

Brexit and the British Election

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The British election was another nail in the coffin of neoliberalism as an economic regime, even though there is as yet no successor to it. The Conservative incumbent ran on a one-nation platform, having rightly concluded from the Brexit vote that there were no international excuses any more for neglecting the interests of the broad majority. And her challenger, far from demanding an exit from the Brexit, had united his party behind an anti-austerity program much of which would be illegal under European Union free-market competition law.

While Renewed Labour fell short of a majority, its amazing surge made it the effective winner – against the Murdoch press as well as Corbyn’s middle-class detractors who accused him of not being “charismatic” enough. Perhaps after Blair, the British have had enough of charisma? May’s snap election gave Corbyn, the “stone-age socialist”, the opportunity to consolidate his hold over his party, putting the New Labour old guard into its place. He succeeded brilliantly, with the support apparently of a vast majority of young and first-time voters. (Remember Bernie Sanders? Had the Democratic machine in the United States been as inept as the Republican machine in protecting its mainstream candidates against outsiders, Sanders might now be POTUS.) Perhaps the young had understood that the promise of a more socially responsive, post-neoliberal domestic policy after Brexit was more likely to be delivered by Labour than by the Conservatives?

Theresa May’s historical achievement, for all her ineptitude as a campaigner, was that after the Brexit vote she took care that it would stand. She also understood that the vote meant the end of neoliberalism as we know it. (In the same way that Corbyn had understood that there

is no need for Labour to substitute cosmopolitanism for socialism.) It was Labour, being more credible than the Tories as a force for a domestic turnaround, which became the beneficiary of this. For Brussels, this should frustrate all hopes for a Blairite Remain putsch in the Labour Party. With both Labour revisionists and the “hard Brexit” wing among the Tories weakened, a window may be opening for a constructive re-negotiation of the relationship between Britain and the EU. The outcome could, in the best of cases, be an association agreement that could serve as a model for a more flexible EU membership, with more democratic autonomy at national level. This might also be attractive for other member countries which feel locked in by Brussels technocracy and German economic interests.

Of course this is not a foregone conclusion. What is also possible is a conspiracy between Euro-fanatics in Brussels, Paris and Berlin and Tory Remainers – the former giving the May government a hard time during the upcoming negotiations, and the latter overthrowing their Prime Minister as negotiations get stalled over maximalist demands and minimalist offers from the EU. Perhaps this is what May was afraid of in the first place when she called the early election. Much will depend on the leader of the opposition, strengthened by the election result, should this moment of truth arrive.