liberal or a social conservative as it

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9 Stewart H (2020) 'Keir Starmer to whip his MPs to support "thin" Brexit deal', *The Guardian*, 24 December 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/24/keir-starmer-to-whip-his-mps-to-support-thin-brexit-deal

10 Curtice J (2017) 'The vote to leave the EU: litmus test or lightening rod?' in Clery E, Curtice J and Harding R (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 34th report*, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-34/brexit.aspx

was of whether they were on the left or the right.[11] That is why it is understandable that many in Labour might like Brexit to slip down the political agenda as it becomes an ever-distant dot in the rear-view mirror. A return to the familiar politics of left and right with which the party is much more comfortable would seem to open up the prospect of it being able to 'reconnect' with working-class voters.[12]

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AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

A key feature of the above analysis is that it focuses on the question: "Who were the voters among whom the party lost ground most heavily in 2019?" However, this is not the only question we might ask. A potentially equally important question is: "Why was Labour less adept than the Conservatives at adapting to the politics of Brexit?" Asking that question points to an alternative account of what happened in 2019 – and also suggests a need to look beyond the 2019 election in order to understand the Labour party's current predicament.

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Contrary to what is often claimed, the Conservatives did not win a majority in 2019 by persuading voters of the merits of Brexit. True, most voters did reflect their view on Brexit in how they voted – 83 per cent of those who at the time of the election supported Leave voted for a party that was arguing in favour of implementing Brexit on the basis of the deal that had been negotiated, while 83 per cent of those who were currently

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11 Curtice J (2020) *Was the 2019 General Election a Success?*, NatCen Social Research. https://whatukthinks.org/eu/analysis/was-the-2019-general-election-a-success/
12 Labour Together (2020) *Election Review 2019*, Labour Together. https://electionreview.labourtogether.uk/

backing Remain voted for a party (including Labour) that was willing to back a second referendum.[13] Yet in the event, only 47 per cent of the total vote in Great Britain was cast for parties that backed Brexit, while 52 per cent was given to those who were supporting a second referendum. In short, the distribution of votes in the ballot box (as opposed to seats in the House of Commons) failed to demonstrate that the pro-Leave majority that was recorded in 2016 was still in evidence three-and-a-half years later. Rather, it added weight to the evidence of opinion polls that there was now a narrow majority in favour of Remain.[14]

So how did the Conservatives manage to turn backing what appears to have been a minority position on Brexit into the foundations of an overall parliamentary majority? The answer lies primarily in the party's success in persuading most Leave supporters to back the party – while Labour failed to achieve the same degree of success among Remain voters.[15] Nearly four in five (79 per cent) of those who were currently in favour of Leave voted for the Conservatives in the 2019 election. In contrast, only around a half (49 per cent) of those who backed Remain gave their vote to Labour.[16] If Labour had succeeded in emulating among Remain voters the Conservatives' success among Leave voters, the party would have outpolled Boris Johnson and been in a position to oust him from power.[17]

13 Curtice J (2020) *Was the 2019 General Election a Success?*, NatCen Social Research. https://whatukthinks.org/eu/analysis/was-the-2019-general-election-a-success/

14 whatukthinks.org (no date) 'EURef2 Poll of Polls', What UK Thinks website. https://whatukthinks.org/eu/opinion-polls/euref2-poll-of-polls/

15 The Conservatives were also potentially advantaged by the fact that the Leave vote was geographically more evenly spread, although this advantage is diminished if Remain outpolls Leave, as implied by polls and the result of the 2019 election. If the outcome of the EU referendum had been reversed and Remain had won 52 per cent of the total vote, Remain would have been ahead in 321 seats in Great Britain, and Leave in 311. See Fisher S (2019) 'United Leavers could easily thwart divided Remainers in the upcoming election', *Prospect*, 6 September 2019. https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/united-leavers-could-easily-thwart-divided-remainers-in-the-upcoming-general-election-polling-brexit

16 Curtice J (2020) *Was the 2019 General Election a Success?*, NatCen Social Research. https://whatukthinks.org/eu/analysis/was-the-2019-general-election-a-success/

17 This would have been tantamount to Labour winning over all those votes cast for the Liberal Democrats and nationalist parties. In that event, Labour would have had 319 seats to the Conservatives' tally of 312, and even if the Democratic Unionist party (DUP) backed the Conservatives they would have been outnumbered by Labour (319), the Greens, the Social Democratic and Labour party (SDLP) and the Alliance.

