

# FO 360°

UK Election Series



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## UK Election Series



December 2019

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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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## **Britain Faces a Historic Election**

Atul Singh

December 9, 2019

**As in 1945 and 1979, the UK faces an election that will change the arc of its history. This 360° context article explains the situation.**

**E**lections are almost invariably termed historic. For once, the use of the term is not an exaggeration. When British voters go to the polls on December 12, they will indeed be making a historic choice.

British democracy has been dysfunctional since the 2016 Brexit referendum to leave the European Union. This is the second early election in three years. This is precisely what British MPs sought to avoid through the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011. That legislation set a five-year period between general elections. Prior to 2011, a sitting prime minister could call an election at any point during his or her premiership. Now, that power lies with the House of Commons, and it has voted for an early election after much drama over the last two years.

### **The Story of the 2019 Election**

In 2017, Parliament voted for an early election. Theresa May, the then-prime minister, wanted to secure a clear majority in Parliament for Brexit negotiations with the EU. May's Conservative Party won 42.4% of the vote, its highest share since 1983. Yet it was not just Tories that got a high percentage of the vote. The Labour Party won 40%, its largest share since 2001. Labour might not have returned to power but, led by Jeremy Corbyn, it surprised pollsters and analysts, gaining 30 seats.

With a hung Parliament and no clear majority for either party, May was forced to seek the support of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), founded by the late Protestant preacher Ian Paisley in Northern Ireland, to continue as prime minister. In late 2018, a weakened May agreed a Brexit withdrawal agreement with the EU, but the

House of Commons rejected her deal thrice. Consequently, in May 2019, she announced that she was stepping down as prime minister.

May's resignation set off a leadership election in the Conservative Party. Its 160,000 members voted for Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London and the leader of the "leave" campaign during the Brexit referendum. Taking over as prime minister on July 24, Johnson promised to "deliver Brexit, unite the country and defeat Jeremy Corbyn."

Johnson's brief premiership has been eventful. He declared that he would "rather be dead in a ditch" than stay on in the EU after October 31, the deadline to depart from the union. Even his younger brother resigned from the cabinet. The prime minister repeatedly promised to take the UK out of the EU "deal or no deal," but the House of Commons foiled his plans by prohibiting a no-deal Brexit. This was thanks to the rebellion of 21 Tory MPs who voted against the government, the first of Johnson's 12 parliamentary defeats.

In September, Johnson suspended Parliament. However, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled against his decision. In an 11-0 verdict, the justices held that the prime minister had "acted unlawfully in shutting down the sovereign body" in the British Constitution.

Despite numerous setbacks at home, Johnson agreed a new Brexit deal with the EU on October 17. A majority of British MPs backed this withdrawal agreement but rejected Johnson's plan to get it through Parliament in three days, leaving it "in limbo." The prime minister sought a way out of this impasse by forcing an early election on December 12, the first UK general election in this month since 1923.

### **Why Does the UK Election Matter?**

The election is historic because different parties are offering radically different visions for the UK's future. This does not happen each time the country goes to the polls. In the 1950s, the Labour and Conservative parties moved to a broad consensus on economic policy. In fact, The

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Economist coined the term “Butskellism” because Conservative Rab Butler and Labour Hugh Gaitskell were indistinguishable in policy terms when they were chancellor of the Exchequer.

In 1997, Tony Blair’s New Labour wrested power from John Major’s Conservatives. However, there was not much daylight between the policies of the two parties. Similarly, there was little to separate David Cameron’s victorious Tories from the vanquished New Labour in 2010. Britain’s adversarial politics and tradition of feisty debate often magnifies policy differences but hides the common ground and shared beliefs on which its parliamentary politics generally operates.

Yet there are elections when seismic shifts occur. In 1945, Clement Attlee led the Labour Party to a historic victory. His government created the modern British welfare state with its fabled National Health Service (NHS). Attlee also presided over the decolonization of much of the British Empire.

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher’s election brought Butskellism to an end. Inspired by Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek, the “Iron Lady” championed free markets and rolled back the role of the state. Thatcher privatized most nationalized industries, lowered taxes and encouraged homeownership. Her “Big Bang” reforms deregulated financial markets and made the City of London a rival to Wall Street.

The election on December 12 is similar to the elections of 1945 and 1979. This was clearly in evidence on December 6 when Johnson and Corbyn squared off in a televised debate. They jostled over the future of the NHS, the UK-US relationship and, of course, Britain’s ties with the EU. Corbyn promised democratic, Scandinavian-style socialism and Johnson promised “one-nation conservatism” in which “a dynamic market economy” would “pay for fantastic public services.”

Unlike 1945 and 1979, though, the December 12 election might not just be a two-horse race. Smaller parties may punch above their weight.

The Liberal Democrats were in a coalition government with the Conservatives from 2010 to 2015. Now, they are attracting attention again because they have vowed to overturn the Brexit referendum and remain in the EU. The party plans to replace rates for small businesses with a new land-value tax on landlords. It aims to boost entrepreneurship as well and redevelop town centers and high streets. This might be music to the ears of some voters.

In 2019, regional parties are more important than ever with the Scottish National Party (SNP) reported to be on the ascendant. In 2016, Scotland voted against Brexit. In 2014, the Scots voted to stay in the UK but, at that time, the UK was a part of the EU. It is possible that an SNP victory might put Scottish independence back on the agenda and give the party a say in the formation of the future government in Westminster.

The DUP, which has supported the Conservative government since 2017, hopes to have “significant influence” after the election. It supports Brexit but opposes Johnson’s withdrawal deal. Its Catholic rival, Sinn Féin, bitterly opposes Brexit. In 2017, the Northern Ireland Executive collapsed because of differences between Sinn Féin and the DUP. Since then, the situation has deteriorated and the Royal College of Nursing has plans to start strike action for the first time in its 103-year existence. Both parties of Northern Ireland are important in this election.

Finally, Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party cannot be underestimated. In November, Farage decided not to contest the 317 seats the Conservatives won in 2017. Over the years, he has been the single biggest proponent of Brexit. Like the DUP, Farage’s party opposes Johnson’s Brexit deal. Some of his party members disagree. These Brexiteers are supporting the Conservatives instead because they are unwilling to risk Brexit. Furthermore, Farage’s party has appeal among the working class and could potentially take away votes from Labour, queering the pitch for the Conservatives.



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Rarely have so many variables been at play when the British have queued up to cast their votes. This election will define an era.

\***Atul Singh** is the Founder, CEO and Editor-in-Chief of Fair Observer.

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## **In Britain's Election, the Future of Human Rights Is at Stake**

Matthew Turner  
December 9, 2019

**Human rights are at the heart of this UK election — we are fighting for their very existence.**

**W**hen Boris Johnson became prime minister in July, he assembled the most aggressively anti-human rights cabinet in decades. The current home secretary, Priti Patel, wants to bring back the death penalty. The chancellor, Sajid Javid, as a former home secretary, deported British citizens to the US without death penalty assurances and revoked the citizenship of Shamima Begum — who joined the Islamic State as a bride aged just 15 — leaving her stateless and at risk of death.

The foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, doesn't believe in economic and social rights, claiming that it is "too hard to hire and fire people" in the UK, and has called feminists "obnoxious bigots." And the leader of the House of Commons, Jacob Rees-Mogg, is opposed to gay marriage and abortion, even in cases of incest and rape.

If the Tories win this election, so many of our rights — from workers' rights to women's rights and everything in between — will be under threat. Even the most basic right of all — the right to life — is at risk. The Conservative Party manifesto euphemistically pledges to "update" the Human Rights Act. But let's be clear, they won't be "updating" it to strengthen our existing rights or add new ones — they will be stripping away important protections that apply to us all.

Remember, this is the same party that in 2015 pledged to scrap the Human Rights Act altogether. With a Conservative majority, none of our hard-fought-for and hard-won rights will be safe.

### **Our Human Rights**

By contrast, the current Labour shadow cabinet is united by its belief in — and respect for — human rights. Jeremy Corbyn has spent his whole life fighting for the rights of others, both here in the UK and overseas, and the party front bench is packed with human rights lawyers, advocates and campaigners.

If Labour wins the election, we will have a home secretary who is committed to civil liberties. Diane Abbott has fought tirelessly for the victims of the Windrush scandal and for women held indefinitely in immigration detention centers such as Yarl's Wood and Brook House. Rather than punishing migrants, Labour will end indefinite detention and use the money saved to support survivors of trafficking and modern slavery. Instead of bringing back hanging, Labour will restore funding for prisons and provide support for people with mental health problems and drug addictions.

A Labour government would not just protect our existing rights but would create new ones. Labour has pledged to introduce a brand new right to food. Social rights like this are needed more than ever before. In the last decade, the use of food banks has increased by more than 5,000%. It is a moral disgrace that so many of our citizens have been driven to this. Labour will put an end to "food-bank Britain" and ensure that no child goes hungry in the fifth richest country in the world.

As well as food, Labour will end rough sleeping within five years, build thousands of new homes and ensure everyone has access to free education through a National Education Service.

But our human rights are meaningless if we cannot enforce them in the courts. The Tories know that, which is why they cut the Ministry of

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Justice budget — including critical funding for legal aid — more than any other department. There are now legal aid deserts all over the county, and millions of people have been left without access to justice. That is why Labour has committed not only to restore funding for early legal advice, but also to hire hundreds of community lawyers and build an expanded network of law centers. Labour will treat access to justice as a fundamental human right, the same as education or health care.

### **Beyond Our Borders**

The protection of human rights would not stop at our borders. A Labour government — with Emily Thornberry as foreign secretary — would put human rights and international humanitarian law at the heart of Britain’s foreign policy. This means immediately suspending arms sales to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen and conducting a root-and-branch reform of our arms-export regime.

As Thornberry said at the party conference earlier this year, Labour will never put strategic alliances with dictators like Saudi Arabia’s Mohammed bin Salman before our responsibility to uphold human rights and protect lives across the world. Our government should never turn a blind eye while our “allies” murder journalists and drop bombs on buses full of innocent children.

With Labour in charge, Britain would be a beacon of hope around the world, standing up for democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. But this also means coming to terms with our own history, which is why Labour would conduct an audit of the impact of Britain’s colonial legacy to better understand our contribution to violence and insecurity around the world. Only by acknowledging this can Britain credibly criticize human rights abuses in other countries, especially former colonies.

