

The changing political landscape

by Mark Iddon

Theresa May has called a snap election, to take place in 5 weeks time, presumably to establish a mandate for her leadership of the Tory party and the Brexit negotiations. She became leader of the Conservative Party after the Brexit referendum and the resignation of David Cameron, rather than through a General Election whilst being leader of the Conservative Party.

It is widely acknowledged that the main political parties have been fighting for the political centre ground for some time and there is little to separate them in their managerial technocratic outlook. With the conservatives calling for the protection of workers' pension rights and Labour opposing cuts in welfare, public spending as well as opposing zero hours contracts, it appears that both parties are competing to be the political party to represent working people. There are many people who still insist that the Conservatives are the nasty party and hope that Labour will save the day with the leftish Jeremy Corbyn at the helm. However, it is important to see that using the old language of Left and Right to describe politics is increasingly meaningless and unhelpful terminology in order to understand the change in political context.

I would suggest that there is more at stake now than at any time in my adult life in the political arena with democracy being held to question and whether Brexit is upheld and followed through to free us from the ties and regulations of the undemocratic European Union (EU) or whether the technocrats can stall or frustrate Brexit negotiations. It is worth remembering that after the referendum there were questions about whether all votes are equal or whether there should be some sort of intelligence test to keep out people not capable of voting for what is in their own best interests.

In the 1980s the Labour Party was allied to the Trade Unions and supported workers rights whilst the Tories were understood to support the business and propertied class. In the 1990s Labour distanced itself from the Trade Unions, rebranded itself as New Labour and tried to appear as friends with the Cool Britannia youngsters. At the same time the Conservative party tried to move away from the family values ideas and reinvent themselves as the caring Conservatives. The lasting legacy of Margaret Thatcher that has dominated politics throughout my adult life has been that There is No Alternative (TINA) to the present system. This was made apparent with the collapse of the Soviet regime and the fall of the Berlin Wall. New Labour won in the General Election of 1996 and had 14 years at the helm. In that time they tried to present themselves as good managers of the economy and good business leaders.

New Labour did themselves no favours by embarking on ill-advised overseas military missions based on dodgy evidence and spectacularly crashed along with the banking industry in 2008 but held on to power until the general election of 2010. We then had 5 years of a Tory / Liberal Democrat coalition until the Tories managed to get a small majority in the 2015 General Election. The Liberal democrats have been swept to the sidelines since the last general election and to differentiate themselves from other parties, they have focussed their campaign on not wanting to leave the EU. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) don't have any reason to be a political party since, the EU referendum in June 2016 when the UK voted to leave the EU and, their objective had been achieved. The Scottish National Party (SNP) has suggested that a majority of Scotland voted to remain and have tried to bolster a new campaign for Scottish Independence. We will have to wait and see if there is any real appetite for this.

The majority of political parties, except UKIP, were behind the Remain campaign last June

but the Tories have generally taken on board the decision of the electorate to leave the EU although they were quite hesitant, following the referendum, to trigger Article 50 in order to start the leave process. Jeremy Corbyn who had been anti EU throughout his political career in the Labour Party stood by his Party's line and paid lip service to the Remain campaign despite his own personal convictions. The Labour Party has not yet issued their manifesto for the forthcoming election, and their candidates seem to be reluctant to express their political stance to date. They are sitting on a fence where they will be in for some criticism no matter what side of the fence they jump or fall.

The referendum on the EU in June 2016 revealed a staggering disaffection with the political elites in voting leave when all the institutions, banks, celebrities and world leaders were all advising us to remain in the EU. After years of political ambivalence when voting patterns in a particular constituencies rarely changed across many regions, the last year has revealed an increased level of engagement where people have shown a keen interest in politics and that they do care about issues of democracy, sovereignty and immigration policy and what exactly British values are?

The General Election (GE 2017) is a great opportunity to build on that platform and to have renewed debate about where we are going and what issues matter. After all the talk of division in the fall out of the referendum, this is a chance for real engagement and to redraw the political lines. The disaffection with the old parties is a good thing and will allow us to stop propping up these lifeless zombie parties which have nothing in common with the aspirations of ordinary people. TINA has been undone and there appears to be an appetite for change and fresh ideas. It was a rejection of stability and business as usual that we have tolerated for so long without receiving a dividend. We are about to enter a new era and how that pans out depends on our choices. It's time to raise the level of debate and call our representatives to account.