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Labour's difficulty, of course, was that it was in competition for the Remain vote in England and Wales with the Liberal Democrats, a party that was clear if not always effective in its advocacy of the argument that Brexit should be cancelled, while in Scotland the Scottish National party (SNP) had become the principal standard bearers for those who had voted Remain. The strength of the Liberal Democrats among Remain supporters was a legacy of the European election held in May 2019. Six months later, the Liberal Democrats were still neck and neck with Labour among Remain supporters in voting intentions for Westminster,[18] while the Conservatives, in contrast, already enjoyed the backing of more than half of Leave supporters well before the election was called. Although in the run-up to the December poll, Labour managed to reverse much of the damage that it had suffered among Remain voters at the hands of the Liberal Democrats (whereas very little progress was made among those who were backing Leave), it was starting from a relatively weak position.

The Conservatives were, of course, significantly assisted in their quest to appeal to Leave voters by Nigel Farage's decision early in the election campaign effectively to throw in the towel by withdrawing his Brexit party candidates from seats being defended by Boris Johnson's party. The Liberal Democrats were never willing to do that although they were – unlike Labour – willing to enter into a limited electoral pact with other pro-Remain parties. Even so, we might note that in staking out a clear position on Brexit – and in so doing risking (and incurring) losses among the party's traditional pro-business centre-right supporters that had backed Remain – the Conservatives were able to find the basis for an overall majority. In contrast, Labour's attempt at a more nuanced position – backing a referendum but not being clear about which side it would back in that ballot – was both insufficient to unite the Remain vote behind it, while among Leave supporters it was too weak a counterweight to the invitation from the Conservatives to "get Brexit done".[19]

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18 Ibid

19 Labour Together (2020) *Election Review 2019*, Labour Together. https://electionreview.labourtogether.uk/

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WHY REMAIN VOTERS MATTER

Meanwhile, it has to be borne in mind that the loss of the red wall seats is not the only instance of the Labour party losing support and seats in one of its heartlands. In 2015, Labour's political representation in Scotland fell to almost nothing. No sustained progress has subsequently been made in reversing that loss – indeed in 2019 the party's share of the vote dipped still further. This decline, however, cannot be blamed on the loss of Leave votes; data collected by the BES suggests that among those who voted Labour in 2010 but SNP in 2019, as many as 77 per cent voted Remain in the 2016 EU referendum while just 15 per cent voted Leave.[20] Meanwhile, winning an overall majority at a future UK election is likely to be very difficult unless the party does regain ground north of the border – assuming that in the meantime Scotland is still part of the Union.[21,22]

Moreover, even in England and Wales, recapturing the Leave-inclined constituencies that Labour lost in 2019 is not simply a question of winning back the support of Leave voters. It also requires retaining the support of Remain voters in these seats. Contrary to what often appears to be assumed, because in a constituency a majority voted Leave in 2016 and then elected a Labour MP in 2017 does not necessarily mean that most

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20 These figures are based on the answers given by 220 respondents to wave 19 of the BES internet panel who are recorded as having voted Labour in 2010 but SNP in 2019. It might also be noted that more generally the SNP has come to dominate the support of those who voted Remain in 2016, 52 per cent of whom voted for the party in 2019 – more than twice the proportion who voted Labour (21 per cent) and almost twice the SNP's strength among Leave voters (27 per cent). See also Curtice J and Montagu I (2020) *Is Brexit Fuelling Support for Independence?*, NatCen Social Research. https://whatscotlandthinks.org/analysis/is-brexit-fuelling-support-for-independence/

21 Curtice J (2020) 'A return to "normality" at last? How the electoral system worked in 2019', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(S1): 29–47

22 Curtice J and Montagu I (2020) *Is Brexit Fuelling Support for Independence?*, NatCen Social Research. https://whatscotlandthinks.org/analysis/is-brexit-fuelling-support-for-independence/

Labour voters in that constituency voted Leave. Rather, nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of Labour's support in 2017 in pro-Leave seats that elected a Labour MP came from those who had voted Remain.[23] In short, any success in winning back red wall seats will be heavily reliant on retaining the support of Remain voters in these seats.