With so much focus on Brexit, it is important to remember what else is at stake in this election. Boris Johnson and his cabinet are so opposed to human rights that they are challenging their very

existence. A Johnson government would not hesitate to turn back the clock on human rights progress — and even go so far as to repeal the Human Rights Act. This is what is at stake in this election and what we are fighting for. Labour will always protect and respect our human rights. The Conservatives will destroy them.

\***Matthew Turner** is a barrister and chair of the Labour Campaign for Human Rights.

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### **The Climate Within the Brexit Election**

Arek Sinanian  
December 10, 2019

#### **How do UK’s leading parties compare on climate policy going into this week’s election?**

**Y**ou’d be forgiven to think that the only issue for discussion and decision by the public in the UK election is Brexit. As far as Boris Johnson is concerned, it may well be the only issue he wants a mandate for. This may have been the reason he refused to take part in the world’s first TV debate of party leaders on climate change.

But you would also think that the current global momentum in public sentiment and concern regarding climate change is the strongest it has ever been. With Extinction Rebellion demonstrations, the climate school strikes all around the world and heightened warnings from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and climate scientists in general, there has never been so much coverage of global warming and climate change. With the UN COP25 conference underway in Spain, and with the UK due to host the COP26 in 2020, climate change would surely climb up the ladder of issues for clarification by all parties involved.

For the exercise, let’s have a look at the two parties’ policies on climate change.

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Labour's manifesto for the election, titled "It's Time for Real Change," puts environmental issues under the heading of "A Green Industrial Revolution" at the top of its agenda and places Brexit near the end of the manifesto. This prioritizing of environmental issues is in itself significant, and some say it is unprecedented in UK politics. The chapter begins with: "This election is about the crisis of living standards and the climate and environmental emergency. Whether we are ready or not, we stand on the brink of unstoppable change."

If the party wins the election, it will launch a National Transformation Fund of £400 billion (\$527 billion) and rewrite the Treasury's investment rules to guarantee that every penny spent is compatible with our climate and environmental targets — and that the costs of not acting are fully accounted for too. Of this, £250 billion will directly fund the transition through a Green Transformation Fund dedicated to renewable and low-carbon energy and transport, biodiversity and environmental restoration.

Labour further proposes a revenue-raiser in an £11-billion windfall tax on oil and gas companies which would create a "just transition fund" to help shift the UK toward a green economy without causing mass job losses.

In contrast, the Conservative Party's climate policies, while they are placed on a lower standing than Brexit, nevertheless promise the generation of 80% of UK's power from renewables by 2030 and bring forward the deadline for a net-zero carbon emissions target from 2050 to 2045. They plan to expand electric vehicle uptake and a moratorium — not a ban — on fracking. But some may be disappointed with the party's policy freezing fuel duty, banning onshore wind farms, ending subsidies for solar panels and approving significant spending on building new roads.

Interestingly, Brexit will have a number of impacts on climate change, not least of which is the general influence of the EU on environmental protection in general but, more directly, on the availability of funds for any greenhouse gas

reduction or renewable-power-generation projects. Also, perhaps more subtly and indirectly, if a no-deal Brexit is to take place — and if the UK is to align itself more closely with the US on trade — then any reference or negotiation on climate issues may be taken off the table.

According to Sky Data, there is a clear correlation between Tory and Labour voters when it comes to Brexit and climate change. Labour voters expect their party to put a higher priority on climate change action and, similarly, Brexit voters place less priority on climate policy. The latest opinion polls show the Conservative Party in front, with a healthy lead over Labour. This may well be due to the Brexit factor.

So, if you were to give a score to the two parties, it would be fair to say that the Conservatives have done a lot of good work since 2010 in cutting emissions, but need to do more in future, while Labour could perhaps have been less cautious in its promises. Much depends on how Brexit is handled, how negotiations take shape post-Brexit, and how much the electorate trusts each party. However, with just a few days until election day, there is still time for public opinion to shift, particularly as the public absorbs the parties' other policies such as climate change. As Harold Wilson once said, one week is a long time in politics. But in today's world, even 24 hours can change everything.

\***Arek Sinanian** is the author of "A Climate for Denial" and an international expert on climate change.

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## **Britain May Back Boris to Get Brexit Done**

Atul Singh

December 10, 2019

**In a deeply divided country, the Tories seem to have the most loyal flock which should lead**

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**them to victory on December 12 and mark a new era in British politics.**

**J**ust days before the December 12 election, The Guardian's opinion poll tracker finds the Tories to "have a significant lead" over Labour even as support for the Liberal Democrats and the Brexit Party has slumped. In recent years, opinion polls have been notoriously unreliable. Rob Watson, the BBC's UK political correspondent, went on a "mini-election tour" of the United Kingdom and found "plenty of anecdotal evidence" to suggest that Prime Minister Boris Johnson will win this election. Johnson's time in 10 Downing Street has been tumultuous. The House of Commons defied him a staggering 12 times, the Supreme Court voted unanimously against his decision to suspend Parliament and his own brother resigned from the cabinet. Johnson kicked out 21 rebel MPs from his own party. They included big beast Ken Clarke, rising star Rory Stewart and Winston Churchill's grandson, Sir Nicholas Soames. Despite the odds, Johnson has still managed to get a new Brexit deal with the EU. It is this deal that he wants voters to back.

There is method in Johnson's madness. Both Tory insiders and journalists speak of a Svengali who has cast a spell on the prime minister and masterminded his strategy. Johnson plays the good cop, turning on his legendary charisma, charm, wit, banter and humor. Svengali Dominic Cummings, the founder of "leave" campaign, plays bad cop, marking out victims, putting the knife in and then twisting it. Despised by former Prime Minister David Cameron, Cummings has been called a Tory Bolshevik. While Johnson with his oratory and energy plays Vladimir Lenin, Cummings with his plotting and cunning plays Joseph Stalin.

### **The Civil War Is Back**

As Stewart has observed in a candid interview, Cummings is a Machiavellian operator with a gift for communication in the modern age. "Take back control," a slogan Cummings created,

became a mantra that resonated deeply in an island with a sacrosanct tradition of parliamentary sovereignty and memory of global empire. The red bus calling to spend the £350 million (\$461 million) per week the UK sends to the EU on the National Health Service (NHS) instead was political theater of the very highest order.

Johnson and Cummings have been itching for an election from the very day they entered 10 Downing Street. They have pitched themselves as the keepers of the democratic flame who regard the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum as inviolable. They see the "remain" camp as hopelessly fragmented. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour and Jo Swinson's Liberal Democrats cannot work together. They will inevitably split the vote, giving the Conservatives a clear path to power.

In this worldview, the Liberal Democrats are now a single-issue pressure group. They are obsessed only with Europe. Led by a "shouty hockey mom," they lack intellectual ballast of yore when Paddy Ashdown led them with splendid gravitas if not spectacular electoral success. More importantly, the Lib Dems are now an anti-democratic party because they have rejected the result of the Brexit referendum to leave the European Union.

In this worldview, Corbyn's Labour Party is unelectable. The threatening New Labour project of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown is dead. A Marxist anti-Semite with dodgy friends from Palestine and Northern Ireland is now in charge. Labour has returned to the days of Michael Foot under whom it lurched to the left, allowing Margaret Thatcher to ride her victory chariot to Number 10.

Johnson and Cummings have bet that the Brexit faithful will deliver a Tory majority in the House of Commons on December 12. Therefore, the party had to be purged of "namby-pambies and fuddy-duddies" to win a majority. Learning from Theresa May's lackluster performance in the 2017 election, Johnson and Cummings are going to the public with a new deal and asking for a majority to "get Brexit done."

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This strategy to swing right to win the election and then move back to the center sounds eminently sensible. However, there is a fly in the ointment. The country is deeply divided. The Conservative Party has morphed into a party of Brexit. It is not quite the broad church it was until recently. A victory on December 12 might well be Pyrrhic because a potential Tory cabinet will inevitably lack some of the party's best minds.

In fact, the UK has never been so divided since the English Civil War of 1642-51. Labour has emulated the Tories in purging the party of its own heretics. The Corbynistas now control the commanding heights of the party and dream of doing the same with the economy. They want Scandinavian-style socialism and have no time for New Labour apostates. Like the Conservative Party, Labour is now thin on talent and intolerant of dissent.

Along with the two main parties, the rest of the country is divided too. The Scottish National Party (SNP) led by Nicola Sturgeon is campaigning on a simple question: “[W]ho will decide Scotland's future — Westminster leaders like Boris Johnson or the people who live here?” After a similar vote in 2014, the SNP wants another referendum on the question of Scottish independence because the UK will no longer be in the EU and most Scots voted for “remain.” Johnson, Corbyn and Swinson have all rejected the call for a second Scottish referendum, but this seismic fault line could end the much-vaunted unity of the United Kingdom.

Even as dour Presbyterian Scots may bring future peril, Northern Ireland is already simmering. May's Brexit deal collapsed in part because of the Irish backstop. This was a special provision of the EU withdrawal agreement that prevented a hard border on the island of Ireland. That question has not gone away. Johnson's deal is not making the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the strident Protestant party of Northern Ireland, terribly happy. Since 2017, the Tories have been in power thanks to DUP support, and a hung parliament might make matters for Johnson's Brexit deal tricky.

In any case, the peace in Northern Ireland is far more fragile than it seems. The DUP and Sinn Féin, the Catholic party that wants reunification with Ireland, have fallen out. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought peace to this troubled land and envisaged a power-sharing agreement. After the Brexit referendum, the DUP and Sinn Féin have bickered bitterly. Since early 2017, Northern Ireland has had no government because the two parties have been unable to share power. Consequently, major decisions involving millions of pounds and affecting the lives of the people are simply not being made. Nurses are striking, people are restive and the return of violence is a distinct possibility.

### **The Cavalier Leads the Roundhead**

On July 24, this author observed that the history of the UK has long been “a ding-dong battle between cavaliers and roundheads.” Old Etonian Cameron is clearly a cavalier while the vicar's daughter May is a roundhead. This divide exists even within the Labour Party. Blair was a cavalier while Brown a roundhead. Today, the contrast could not be sharper.

