



Politics after the Brexit Election

by Simon Belt

The 2017 General Election was a very strange one. Theresa May called the snap General Election to give herself a proper mandate as Prime Minister and bolster the negotiating position of the government in Brexit talks with the EU.

The election actually left Theresa May in weakened position as PM, and plans for the UK's withdrawal from the EU somewhat confused. Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party lived on, even thinking they won.

So what should we make of the political landscape post the Brexit election? To understand what's driving politics now, it's worth assessing what changed through the election campaign. The election itself was a little unexpected and perhaps unnecessary, though Theresa May did have a legitimacy problem caused by her inheriting the role as Prime Minister when David Cameron departed rather abruptly after losing the Brexit referendum gamble. ***The Brexit referendum changed the political landscape profoundly.***

The Brexit referendum vote saw 17,410,742 electors vote to extract the UK from the anti-democratic EU. Decades of politics becoming increasingly managerial was challenged by an electorate wanting a greater say in how things are organised in society. The cosy 'leave it to the experts' approach was well and truly given the finger despite, and perhaps because of, the onslaught of well-to-do professionals who told us that it would be a disaster to leave the EU. Shocked by the result, David Cameron resigned as PM and Theresa May won the contest to take over as leader of the Conservatives.

Although Jeremy Corbyn was a lifelong opponent of the EU, most Labour MPs were advocates of Remaining in the EU and rather at odds with large pockets of their electorate. Theresa May, an advocate of Remaining in the EU during the referendum, saw the importance of accepting the result of the referendum and sought to exploit the bad faith being expressed by many Labour MPs looking to overturn the Brexit vote. The snap general election was meant to capitalise on Labour's confused message over Brexit and increase the Conservative majority in the House of Commons.

Theresa May made what proved to be a serious mistake after announcing the general election with a clear pitch that Brexit was the key defining issue that all policy issues needed to be focussed through - she then pretty much dropped Brexit and campaigned around anything but.

This was amplified by a contrasting political style that was aloof and often described as robotic. The production of an election manifesto by a very small group of advisors that included plans to recoup the cost of elderly care from selling off homes after death seemed to come out of nowhere and alienated the Conservative's core constituency.

Meanwhile Labour made some headway by formally supporting the delivery of Brexit whilst wrapping up that formal position with qualifications galore. This papered over the divisions within the Labour camp by being all things to all voters and offering disaffected Brexiters and Remainers hope of finding a receptive hearing. Jeremy Corbyn was much more relaxed at meeting and talking to voters, which was a breath of fresh air by comparison to Theresa May's very uncomfortable style.

The Liberal Party clearly defined themselves at complete odds with the majority of the electorate by looking to overturn the Brexit referendum result, resulting to any Remain allegiance only being seriously covered by the Labour Party. It looks like Labour managed to attract back some of its disaffected Brexit voters from UKIP, whilst attracting a Remain allegiance with nowhere else to go. The result was a minority Conservative government that needs the support of 10 Democratic Unionist Party MPs to get through crucial votes against a buoyed and resurgent Labour Party.

The most notable trend that the election has confirmed is that the electorate are back as a force in politics, and that the current political parties are decidedly aloof and unconnected to that. The Conservatives are seriously damaged by the general election, mistaking popular support for Brexit with support for them and Theresa May was especially culpable in that. The Labour Party have ridden the wave of Brexit better than expected, but was more because of the collapse of authority of Theresa May than anything about themselves particularly.

This is clearly a worrying period as Brexit offers so much for the renewal of political debate and accountability, yet there is little by way of any decent politicians able to make something useful from it. That Corbyn sacks 3 shadow ministers for supporting Chuka Umunna's amendment to the Queens speech in favour of remaining a member of the single market, after having just been in an election with a manifesto for leaving the EU shows they lack the wherewithall to do anything particularly useful at the moment. Politics is wide open and volatile and being driven by extraneous circumstances rather than taking any programmatic direction.