The implications of this analysis are very different from those of the dominant narrative. It suggests that the roots of the Labour party's difficulty over Brexit lay in its attempt to ride both horses at once. As a result, the party failed to command the support of sufficient Remain voters – for which it faces potential competition from the Liberal Democrats and the SNP – yet at the same time it still proved insufficient to stem significant losses among Leave voters – for whom Boris Johnson's cry of "get Brexit done" was much more appealing. In short, the Brexit divide requires Labour to choose – and, given that the Conservatives have chosen Leave, and 80 per cent of Labour's vote now comes from Remain supporters, the only realistic choice open to the party is to craft an appeal that will maintain and enhance its support among Remain voters, be they working class or not.

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LOOKING AHEAD

Clearly, in drawing this implication, the alternative perspective is making a crucial assumption – that the conclusion of the Brexit process will not mean that Brexit and the divisive cultural issues that accompanied it (such as immigration) will fall off the political agenda. This is sharply at odds with the hope and assumption of the dominant narrative, which anticipates that the issue will fall down the list of voters' concerns and that, as a result, the country's electoral politics will return to its usual pattern – thereby

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23 Figures are based on 948 respondents to wave 19 of the BES internet panel who are recorded as having voted Labour in 2017 and as living in a constituency that Labour lost in 2019

making it possible for the party to unite its current pro-Remain electorate and its lost pro-Leave support around a left-of-centre economic message.[24] Indeed, Keir Starmer has been explicit in claiming that the UK's relationship with the EU will not be an issue at the next election.[25]

Yet whether this will prove to be the case is highly uncertain. Much will depend on how smooth the path of Brexit proves to be now that the UK has left the EU single market and customs union. If all goes well, the issue may indeed fall off the political agenda as the country concentrates on recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. But if, as some commentators anticipate, the deal proves not only to be thin but also brittle, the merits of the new relationship and how it might be improved could continue to be a subject of political contention.

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Moreover, while Labour might want the issue to fall off the political agenda, it is not clear that its political opponents will take the same view. Rather, the party might find itself isolated in its reluctance to talk about the subject. The Conservatives will wish to try to keep their new political coalition together by extolling the benefits that Brexit has brought and, under their stewardship at least, will continue to deliver. Meanwhile, having voted against the trade deal, both the Liberal Democrats and the SNP will be keen to argue the very opposite case – and in so doing hope to erode Labour's support. Most immediately, the SNP will have the opportunity in the Scottish parliament election in May to put its point of view before an electorate among whom there now seems to be a majority in favour of independence – not least as a result of a swing in favour of independence among those opposed to Brexit.[26,27] If the SNP does win an overall majority in the devolved election, the constitutional clash between

24 Labour Together (2020) *Election Review 2019*, Labour Together. https://electionreview.labourtogether.uk/

25 Elgot J (2020) 'Labour will not seek major changes to UK's relationship with EU – Keir Starmer', *The Guardian*, 29 December 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/29/labour-will-not-seek-major-changes-to-uks-relationship-with-eu-keir-starmer

26 Curtice J (2020) 'High noon for the Union?', *IPPR Progressive Review*, 27(3): 223–224. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/newe.12217

27 Curtice J and Montagu I (2020) *Is Brexit Fuelling Support for Independence?*, NatCen Social Research. https://whatscotlandthinks.org/analysis/is-brexit-fuelling-support-for-independence/

the Scottish and UK governments over holding an independence referendum that is likely to ensue will help keep Brexit on the political agenda throughout the UK.

And then, of course, there is the electorate. The Brexit debate has stirred a level of partisanship that has long been absent from British party politics. During 2019, around 45 per cent said they were either a 'very strong Remainer' or a 'very strong Leaver'.[28,29] So far, that proportion has only edged down a little to around 39 per cent. In contrast, far fewer – less than one in 10 – say nowadays that they identify very strongly with one of the political parties. That helps explain why, in 2017 and 2019, voters were so willing to change parties in order to express their views on Brexit. Labour, it seems, is betting that this pattern will not become a habit.

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28 Curtice J (2020) *Has Brexit Gone Off the Boil? Or are the embers of Brexit still glowing?*, NatCen Social Research. https://whatukthinks.org/eu/analysis/has-brexit-gone-off-the-boil-or-are-the-embers-of-brexit-still-glowing/
29 Curtice J and Montagu I (2020) 'Political consequences of Brexit: has Brexit damaged our politics?' in Curtice J, Hudson N and Montagu I (eds) (2020) *British Social Attitudes: The 37th report*, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-37/consequences-of-brexit.aspx