Johnson, the 20th-Old Etonian prime minister, a scholar of classics at Balliol College, Oxford and a £250,000-a-year columnist for The Daily Telegraph, is the classic cavalier. Corbyn, a self-proclaimed democratic socialist, a student who left school with the lowest-possible passing grades and a supporter of underdogs from Latin America to Africa, is a redoubtable roundhead.

Like Thatcher, another roundhead, Corbyn is a conviction politician. The Labour leader opposed selective education and, therefore, did not want his son to attend a grammar school. A frugal vegetarian, an avid gardener and a supporter of unilateral disarmament, Corbyn is a cardholding member of the old guard of the Labour Party. Corbyn's unlikely rise to power stems from public resentment against George Osborne's austerity measures that inflicted pain and hardship on the most vulnerable sections of society. In 2017, he did unexpectedly well against May. Now, Corbyn is against a

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completely different political animal and evidence suggests that he is struggling.

Corbyn's Achilles' heel is his lack of clarity on Brexit. There is reason to suspect that Corbyn is a closet Brexiteer. His claim to be "neutral" on Brexit might be forced because his party members lie largely in the "remain" camp. Corbyn is promising to negotiate a third Brexit deal with the EU if he enters Number 10 that will protect trade, jobs and the peace process in Northern Ireland. The trouble for Corbyn is that the country is suffering from Brexit fatigue and wants the protracted political soap opera to end. On Brexit, the issue voters care most about according to opinion polls, the Labour leader has not been able to put daylight between Johnson and himself.

As pointed out earlier, Johnson could not be more different to Corbyn. His own sister describes him as "charming, ruthless, single-minded, determined" and disciplined. Conrad Black, who hired him as editor of *The Spectator*, has called him "a scoundrel" who is "very clever and very likable" but is really "a sly fox disguised as a teddy bear." Ian Hislop, the editor of *Private Eye*, has called the philandering Johnson "our [Silvio] Berlusconi but somehow it's funnier."

Like Berlusconi, Johnson is a populist Pied Piper. Like the Italian stallion, he is also "a politician with no convictions." Clarke, Soames and others who know him well have come to a similar conclusion. Johnson does have preternatural confidence and extraordinary swagger that comes from a deep belief that he was born to rule. Johnson's sister remarks that the Tory leader knows that "life is a competition and he always wants to be top." At university, Johnson became president of the prestigious Oxford Union after losing out the first time around. At Eton, he competed so ferociously that he broke his nose four times on the rugby pitch. Even as a young boy, Johnson wanted to be world king. He may be short of conviction but certainly not of ambition.

As Labour's Ken Livingstone observed after losing to Johnson twice in the London mayoral race, the Old Etonian knows how to make people feel good about themselves. In this election, Johnson's high energy, cheery, witty style of campaigning seems to be working even with some minorities. With his Diwali greetings, the prime minister has cannily wooed British Indians. To be fair, most British Indians swapped sympathies from Labour to the Conservatives in 2015 after Cameron's bromance with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. By showing up in a London temple with his partner clad in a sari, Johnson has British Indians singing Bollywood-style devotional ditties in Hindi.

Apart from the "Boris effect," Tories have a structural advantage that Cummings understands only too well. They have more money than other parties. They are the natural party of power in a class-divided society where people may resent but ultimately defer to their social superiors. Besides, the "leave" camp is less fragmented than the "remain." Nigel Farage's Brexit Party not contesting the 317 seats won by the Conservative Party in the 2017 election, and many members of Farage's party are gravitating toward the Tories. This gives Johnson's party a huge advantage in the UK's first-past-the-post system.

In this electoral system, if there are five candidates who win 36%, 30%, 18%, 10% and 6% of the vote in any constituency, the one who wins the most votes — i.e., 36% in this example — becomes MP. Unlike proportional representation, the seats in Parliament are not divided among different parties in accordance with the national percentage of the votes they receive. The party that wins the most seats governs and the Tories are in poll position. The wily cavalier fox seems set to beat the naive roundhead hedgehog, "get Brexit done" and inaugurate a new era in British politics.

\***Atul Singh** is the Founder, CEO and Editor-in-Chief of Fair Observer.

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## The End of Liberal Britain?

Al Ghaff

December 11, 2019

### Is this election marking the end of liberal Britain in the age of extremes?

This UK general election campaign has been an emotional roller coaster for the Liberal Democrats. In fact, 2019 has been a massively emotional year for the party, and if polls or the betting market are anything to go by, it promises to be even more emotional — perhaps painful — on December 13.

Less than three months ago, the Liberal Democrats were riding high in the polls when they gathered in Bournemouth for the party's autumn conference. They were buoyed by their performance in both the local and the European elections earlier in the year, in addition to defections of the likes of Chuka Umunna and Sam Gyimah from Labour and the Conservatives, respectively. The latter of the two was introduced on stage at the conference to the loud cheers of the party faithful.

#### After Brexit

It appears that against this backdrop, the Lib Dems devised a general election strategy based on two pillars of out-remaining all “remainers” and running a presidential-like campaign aimed at contrasting the difference between Jo Swinson — a young mother of two from an ordinary background — with other main party leaders, all of whom are older men from privileged backgrounds.

Against this backdrop, senior party strategists briefed activists, donors, candidates and the media on the Liberal Democrats' chances of securing a minimum of 80 seats in the event of a general election. Some even talked up the idea of the Lib Dems competing for 200 seats across the country. But fortunes change quickly during election campaigns. With the benefit of hindsight, one might be able to point out that the Liberal

Democrats did a dismal job of managing expectations, both internally and externally.

Critics have argued that the party's central electoral offer of revoking Article 50 and the PR campaign around Swinson were both ill-advised and poorly executed. Both were dropped mid-way through the election campaign, as the Liberal Democrats calibrated their message and concentrated on stopping Brexit and preventing Boris Johnson from gaining a majority.

This neatly brings us to the key question of this article: Is this election marking the end of liberal Britain in the age of extremes? The other version of this question, which points to the immediate urgency of this election, is the one which I have heard on the doorsteps over the past few weeks: What do the Lib Dems stand for beyond wanting to stop Brexit?

The response from the Lib Dems is clear: This election is first about stopping Brexit. But they also have a liberal vision that is firmly progressive and egalitarian, and marks their departure from “The Orange Book” orthodoxy that ruled the party during Nick Clegg's leadership.

#### A Case for Liberal Britain

It's fair to say that the Lib Dem manifesto is the most sensible of all the main political parties and has been praised by many across the board. The Resolution Foundation — an independent think tank focused on improving the standard of living of low and middle-income families — had stated that the Lib Dem “plans are the most progressive, the plans that will help the poorest people the most.” The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies had declared the Liberal Democrats as the only party with “economically credible” manifesto.

The Economist — the bastion of establishment neoliberals — had endorsed the Liberal Democrats as the best choice ahead of Thursday's election. These endorsements make the Liberal Democrats the sensible political actors in the turbulent and divided world of British politics and further highlights the

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challenges faced by the Lib Dems and Jo Swinson in making liberalism a permanent fixture of the British political scene.

It is now clear that there's no substantial market for the center-right liberalism mainly advocated by "The Orange Book" liberals who thrived under the leadership of Nick Clegg. In fact, every major study indicates that only an egalitarian version of liberalism can bring about prosperity for the Liberal Democrats and make them a permanent presence on the British political scene once again.

The Liberal Democrat manifesto for this election is underpinned by the principles of egalitarian liberalism. This will be a long and challenging journey for the Liberal Democrats, but it's their only path for breaking out of the existential threats that they've been dealing with for the past few years.

On the eve of the election, all indications point to a Conservative majority, but it's still perfectly plausible that the electorate might vote in a hung Parliament. If that were to occur, the Liberal Democrats might be able to stop Brexit in conjunction with other political parties, but that entirely depends on how many seats the party is able to secure on December 12.

This general election is most certainly one of the most consequential in recent history. A majority for the Conservative Party will strengthen the case for a hard Brexit and will see the United Kingdom heading out of the EU with major consequences for the union as there will be restlessness in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Such an outcome will also mark the end of liberal Britain.

But anything other than a Tory majority leaves the door open for the possibility of a softer Brexit or even remaining in the European Union via another referendum.

\***Al Ghaff** is the Liberal Democrats' former head of membership and fundraising.

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## Can Anything Unite the United Kingdom?

Peter Isackson

December 11, 2019

**Since 2016, the UK has found itself in a rivalry with the ineffable Donald Trump to see who could produce the most melodrama to dominate the political news cycle in the West.**

**F**or all its complexity, everyone understands what the US is. But what is the United Kingdom? Most people around the world have never quite understood what geographical and political unity is referred to in its name. Nor do they understand the question of where its boundaries are located.

The debate about the Irish backstop means that the British themselves are now unsure about the answer to that question. Even more mysterious to non-Brits is the question of how a declared "constitutional monarchy" with a high-profile royal family is governed. Many who wonder about what is united in the United Kingdom also ask themselves the question: What is great about Great Britain? The nation is on the fringes of Europe and about to drift out to sea, guided by its new and as yet unelected navigator, Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Can it really be called both great and united?

Never has the official name of a nation contained a more misleading description of its reality. It's true that every so often — thanks to the mysterious and anonymous Electoral College that, in recent years, elected two luminous US presidents, George W. Bush and Donald Trump, who actually lost the popular vote — the world is reminded that the 50 states of the US have, from the point of view of pure democracy, never been formally united. But no one inside or outside the US entertains any doubts about the unified power and universal purpose of the nation, however chaotic its leadership and however contradictory its policies.



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## **The Crisis of Cultural and Political Authority**

In contrast, the UK clearly lost both its sense of power and unique purpose with the dissolution of the British Empire following World War II. It has been struggling to find it ever since. After a decade of “angry young men” who appeared to be lost souls, The Beatles, Carnaby Street and Monty Python brought what was once remembered as “Merry England” back to life in terms of cultural impact in the second half of the 1960s.

In the 1980s, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, embracing the sobriquet of the “Iron Lady,” profiting from the windfall of North Sea oil, endowed the nation with a form of ideological leadership that helped define the belief system of late 20th-century globalized capitalism.

But Thatcher couldn’t have done it alone. She thrived in the shadow of US President Ronald Reagan. Whereas she earned her stripes and achieved her glory thanks to the skirmish called the Falklands War, Reagan stepped up in front of the microphones and TV cameras to lead the war against an “evil empire.” Eventually (some people say) his policies defeated it because that empire imploded in 1989.

Thatcher nevertheless committed Britain to a position of relative strength in the expanding European Union largely because of her belief in the commercial value of the European single market. She never believed in the EU as a political entity. For a while, though, she felt there was a real possibility of achieving “Thatcherism on a European scale.” The ambiguity of her attitude set the stage for the drama of Brexit that would unfold under David Cameron’s premiership a quarter of a century after her departure from politics.

Following Thatcher by a decade, Tony Blair reconstructed Labour partly in Thatcher’s image, profiting from the renewed prestige the Iron Lady had earned for the nation. Just as Thatcher’s authority depended on her game of mirrors with Reagan in the White House, Blair prospered by becoming the accomplice of Bill Clinton and

then, slightly less comprehensibly, George W. Bush. In contrast with other prime ministers, both Thatcher and Blair excelled at rhetorical leadership in the absence of global political power.

## **The Omelet and the Egg**

Now, after nearly four years of Brexit melodrama, the lingering divide over “remain” versus “leave” has produced and prolonged an existential debate around the identity of a kingdom that is manifestly no longer united. To complicate things further, after the seemingly never-ending cliffhanger of Theresa May’s negotiated EU withdrawal agreement, the nation is now in the throes of preparing for a general election on December 12 in the hope of achieving some form of closure. Unlike the straightforward electoral battles of the past, this campaign puts on full display the visible, profound disunity of the two dominant parties, the Conservatives and Labour. Divided by Brexit, the internal wrangling of the parties has significantly contributed to the general, rudderless disunity of the nation.

The two parties are not only divided between “remain” and “leave,” but the “leavers” themselves, especially among the Tories, are divided over a hard and soft Brexit. As if that wasn’t enough, they are further divided over the personalities of their two leaders: Boris Johnson — an ambitious, mendacious and narcissistic upstart — and Jeremy Corbyn, apparently too puritanically socialist for the taste of some in his party (especially the Blairite loyalists who truly believe in the merits of capitalism).

Then there are the parties that actually know what they want — the Liberal Democrats, on one side, and the Brexit Party, on the other. But even those who agree with their relatively simple electoral credo (“remain” for the Lib Dems and “leave” for the Brexit Party) appear, according to recent polls, to be drifting away from parties that have no chance of governing and even less of bridging the growing divide if called upon to govern.

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Adding to the confusion is the increasingly doubtful status of Northern Ireland and Scotland within a future version of the unified kingdom. In Johnson's new "acceptable" draft of a withdrawal treaty from the EU, Northern Ireland will effectively remain within the European customs and tariffs zone while remaining politically "united" with the UK government in London. At least during a period of transitioning to something else, it will retain a soft border with the Republic of Ireland and acquire a hard border with its own nation.

It required great British ingenuity to come up with that solution, much more than Lewis Carroll's seven maids with seven mops could have done when planning to clear the sand from a beach. At the same time, Scotland — a country but not a nation — whose population voted to remain within the EU, will most likely hold a new referendum for independence, with the ambition of having its own place in Europe once the government in Westminster finalizes Brexit. That will give new life to Hadrian's Wall, possibly provoking a fit of jealousy on the part of Donald Trump who could well end up accusing the Roman emperor of stealing his ideas.

### **Can Gravity Restore Its Dissipating Force?**

In short, the picture of the nation that emerges is that of a complex series of powerful centrifugal forces pushing away from the unified center, with no gravitational force to pull any of the elements back together. Unless, of course, we are to believe that the magnetic personality of Prime Minister Johnson can somehow provide that missing gravitational force. If toward the end of the 17th century the Englishman Isaac Newton could offer the world gravity — until then an unknown concept — a modern Englishman with a strong sense of mission, a charismatic personality and an unkempt mop of blond hair that demonstrates the ability to defy gravity might also find the resources to make it work for the political benefit of his people.

Until recently, the polls seemed to point to this hypothesis. If Johnson were to be elected with the

resounding majority that some early polls indicated (366 seats to Labour's 199), perhaps the prime minister would find himself in a position of allowing him to play the dominant role he has so long coveted. He may even be dreaming that, with the requisite amount of power and influence, with the dissociation of the union, he could envisage abolishing the anachronistic name of the United Kingdom and calling it, say, "Johnsonia."

And because even a megalomaniac like Johnson would quickly realize that what's left of the formerly united kingdom could hardly survive on its own after definitively cutting its ties with Europe, eventually the prime minister would have the option of applying for Johnsonia to become the 51st state of the "United States of Trumplandia," which some predict will be the fate of the US if President Trump wins a second term in 2020.

The absurdity of the reflections in the preceding paragraph serves only to demonstrate the degraded state of democracy today. The idea that impetuous, inveterate liars — including Trump, Johnson, Rodrigo Duterte and Jair Bolsonaro — have discovered the secret to winning elections in populous nations that play a significant role in geopolitics tells us something about the health of democratic institutions today. If democracy is only about who can mobilize the means to win elections and referendums, then it's time to admit that democracy isn't just imperfect but, in its current form, it has become perverse.

Democracy has never sat comfortably with an empire or even a monarchy, but until recently it has managed to maintain a certain stability. Today's crisis in the UK, which illustrates the general problem, boils down to two contrasting interpretations of the workings of democracy: in the words of Blair, commenting on today's crisis, the conflict lies "between a parliamentary democracy and direct democracy."

The parliamentary model has failed to produce any solution. The 2016 Brexit referendum — an example of direct democracy — reached a simple decision without defining the terms of the choice given to the people. Whereas the meaning of

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“remain” didn’t require a great deal of thought, no one had any clear or even unclear idea of the meaning of “leave.” What the British population has now discovered is that no authority exists who can provide that meaning. This means that, without a second Brexit referendum, in which the meaning will be seriously debated and presumably understood by the voting population, chaos is likely to ensue for a long time to come. Even if there is a second referendum, nothing ensures that chaos will not ensue anyway.

### **Lewis Carroll’s Insight into the UK**

The suspense of the last four years has for many people become addictive. Britain has assumed a new identity of being permanently on the brink. On the brink of what? Brexit? A newly-motivated Europe that will welcome back its straying member? Being gobbled up by the US? Forging a new empire to take over from a declining Pax Americana?

Perhaps Lewis Carroll, whose poem cited above, the “Walrus and the Carpenter,” from his book, “Alice in Wonderland,” can offer some insight. Carroll’s poem offers an oblique critique of the methods of empire in the second half of 19th-century Britain. Although commentators on the poem often insist that it’s just nonsensical entertainment for children, Carroll offers hints right from the start that he is thinking all along about the British geopolitical system and has identified features that are present even today, more than 150 years after its publication.

The poem begins with an implicit reference to a cliché that had been circulating for decades before Carroll wrote his poem, “The sun never sets on the British empire”:

*“The sun was shining on the sea,  
Shining with all his might:  
He did his very best to make  
The billows smooth and bright –  
And this was odd, because it was  
The middle of the night.”*

The first line reminds us that Britain “rules the waves,” but the comic idea of daring to shine in the middle of the night points directly to the cliché about the sun never setting on the empire, something the moon justifiably objects to in the following stanza (the sun “had got no business to be there after the day was done”).

The story of the poem concerns a pair of Englishmen who stroll on the beach and then befriend a bed of oysters. They incite the mollusks to exert themselves in a walk upon the beach before mobilizing their superior knowledge of “ships and sails and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings” to lull their victims into a state in which they have no choice but to become the two Englishmen’s lunch.

The Walrus appears as the overfed, self-satisfied pontificating and profiteering Englishman wandering upon foreign shores who believes his command of culture gives him the power to manage the world, physically, economically and socially. Even before discovering the oysters on the beach, the two Englishmen speculate on the methods that would allow them to engage in the meritorious exercise of clearing the beach of its sand, presumably to make the environment resemble his idea of an organized, civilized world: “‘If this were only cleared away,’ They said, ‘it would be grand!’”

The carpenter plays the role of the engineer or colonial administrator who will put the Walrus’ plans into action. He has no personality, only technical savvy and theoretical knowledge of what’s possible and not possible. He is a realist who employs materialistic logic to solve problems. To the Walrus’ wish for a solution to clear the beach involving maids with mops, he replies, “I doubt it,” showing he recognizes the gap between the conquering Englishman’s ambition to reorganize the world and the more resistant physical reality of that world. The fact that the Carpenter sheds a bitter tear tells us two things: that, despite his realism, he identifies with the Walrus’ imperial logic and he regrets his powerlessness to change some features of the environment according to their desire.

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The story of the oysters, which begins immediately after the failed plan to clear the beach, provides a perfect example of the psychological methods employed by the roving agents of the British Empire. They first establish contact with the rulers of the societies they wish to reorganize and exploit for their own purposes. In this case, the eldest, wisest oyster suspects a foul motive and declines the offer of a “pleasant walk, a pleasant talk” on the beach. Four unwary younger oysters, ambitious to profit from the solicitations of the visitors turn out to be all “eager for the treat.” These are the unsuspecting locals the British can appeal to for their profit, which in this case takes the form of eating them for their lunch after a leisurely chat.

Naturally, leaders of traditional societies tend to resist the blandishments of the European masters who came to enlighten them by sharing with them their advanced wisdom. The Englishmen state that they can only accompany four at a time. But when the eldest oyster resists, they extend their offer to the masses, seeking to identify those who are “eager” to take advantage of what appears to be the generous offer of the rich invader. It’s the world of Gunga Din, where the natives can hope to be gainfully employed by the tenors of an advanced civilization.

When he sees the potential for profit, the Walrus has no objection to breaking his own rule of “only four” and accepting the hordes of oysters who will follow the two men to their feasting place, a rock that’s “conveniently low.”

The rest of the story demonstrates another Victorian idea, a colonial variation on Charles Darwin’s scientific notion of “survival of the fittest.” The Walrus and the Carpenter must eat to survive. The “convenience” of stuffing themselves on the oysters who had trotted after them was too great to forgo.

In short, the poem offers a comically absurd view of British colonialism. It reflects on the discourse and strategies of seduction that include pseudo-scientific expertise that convey the aura of superiority of the British over the natives. From the practical work of clearing beaches to

speculating on the attributes of pigs, the British represent the finesse of evolved civilization.

The final outcome — devouring the oysters — reflects the fundamental racism that accompanies the British imperial project. The two interlopers initially treat the oysters as if they were equals, proposing to cooperate, share and collaborate. The Walrus and Carpenter control the conversation and propose the topics. They include production and management of resources (cabbages), government (kings), industrial production (shoes, ships, sealing wax) and intellectual matters in the form of abstract scientific research and logical thinking (“why the sea is boiling hot ... whether pigs have wings”). The Walrus and Carpenter set the agenda and never consider listening to the oysters.

The oysters are literally exploited to the death, in this case by being eaten. The British had no qualms about devouring the lives of the populations they conquered, not by eating them but by manipulating them in all sorts of “scientific” ways as they demonstrated their skills at social engineering.

The final irony concerns the emotional hypocrisy with which imperial conquest was carried out. Just before eating them, the Walrus takes the opportunity to reaffirm his public commitment to the human values of civilization. He regrets his act at the very moment of completing it: “It seems a shame,’ the Walrus said, ‘To play them such a trick.’” He adds, “I weep for you... I deeply sympathize” and immediately stuffs himself on the delicious oysters.

After the recital of the poem, the discussion of its impact and meaning between Alice and the Tweedle twins brings us forward to the world of today’s politics:

“‘I like the Walrus best,’ said Alice: ‘because you see he was a little sorry for the poor oysters.’ He ate more than the Carpenter, though,’ said Tweedledee. ‘You see he held his handkerchief in front, so that the Carpenter couldn’t count how many he took: contrariwise.’”

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‘That was mean!’ Alice said indignantly. ‘Then I like the Carpenter best — if he didn’t eat so many as the Walrus.’ ‘But he ate as many as he could get,’ said Tweedledum.

This was a puzzler. After a pause, Alice began, ‘Well! They were both very unpleasant characters.’”

Alice reacts in the way the British population would have been expected to at the time. She tries to decide whom she likes best between the Walrus and the Carpenter. A choice similar to “leave” or “remain” or between Johnson and Corbyn.

### Applying Carroll’s Wisdom Today

The moral problem (Carroll calls it the “puzzler”) is reduced to a personality contest, meaning that any reflection on how and why the observed injustice occurred — its systemic causes — is banished. Carroll presents his implicit criticism of a political system that offers no other choices than between two “unpleasant characters.” This observation is ironically underlined by the fact that this dialogue is led by none other than the utterly interchangeable Tweedle twins.

Which brings us back to today’s politics leading up to the UK general election. Just like Alice, British voters must make what is essentially a new binary choice between the portly Walrus (Johnson?), who tells lies and takes as much as possible for himself, and the lithe Carpenter (Corbyn?), who refuses to comment on the crucial issue the Walrus mentions — the shame of playing “them such a trick” expresses: “The Carpenter said nothing but ‘The butter’s spread too thick!’”

To some extent, the parties today reflect the situation Lewis Carroll described a century and a half ago. Inspired by the lessons from the poem, Labour would be wise to raise the moral question Alice struggled with. They might suggest voters ask themselves: Which of the two characters do they think would be more inclined to lie about his intentions and eat as many oysters as possible?

Contrariwise (as Carroll would say), the question Tories may hope the voters will seek an

answer to would be this: Which of the two characters has the greater ability to successfully plan and execute the “trick” that will reduce the population of unwanted oysters on the beach?

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## The Extremes Win Today’s Elections

Hans-Georg Betz

December 13, 2019

**The contemporary political landscape is characterized by extreme polarization, and that’s not only in Britain or the US.**

**T**he outcome of the election in the United Kingdom is just one more piece of evidence of a pernicious trend that has increasingly infested liberal democracies — extreme polarization. While it will take some time to get a complete picture of what happened, one thing is clear: The result of the election has revealed the existence of a gigantic chasm — a political Grand Canyon, as it were — between England and Scotland, on the essential issue that informed this election.

Representative democracy, or so political theorists have told us, is all about making compromises. Even in majoritarian systems such as the UK, politics is not supposed to be a game of “winner takes all.” Reality is — as the result of the Brexit referendum made glaringly obvious — that today there are as many voters for as there are voters against on most important issues. Politics, as Max Weber famously put it, is “a strong and slow boring of hard boards,” hardly conducive to the likes of Donald Trump or, for that matter, Boris Johnson.

Yet today, that lesson seems to have fallen to the wayside. The contemporary political landscape is characterized by extreme polarization — and not only in Britain or the US.

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## Unreasonable People

In its most rudimentary form, extreme polarization means that even reasonable people have nothing to say to each other. Political polarization divides families and separates close relatives who, for instance during Thanksgiving dinner, desperately avoid mentioning politics — in line with the famous “Fawlty Towers” quip, “Don’t mention the war!” — in order to avoid that dinner ending in a fist fight. Knowing, for instance, that somebody voted for Trump, more often than not has meant the end of friendships and even communication among relatives.

A number of secular developments account for today’s polarization. Not all of them are grounded in politics. In fact, most of them are not. Yet — and this is the problem — they unfortunately find their expression and release most noticeably in politics. Brexit is but one, albeit prominent, example. There is no compromise between those who consider Britain’s exit from the EU the solution to everything that has gone wrong in the country and those, like the Scots, who consider Brexit a disaster.

The same holds true for Donald Trump. He might be somewhat unhinged, and he might be competing for the honor of being the worst president in recent American history (suddenly George W. Bush doesn’t look that bad any more). But for diehard Trumpistas — and they still exist, many of them evangelicals who lack any sense of irony — “The Donald” continues to be the man of providence, like Dan Ackroyd and John Belushi a on mission from God, to snatch America’s WASP-cum-WC (C stands for Catholicism) cultural supremacy from the clutches of secular, multicultural, “liberal” perversion.

It would be convenient to attribute extreme polarization to the nefarious influence of radical right-wing populism in Western democracies. To be sure, radical right-wing populist politicians such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Nigel Farage and Santiago Abascal (the strongman of Spain’s VOX) have made it their political

business to stoke the fire of anger, fear and resentment. In reality, however, their appeal at the polls is but a reflection/expression of secular developments that fuel polarization. In order to understand what is happening today, it might be useful to take a brief trip down memory lane.

## The Second Coming

In the 1890s, American populists came together and formed a political party, which at one point had the potential to seriously threaten the two major parties. This was a period in American history characterized by enormous turmoil — economic, social, cultural. Mark Twain called it the “Gilded Age,” a moniker which entered the pages of American historiography. The age, however, was only gilded for a small minority. For most Americans at the time, the reality looked quite different.

The populists “hit the nerve of the time” when, in their party manifesto, they charged that “The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of those, in turn, despise the republic and endanger liberty. From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes — tramps and millionaires.” The analysis was a tad exaggerated. But it reflected a reality: the inexorable advance of blatant inequality across American society.

What we are witnessing today is the second coming of the Gilded Age, not only in the United States, but also in Europe. Inequality has escalated, even in countries such as Sweden, once touted as the paragon of social equality and harmony. Even in Switzerland the times have changed, with Teslas replacing Maseratis and Ferraris as the latest status symbols of the rich and famous.

Income, and particularly wealth, inequality might be the most visible cause of polarization. Yet it is certainly not the most significant one. Much more significant are regional disparities, particularly the growing gap between metropolitan cities and rural areas. In the United

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States, according to a report by the McKinsey consulting firm, by 2030, 25 cities will account for a whopping 60% of job growth, while rural areas for little more than 1%. As an Economist report recently put it, growing “regional disparities are built into the mechanisms of globalisation” leading to the “marginalisation” of a growing number of regions and increased geographical polarization in advanced capitalist countries.

Most importantly, geographical concentration has resulted is what another McKinsey report has characterized as the emergence of “superstar cities” — urban conglomerates such as London, Paris, Munich, New York, Mumbai and Shenzhen. What they have in common is that they are hubs of global finance, business, technology and innovation. While the top 50 superstar cities account for only 8% of the global population, they account for 45% percent of headquarters of firms with more than \$1 billion in annual revenue.

### **Payback Day**

What metropolitan areas also share is a cosmopolitan outlook, an openness to the world. Here we have the second major cause of polarization — what sociologists have identified as a rapidly growing cosmopolitan/parochial cleavage. Cosmopolitans promote universal values, such as global human rights, multiculturalism and global/transborder solidarity. Against that, parochialists defend the integrity of local identity, cultural autonomy, (national) sovereignty and the “right to difference.”

Cosmopolitanism is the ethical outlook of a highly educated, highly mobile new middle class concentrated in big cities and university towns, such as London and Oxford. Hardly surprising, majorities in both cities voted against Brexit and, one would expect, against the Conservatives in yesterday’s election. Against that, “Johnson land” consists largely of what Andrés Rodríguez-Pose recently called “the places that don’t matter” —

Britain’s equivalent to America’s “fly-over country.”

The outcome of the December 12 election was above all owed to the electoral backlash of the by now famous “Workington Man” — a symbol that stands for ordinary working-class voters, white, male, with little “cultural capital” and particularly hard hit by deindustrialization and globalization. Like their American counterparts who voted for Trump, they are desperate, without illusions and out for revenge. A couple of decades ago, Austrian political scientists coined to phrase “Wahltag ist Zahhtag” — election day is payback day — in order to explain the dramatic gains of Jorg Haider’s Freedom Party in the 1990s. If there ever was a Zahhtag, it was yesterday in Great Britain.

Cosmopolitanism and parochialism are not necessarily incompatible. Unfortunately, political entrepreneurs have generally found it easier to bank on one or the other rather than seeking a middle ground. The victim of this development has been the moderate center. The dismal showing by the Liberal Democrats in this election is paradigmatic. One of the central doctrines in political science used to be that elections are won in the center, a notion shattered by the election of Donald Trump.

Today, it seems elections are won on the margins, if only because in recent decades the margins have dramatically grown, particularly on the nativist right. On the margins, electoral choice is primarily driven by emotions: anxiety, anger and resentment, and by strong sentiments of revenge. Ironically, in these times, the vote is one of the few means for those who feel ignored and abandoned by the political establishment to express their rage. This explains Labour’s dramatic losses in once safe constituencies. In the age of extreme polarization, betrayal — real or imagined — is unforgivable.

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## Why Liars Win Elections

Peter Isackson

December 16, 2019

**The voting populations of our evolved democracies have apparently learned to accept, and even expect, that their governments lie.**

**T**he vast majority of voters got it right. They knew that the December 12 election could only produce a meaningless result, and they acted in consequence. Although unambiguous, the result answers no questions, but opens up new ones. To anyone with an understanding of historical processes, the idea that this election could in any way help define the nation's future made no sense. After such a long wait to solve an obviously unsolvable problem, the people opted for the one uncertain choice that might point toward a resolution when all other choices appeared to lead nowhere. History now awaits the next stage in the nation's agonizingly uncertain future.

Whether we apply these observations to Thursday's election in Algeria or the United Kingdom, the previous paragraph accurately describes a wider moment of history that now concerns every democracy across the globe. Both of Thursday's elections underline, in contrasting ways, the unfortunately growing meaninglessness of the ritual of democratic elections. In Algeria, a majority of the people abstained from voting. In the UK a near majority (45%) of the people abstained from any form of critical thinking, but voted anyway.

This time, 60% of Algerians qualified electors voted not to vote. Their message was clear. After decades of arbitrary rule, and nearly a year of repeated peaceful protests, they are still waiting for democracy. Not just an election, but democracy. On the same day, the UK went through a similar ritual and, in a very different way, made a similar point. The British, poised between the comically arbitrary attempt at direct

democracy — the 2016 EU referendum — and the constantly exasperating and inconclusive exercise of parliamentary democracy under Prime Minister Theresa May, the public has woken up from its latest election and is left, more than ever before, wondering how democracy works and what it is even useful for.

### Renunciation of Critical Thinking

While it might sound severe to claim that British voters massively abandoned critical thinking, the easily verifiable fact that the sitting prime minister who led his party to a resounding victory is someone who lives and breathes by slogans and easily detectable lies, points to a high level of either gullibility or misplaced confidence among the voters. Their capacity to place their confidence in a new form of political boldness, with brutally strong ideas but no sense of their consequences, echoes the experience of the United States for the past three years.

It literally entails the renunciation of critical thinking, or even the notion of accountability. It relies on the hope that decisions whose consequences are too complicated to think about will be made without further ado by a resolute leader, piercing the abscess of prolonged uncertainty. And while it might sound like trivial carping to call inconsequential what many have identified a "a historic election," it's important to remember that "inconsequential" can have two meanings. The first, "devoid of any kind of consequence," obviously does not apply.

There will definitely be dramatic consequences stemming from Boris Johnson's victory. Nicola Sturgeon, leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) has made it clear that Scotland may be on the verge of a prolonged struggle — possibly an internal cold war — with the nation of England that has decided to secede from the union (with Europe) that Scotland has voted to belong to. At the same time, Johnson appears ready to put Northern Ireland in limbo, unified economically with Europe and politically with a post-Brexit tenuously-united kingdom.



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The second meaning of “inconsequential” — “incapable of resolving uncertainty” — does seem to apply, unless by some miraculous feat of persuasion Boris Johnson manages to unite, not just the kingdoms that make up the UK, but also the parties, the businesses and the nebulous middle class/working class who still have no clear idea of what it means to “leave,” even if that is their clear preference.

In his victory speech, Johnson was adamant. Yes, leave they will. Brexit will be done. The refrain has practically turned into an echo of “Thy will be done.” Whether that will is the deity’s, the people’s or Johnson’s doesn’t seem to matter since — for all the charming humility of the prime minister’s joyous victory speech (once all the smashing was done) — Johnson appears to see all three as total convergent.

### **Democracy’s Romance with Liars**

Once upon a time, in modern civilization there existed a grand idea that wasn’t always easy to apply but always worth trying. Innovative political thinkers gave it the label — “democracy.” After surveying the damage from numerous recent elections, those same thinkers may have to admit that today the label still exists, but the grand idea seems to have been swallowed up in a whirlwind of chaotic electoral rituals and processes.

For the past three years, the British have started asking themselves some serious questions. Was the 2016 referendum an election, as Johnson and even Theresa May have assiduously asserted? They claimed that by that vote the electorate had validated a program for government summarized in a single word, “leave”? Now, with slightly more reason, Johnson seems to be proclaiming that this week’s election was a referendum. He made it clear that there will be no second referendum precisely because that is the meaning he attributes to this vote.

Just as, twice in less than 20 years, the United States has achieved an apocalyptic confusion at the core of its own democracy by denying the

election of the leader the majority voted for — thanks to the antiquated and unrepresentative relic called the Electoral College — the British parliamentary system has evolved to the point of turning democracy into a highly uncertain system for founding and buttressing a government’s authority. Elections have become a vacuous popularity contest in which policies are now compressed into slogans and victory promised to the personality that best succeeds in embodying a slogan.

Until recently, the idea of democracy prevalent in the West contained two fundamental premises that most people accepted and adhered to. The first affirmed that it was a system designed to allow people to compose and orientate their governments through elections in which motivated citizens had the choice of standing as representatives of their community and the right, if not the civic duty, to vote for the brave citizens who made that choice. The second assumed that people who ran for office could be trusted with the truth and that they could be expected to demand the truth to ensure and sanction capable government.

This formulation of the ideal failed to anticipate the creation of a political class. It supposed that those who were elected retained their identity as citizens while adding to that basic political identity a specific mission of representation through their participation in the governance of the state. Abraham Lincoln called it government of the people, by the people and for the people.

The structure of the modern state in democracies has undermined that ideal to the extent that it has fostered the creation of a political elite closely connected with numerous interests that escape any form of democratic control. It means that the people are on one side, the political class in the middle, and hidden on the other side is an oligarchic class with which the political class is invited (but not obliged) to identify.

Lucid observers will notice degrees of identification with the oligarchy between

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different politicians. Personalities such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders seem closer to the original ideal to the extent that they appear to be less attracted to identify with the oligarchic class. There can be little doubt about the parties either a Johnson or a Trump are ready to identify with.

The modern economy has found a myriad of ways of undermining the second premise of democracy: the importance and the stability of truth. In a culture that has been conditioned by the ideology of capitalism in which every individual pursues his or her own self-interest, persuasion — originally straddling logic and rhetoric — becomes a primary rather than secondary function of transactional behavior. The exercise of persuasion then fatally evolves toward the simplicity of the slogan.

Boris Johnson's victory speech perfectly illustrates the success of this subversion of democracy. At various points, he prompted his audience to chant his electoral slogans and concluded by wittily forcing a repetition of his all-purpose, single dominant slogan: "Get Brexit done."

### **The Walrus Has Defeated the Carpenter**

In the run up to the election, this author pointed to the uncanny political prescience of 19th-century author of "Alice in Wonderland." In his delightfully absurd poem, "The Walrus and the Carpenter," whether consciously or not, Lewis Carroll devised his own oblique way of describing the foreign policy of the British Empire. He also seized on the occasion to compare two stereotypes of British politicians.

Were he alive today, Carroll would have recognized in Boris Johnson as conforming to his type represented by the bombastic Walrus. Johnson even walks like a lumbering Walrus. Evoking the future glory of an independent Britain that in one sweeping motion has severed its ties to the continent and is on course to provide a new model of leadership for the world, Johnson reminds us of the Walrus's grand vision of sweeping away all the sand from the beach,

even if it meant employing seven maids with seven mops.

With Johnson camped in the role of the Walrus, Jeremy Corbyn correspondingly slipped into the part of the Carpenter, who, having heard the Walrus's project to clear the sand, curtly expressed his doubt, about both "remain" and "leave." The Carpenter preferred focusing on pragmatic matters such as making sure there were enough slices of bread.

The Walrus excelled at lying and hypocritically declaring his sympathy even with the oyster he was feasting on. In 21st-century democracies — whether it's the US, the UK, India, Brazil or Hungary — those who lie the most and the hardest tend to win elections. It's the age of the Walrus. Johnson was a far better liar than any other candidate. He made Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage seem too hopelessly sincere and straightforward. (Farage has since declared his commitment to working for an even more powerful liar: Donald Trump).

In contrast with the ever-serious and visibly vindictive Trump, Johnson possesses a wonderfully British style of lying. Trump's style is perfectly adapted to US culture but is clearly out of place in Britain, where he is universally despised. Conversely, Americans would not buy into Johnson's style of lying the way they have bought into Trump's.

Americans can dare to call Johnson's demeanor a "silly style," not nearly assertive and businesslike enough for American tastes. The Brits prefer to call Johnson's style "eccentric" and "shambolic," even "clownish," which — in the nation that gave the world Benny Hill, "The Goon Show" and "Monty Python" — have long been deemed not just acceptable but even endearing as the attributes of a benevolent ruling class that has a capacity for being entertaining. Observant commentators have noticed how carefully Johnson cultivates this style — it's what permits him to lie as repetitively and brazenly as he does. People relate his lies to the forgivable shortcomings of an erudite bumbler.

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## **The Power of Lies**

Sifting through the statistics of the election, political analyst Will Jennings points out that “education is a strong predictor of changes in the Conservative and Labour vote.” He calls it “the new dividing line of British politics.” The trend in this election showed a correlation between the percentage of graduates in any constituency and votes for or against the Tories. It now appears that the higher the level of education, the more likely it is that voters will be critical of simplistic reasoning and slogan-based policymaking.

Johnson may have studied Trump’s success in the US and adapted his style and the degree of his mendacity to British demographics. Trump had his worst results along the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard where education levels were higher and where the prestige of education remained a significant feature of the local culture.

But he eked out his victory, not only in rural areas where education levels are traditionally lower, but especially in the declining industrial areas where many people can no longer afford education. These less educated populations tend to be more responsive to slogans and populist rhetoric. The gutting of British industry made conditions more favorable to politicians capable of reducing their thinking to the level of oft-repeated slogans.

The current success of outright liars represents a major threat not just to democracy but to the future of even the idea of democracy. Richard Nixon resigned and Bill Clinton was impeached not over their irresponsible acts or eventual crimes, but over the fact that they lied. British politicians have traditionally feared being caught out for lying and for centuries have cultivated the art of rhetorically hedging their rhetoric to disguise their lies. Hiding and distorting the truth have always been key components of the art of political rhetoric, but outright lying has in the past been treated as shameful and disqualifying.

As Bob Dylan famously sang, though not to make the same point, “the times they are a-changin’.” Lying has now achieved the prestigious status of an effective short-term

strategy. But its long-term consequences are likely to be disastrous for the survival of democracy.

## **Rule by Liars**

Just as murder led Macbeth to the throne, lying has led Johnson to obtaining a solid majority in Parliament. And just as Macbeth underestimated the struggle with his own conscience, Johnson may well have underestimated the likely blow-back from his lies, to say nothing of the obvious complications of Brexit and a cold war with Scotland.

The conquest of power through the force of lies creates more than ideological division among the population. As this general election demonstrates, it has started pitting the more educated against the less educated. This may be a part of a longer-term trend of the dumbing-down of education itself, whose value has increasingly been focused, throughout the Western world, not on its content or its contribution to national or local culture, but to its vocational end — the prospect of getting a job.

But the damage goes further. It implicitly divides the population into those who accept lies and those who are offended by lies. Even though the latter may be a minority, a regime that thrives on lies sends the sinister message that critical thinking will be suspect because it leads to useless complications and constitutes an obstacle to social harmony. It sets the stage for ever more arbitrary styles of governance.

At a deeper level, rule by liars repositions the question of trust that has always been essential to democracy: It uncouples trust from the criterion of truth. Instead the population places its trust, as Max Weber theorized more than a century ago, in the power and determination of a charismatic personality. However shambolic and eccentric Boris Johnson may seem, and however spontaneous Trump’s form of speaking without thinking appears to be, their avid embrace of lies means that the bond of trust on which democracy relies risks being irreparably broken.

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The very nearly simultaneous release by The Washington Post of the Afghanistan Papers — revealing how three administrations (Bush, Obama and Trump) have consistently lied about the costly and never-ending wars in the Middle East — provides another indication of the decline of democratic values and the eventual disappearance of the conditions in which democratic values can exist. The publication of 18 years of lies exposed for the first time to the light of day, available for anyone to read has, perhaps not surprisingly, produced no significant echo in the popular media — and this as the lies continue to this day.

The voting populations of our evolved democracies have apparently learned to accept, and even expect, that their governments lie. Worse, they seem to believe that lying is such a common feature of a government's activity that without it nothing would work.

On December 12, a majority of Algerians refused to vote because their government lies to them and refuses to listen. That same day, 45% of British voters voted to offer the reins of government to a man they unquestionably know is perfectly comfortable lying to them over and over again.

\***Peter Isackson** is the chief strategy officer at Fair Observer and the creator of the regular feature, The Daily Devil's Dictionary.

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## **Arise King Boris, Father of Brexit and Foe of Brussels**

Atul Singh

December 17, 2019

**The landslide Conservative victory will transform the UK, threaten the EU and influence the US significantly.**

**B**ritish Prime Minister Boris Johnson has given Jeremy Corbyn a good old-fashioned thumping. The Conservatives

won 365 seats out of 650 in Parliament, gaining 47. They smashed the “red wall” of solid Labour seats in northern England. The Johnson-led Conservatives achieved the highest vote swing since World War II. In a typical British irony, old mining towns reposed their trust in an Old Etonian over a dyed-in-wool socialist.

On December 10, this author took the view that the Tories would be back in power because they seemed to have the most loyal flock. That view has been vindicated resoundingly.

The Labour Party is in complete disarray. Corbyn has been weighed, measured and found wanting. While he has promised to step down, he has failed to resign unlike his predecessors. In defeat, a full-scale civil war has broken out in the Labour Party. In the words of Ian Murray, the only Labour MP from Scotland, “This party must listen and this party must respond or this party will die.”

### **From New Labour to the Left**

To be fair, Labour has problems that go beyond Corbyn. The New Labour that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown created lost its sheen with the Iraq War of 2003 and the global financial crisis of 2007-08. Both Blair and Brown were Margaret Thatcher's political children. One of them emulated her Falklands adventure by taking the UK into intervention in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Iraq. The other followed the Iron Lady's “Big Bang” reforms with “light touch” regulation of the City of London. Both Iraq and light touch ended up in disasters.

Many in the Labour Party were deeply uncomfortable with Blair's imperial militarism and Brown's financial capitalism. They saw both these leaders making a Faustian pact with Mephistopheles for the proverbial kiss with Helen. They were both seduced by power and reneged on principles that Labour once held dear. Once Brown lost in 2010, the old guard mounted a comeback. First, Ed Miliband beat his Blairite brother, David, to become the party leader. Then, Corbyn won the Labour leadership election in 2015, marking a major lurch to the left.

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Corbyn was an unlikely leader of the Labour Party. In the Blair and Brown years, Labour had turned staunchly European. Yet it is important to remember that Labour campaigned against joining the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1975 referendum. Thanks to the Maastricht Treaty, the EEC became the European Union in 1993. Corbyn was a part of that Labour campaign even as Thatcher and the Tories argued to join the EEC. It took Neil Kinnock to modernize Labour and turn it into a pro-European party.

Yet euroskeptic elements remained. Corbyn was one of them. Suspicions abound that he remains opposed to the EU and is a closet Brexiteer. Corbyn certainly did not campaign to “remain” in the European Union with much energy or enthusiasm in 2016. In the general election on December 12, 2019, his position on Brexit was a fudge that tried to reconcile the tension between Blairites who have sworn an oath of fealty to the EU and working-class supporters who voted for Brexit. Faced with the crystal clarity of Johnson’s message “get Brexit done,” Corbyn’s fudge melted spectacularly.

Corbyn’s authoritarian leadership style, lack of nimbleness and terrible public speaking ensured that he was not seen as prime ministerial material. Accusations of anti-Semitism dogged the Labour Party under his tenure. Corbyn’s front bench lacked both experience and talent. Even traditional Labour voters lost faith in their party’s leadership and switched sides to the once-hated Tories. Unless the Labour Party elects a charismatic leader who unifies warring factions and crafts a modern message, it will spend a decade or more in opposition.

### **The Rest of the Opposition**

The Liberal Democrats cast off with great hopes during the election. Unfortunately, their ship has rammed into the rocks. Young leader Jo Swinson lost her own seat and promptly resigned. She lacked the intellectual ballast or silver tongue to be a match for Johnson, and her claim to be a prime ministerial candidate smacked of hubris.

Swinson’s bet on opposing Brexit and reversing the result of the 2016 referendum did not cut ice with voters. The Liberal Democrats did split the vote and helped the Tories achieve victory. This led columnist Simon Jenkins to argue that the party is “an anachronistic political spoiler” that “should disband.” On current trends, the Liberal Democrats are destined to stay in the doldrums for the next few years.

This election was also notable for the reduced relevance of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party. The Conservatives no longer need the former in the House of Commons and have sucked oxygen from Farage’s mob. The DUP’s loss to unionists and republicans has long-term implications. A majority in Northern Ireland has voted for parties that favor union with Ireland, putting the unity of the UK at risk.

In fact, television programs and numerous pundits are pontificating about the break-up of the UK. The Scottish National Party (SNP) won 48 of the 59 seats in Scotland. If Johnson has the mandate in England, Nicola Sturgeon has the backing of Scotland. During the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the UK was part of the EU. During the Brexit referendum, Scots voted to remain in the EU. Sturgeon is making a credible argument that Scotland “cannot be imprisoned” in the UK “against its will.” She has sounded the clarion call for another independence referendum by declaring that “the will of the Scottish people cannot be ignored.” The union of England and Scotland of 1707 vintage is certainly at risk.

### **And the Tories?**

What is not at risk is the future of the Conservative Party. The natural party of power has reinvented itself yet again. Some members of Johnson’s team are bullish about life outside the EU. They are already plotting to attract the insurance market from Hong Kong to London as the Asian metropolis suffers from incessant protests that are making business onerous if not impossible. They want London to be a Singapore-

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style safe haven for capital from around the world unconstrained by EU rules.

Like Singapore, they want the UK to invest in public infrastructure, state schools and the National Health Service (NHS). Apart from a supply-side boost, there is a demand-side policy too. Brexit will enable Tories to ease pressure on public services and scarce resources by curbing immigration. Dominic Cummings, the Svengali figure in Johnson's team, is now the dominant intellectual force in British politics. After shifting politics to the right, he plans to shift economic policy to the left and steal Labour's clothes, leaving the opposition naked for the next election or two.

Andrew Sullivan, a former president of the Oxford Union who knew Johnson in those days, recently wrote an article on the prime minister's blundering brilliance. The Pied Piper has managed to "engage and co-opt rather than dismiss and demonize" the Brexit discontent. In a little-watched video, Cummings spoke about the strategy the Tories followed to do so. As per Johnson's strategist, the EU-project was "driving the growth of extremism" and Brexit will "drain the poison of a lot of political debates." All four of Cummings's grandparents served in World War II. For all his faults, this shadowy figure genuinely cares about schools, hospitals and the working class.

Johnson might be a cavalier but, as Sullivan observes, he can connect with people from other backgrounds. He was successful as mayor of London and won a second term in a city with a natural Labour majority. Unlike David Cameron and George Osborne, Johnson never believed in austerity and opposed "Kosovo-style social cleansing" of the poor in London. As prime minister, he is promising higher public spending and lower taxes while acting tough on crime, terrorism and immigration. In fact, Cummings and Johnson might be about to move the Tories and the UK away from its Thatcherite roots. If they do so successfully, the UK might have a good shot at staying united.

## **What Happens to the EU?**

Make no mistake, Johnson's emphatic victory is terrible news for the European Union. The eurozone economy is in trouble. It is experiencing anemic growth and high unemployment. Productivity is stubbornly refusing to rise. In fact, the contradictions of a single currency are threatening to derail the entire European project. There is a strong argument to be made that Greece and Germany should not have the same currency. They are far too different from one another. The same monetary policy for the two countries does both of them a disservice, exacerbating existing imbalances.

Even as the euro currency creates new tensions, the sovereign debt crisis is straining common bonds. The Europeans and the International Monetary Fund might have bailed out Greece with its economy a little over \$300 billion. Italy with its economy of about \$2 trillion and a debt-GDP ratio of more than 130% is too big for anyone to bail out. German taxpayers are going to balk at the bill.

Instead of honestly tackling its financial crisis, Europe has elected to take the "extend and pretend" approach of prolonging payment timetables and believing in the fiction that countries like Greece or Italy will pay back their debts. Instead, Europe has been practicing "socialism for the financial sector and austerity for everyone else." Naturally, this is causing resentment. In Italy, Matteo Salvini rose to power on the basis of public anger against Brussels.

Countries such as Poland and Hungary are also rocking the EU boat. Even in France and Germany, euroskeptic parties are on the rise. The democratic deficit in Brussels does not help. Neither does the red tape. While some European officials are outstanding, many are utterly inefficient if not corrupt. Brussels is simply too removed from Marseille or Munich and Europeans still do not feel an emotional connection with it.

If Johnson and Cummings pull off a successful Brexit, centrifugal tendencies in Europe will increase. Italy might join the UK in

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opting to leave the EU and so might other countries. If that happens, Johnson would be a modern-day Henry VIII. He would have taken back control from Brussels just as the portly 16-century king threw off the yoke of Rome. Brexit might seem like yet another case of British pluck, foresight and cunning.

Of course, Europeans could come together to form a closer union. A fiscal union might emerge to complement its monetary union. Structural reforms might resolve its contradictions. Yet that seems unlikely. In the short run at least, the EU will suffer.

### **What Happens to the US?**

In the US, commentators often compare Johnson to President Donald Trump. Johnson's victory has sent shivers down liberals and enthused conservatives. Both are drawing their own lessons. Roger Cohen sounded the bugle in The New York Times and warned that Trump could win in 2020. In a rambling piece, he called Brexit "a national tragedy" and asserted that the triumph of emotion over reason in the age of Facebook queers the pitch for the likes of Johnson and Trump. Cohen's comparison is superficial and does Johnson a disservice. Johnson may be a lying scoundrel, but he is no Trump. Jon Sopel of the BBC also got in on the act. He warned Democrats against choosing Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren who might be American counterparts of Corbyn. He pointed out that Blair won a third term despite voters seeing him as "smarmy, George W. Bush's poodle, in the pocket of big business – and a war criminal."

Corbyn lost despite promising more money for NHS, nationalization of key industries and free broadband for everyone. The fact that working-class workers turned their backs on Labour in a class-divided society is a key lesson for Democrats. The Green New Deal and the Medicare for All plan might smack of socialism. Bigger government and higher taxes are not easy sells in Anglo-Saxon lands. In the US, socialism is a dirty word and Democrats could gift the election to Trump by flirting with it.

On Fox News, Cal Thomas argued that Johnson's victory is similar to Thatcher's triumph in 1979. It presages a second term for Trump just as the "Iron Lady" paved the path for Ronald Reagan. The news headlines, social media chatter and liberal outrage will be trumped by a booming economy, soaring stock markets and healthy job numbers. In 2016, the vote for Brexit was followed by a mandate for Trump.

The 2020 presidential election is some way off and these commentators might be premature in their predictions. The immediate item on the agenda for both countries is a US-UK trade deal. Johnson and Cummings plan to wrap up trade deals around the world and strengthen their hand against the EU. They will be bending their backs to get a trade deal done by next year.

They might have an ally in the White House. Trump is embroiled in impeachment proceedings. He has been a vocal supporter of Brexit and an opponent of the European project. A trade deal with the UK will take away attention from the proceedings and spite EU bigwigs. In an election year, it would make for good political theater. Waving a "great trade deal" around might bolster Trump's image in the eyes of his supporters. Anglo-Saxon democracies have much in common and Johnson's victory will inevitably affect politics across the pond.

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### **What Will Be Left of Great Britain?**

Stephen Chan  
December 23, 2019

**This is a historic moment for what is now the United Kingdom. What the country will look like after 10 years is up for debate.**

**A**s the shock of the UK general election fades, many questions will take time to be answered. Not that the reelection of

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the Conservative Party led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson was a shock, but the size of his majority in Parliament was one that no Labour Party strategist had foreseen.

Throughout the election campaign, even pessimists had clung to the hope of an opposition coalition emerging from a hung Parliament. But the likely coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, were decimated, and Labour lost strongholds in northern England it had held for decades. The “red wall” in working-class constituency after constituency crumbled like chalk dust. The vaunted socialist and blue-collar consciousness of middle-class North London found itself dramatically out of touch with a national working class with no sense of historical romanticism.

### **The Questions to Ask**

So, the first question is: What will happen to an abjectly defeated Labour Party? This is particularly pertinent in the event of a two-term Johnson administration looming ahead. Which Labour Party will emerge after another decade in opposition? That will mean 19 years outside of government. Whoever replaces Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn may well no longer be in charge 10 years from now, so all the recriminations and power plays in the party today may be meaningless.

The second question is: What kind of relationship will Britain have with a European Union it has formally left? Not that leaving will be as abrupt as Brexit cheerleaders might imagine. There is still an 11-month transition period in which a trade deal has to be finalized — and it may well take, bravado notwithstanding, much longer. But from the end of January 2020, the UK will no longer have a seat at the high European table, and the EU will be weakened as a bloc in the face of the American and Chinese superpowers.

But if the EU is weakened, how will Britain alone face up to the US and China? If it marries itself to the US, will there be a bride price that will seriously weaken the independence of British

institutions? There is much concern about the US “buying into” the National Health Service (NHS) and the rising cost of drugs. But if the future is a Sino-American trade war and power struggle, will Britain — with much Chinese penetration already in its economy — be a pawn in US hands?

The third question is precisely to do with Britain versus any other identity. As the United Kingdom, Great Britain is part of a union with Northern Ireland. As Great Britain, England is in a union with Scotland. Throughout the Brexit negotiations to leave the EU, there were serious Irish and Northern Irish concerns. Yet the first major schismatic fault-line would seem to lie with the Scots — the Scottish National Party swept the polls north of the border on December 12 — seeking another referendum for independence.

A legal vote on Scottish independence can only be sanctioned in Westminster, not in Edinburgh. The Scots will be mulling, nevertheless, a Catalan-style unilateral referendum and using it as moral leverage in difficult and likely protracted discussions and confrontations with Westminster. The one thing Prime Minister Johnson is unlikely to have is any guaranteed unity in the British project.

So, those are the questions no pundit can immediately answer. All of them point to difficult choices and perilous negotiations. Only if all three areas prove disastrous for Johnson would the Labour Party have much chance to stake a real claim to power after his first term. But what are the Labour Party’s postures and policies on all three issues?

### **The Future of Labour**

The first is to do with a power struggle within Labour, with any outcome not guaranteed to indicate the shape and direction of the party 10 years from now. But a Corbynista party under new leadership would have to distance itself, if not in terms of policy, then in terms of style from the defeated grand old man of the left.



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The policy itself, however, bears thought. Not everything can be solved by public ownership and intervention. The move away from one-dimensionality is unavoidable for any more youthful leadership. And it can't be North London appearing to speak for (and "educate") the "unwashed" northern masses. The move to the left under Corbyn appeared far too much like a Leninist vanguard party project, in which the working class would be led to its apotheosis as satisfied producers under wise leadership. It was elitist and condescending, but it represented a trenchant vocabulary and conception.

If Labour turns back to the center, however, in what way can this avoid identification with former Prime Minister Tony Blair's New Labour years? This essentially means there can be no traditional left in a Labour future, and there can be no modern centrism that smacks of Blair. So, what is there left for Labour?

### **Post-Brexit Relations**

As for the UK's relationship with the EU, that requires punditry amidst terrains of unknowns. The world is in the middle of trade wars that might yet see the UK cling closer to the EU in ways unforeseen in the election campaign.

As food prices rise, European common agricultural policy subsidies are withdrawn, and new food suppliers cannot be found — or found only with great transport costs — the UK agricultural sector looks set to be decimated. New tariff barriers, unless successfully negotiated downward over the next 11 months, would raise the prices on almost all imported commodities in a land with declining manufacturing capacities, alongside agriculture that cannot survive without subsidies.

But to have a "Brexit in name only" would mean a repudiation of a sentiment that was stirred into existence. This did not exist before then-Prime Minister David Cameron's referendum on EU membership in 2016. Brexit became the bogeyman for all real and imagined dissatisfactions. It was chiefly attractive because it said someone else was to blame, and that

someone else was the European Union. That all parties in Westminster were out of touch with the masses and that the referendum result was a slap in the face of elite rule is belied by the huge majority that Johnson has now received.

The European bogeyman label has stuck. But the prime minister must now contrive a relationship that seems distant while struggling to stay close enough to minimize economic shocks.

As for the Labour Party, the time to have fought Brexit hard was during the 2016 referendum. Corbyn was so lukewarm and lackluster at the time that it seemed only a personal conviction toward leaving the EU could explain his continuation of such equivocal lukewarmness toward the European project throughout the administrations of Theresa May and Boris Johnson. If Corbyn betrayed an essential little Englander sense of being on the left — without any outreach to a pan-European working class at all — then he must take the blame at least for being a poor leader of the opposition. He scarcely opposed the government at all in its flagship policy.

### **The (Dis)United Kingdom**

The third issue is whether there will still be a United Kingdom in the years to come. That is perhaps the great historical question. But the union has never been so imperiled. Scottish rhetoric is one thing, but it seems a genuine Scottish nationalism has been stirred from the Cameron years till this day.

In 2014, Prime Minister Cameron only won his referendum on Scottish independence with the help of Labour Party dignitaries like Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband. There is no one left in Corbyn's Labour Party who can reach out to the Scots. Labour and the Conservative Party were thrashed in the general election results for Scotland.

This third question is an open one, with perhaps a longer timeframe for a final outcome than even the difficult resolutions required for the first two. But it is not a question that will fade away — or even fade very much.

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So, this is a historic moment for what is now the UK. There is a sense that the country deserves a reduced sense of self. That sense of self still advertises the outcome of World War II as dependent almost entirely on British heroism — never mind the US, the Commonwealth and the Soviets sacrificing huge armies for the defeat of Nazi Germany, together with the heroism of several European underground and partisan organizations.

Yet the likelihood is that a British reduction in real terms would instead reinforce the myth of the plucky and tiny England against all foes. Such a plucky and tiny England might be the exact apotheosis of all the currents of thought, opportunism and grandstanding that have marked the country in the last decade — with perhaps some decades of rue to come, crouched behind the porous barricade of needless mythology.

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