

Lauderovy Školy

# Brexit and the British Left

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## Abstract

This seminar paper attempts to connect the debate on the British Left about membership in the European Union with the Labour Party's electoral performance in recent years. The author attempts to determine the extent to which the Labour Party has become split over Brexit. The paper uses a combination of field work, personal interviews, an online questionnaire, as well as media election analyses and literary sources to reach a conclusion.

Firstly, the paper briefly introduces the reader to the history of the British left and of its position on EU membership. The paper then moves on to determining what caused the Labour Party's defeat in the 2019 General Election.

In the conclusion, the paper mentions what the future holds for the Labour Party.

## Abstrakt

Tato seminární práce pojednává o britské levici a o tom, jak její neúspěch v posledních letech souvisí s jejím vztahem k členství v Evropské unii. Autor seminární práce se pokouší zjistit, do jaké míry se britská levice kvůli debatě o členství v Unii rozdělila. K dosažení tohoto cíle autor používá kombinaci knižních zdrojů a vlastního výzkumu, zejména zkušenosti z kampaně Labour Party ve volbách do britského parlamentu v prosinci 2019.

V první části seminární práce je čtenář seznámen s historií Labour Party a s tím, jak se proměňoval vztah britské levice k členství v Evropské Unii. V druhé části autor čtenáři nabízí vysvětlení prohry Labour Party v loňských volbách a podat alternativní pohled na debatu ohledně Brexitu.

V závěru práce zmiňuje budoucnost Labour Party.

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## Introduction

The history of the labour movement has always been one of a struggle for justice and equality. This struggle has always been driven by a belief in a better, fairer society based on compassion rather than greed.

The reason for my writing of this paper is manifold. The primary reason is my personal involvement and interest in the topic at hand. Through my seminar paper, I also seek to offer an alternative perspective on the Labour Party's electoral performance in recent years to the reader and connect this performance to the debate about British membership in the European Union.

One thing the reader must keep in mind is that this paper is written from the point of view of someone passionately engrossed in the subject matter; I accept the impossibility of portraying the issue in an impartial or objective way, and am writing this seminar paper from a position of someone involved and interested in the British Left; the same must be said for my primary literary sources, most of which are written by people who identify as 'left-wing'.

The thesis of my seminar paper is: 'The British Left has become split over the issue of British membership in the European Union. This division has been laid bare by the Brexit referendum and the subsequent debate and culminated in the Labour Party's electoral defeat in the 2019 General Election. The main cause for this division is the fact that the *status quo* (for many exemplified by British membership in the European Union), is extremely unfavourable to the traditional working-class, deindustrialised Labour voting areas, whereas for most Labour voting modern, young, metropolitan liberal people, the *status quo* is beneficial. This means that this split divides Labour voters predominantly based on the economic prosperity of the area they live in.'

# 1 A Brief History of the British Working Class

The British working class is the oldest working class in the world. It was conceived during the Industrial Revolution, when swathes of the population, who were up until then mostly farming in rural Britain, flocked to cities, where technological advancements, most importantly the steam engine, created huge demand for manual labour. Despite this, the British working class experienced some of the harshest working and living conditions imaginable, mostly due to lack of organisation, which meant that workers were liable to being exploited by their employers.

During this period, the British government imposed heavy tariffs on manufactured goods imported into the United Kingdom, ensuring that the manufacturing took place in Britain, and that the British working class had a guaranteed line of work (Chang 70). Entire communities developed around manual labour in places like South Wales, Glasgow, the North-East of England, or the Midlands. The work originally centred around the textile industry, but later included coal mining, steel works, shipbuilding and the manufacturing of goods.

Despite growing British irrelevance on the international stage following the Second World War, the British working class continued to prosper — at least in relative terms — until the late 1970s and the premiership of Margaret Thatcher, which saw major deindustrialisation, caused by privatisation and the introduction of free trade, which meant that British workers had to face international competition. Overall, the British economy was transformed into one of services — at the expense of the British working class, which found itself redundant, unemployed and destitute.

## 1.1 The Labour Movement

A result — and later the means — of the struggle of the working class was the creation of trade unions. These united workers in opposition to harsh conditions which they had to endure, especially in the early and mid-Industrial Revolution. These unions, which were originally outlawed, campaigned for better treatment

and working conditions for workers. An important aspect of the unions' work was the organising of strikes to force employers to provide better working conditions for labourers. However, an immovable obstacle that the unions had to face was opposition from the government, which, in general, legislated to prevent the unions from greater action. To overcome this, the trade unions founded the Labour Party, the political wing of the labour movement, which would represent the unions' interests in Parliament. The Labour Party was founded on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1900 and first formed a government in 1924. It has since become one of the two main British political parties and has significantly influenced the general socioeconomic situation in Britain. What, to this day, stands out as perhaps the single most significant achievement of the Labour Party is the foundation of the NHS (National Health Service), a health system devised by the post-war Labour government, which provides healthcare free at the point of use to everyone in the United Kingdom.

## 1.2 The Middle-class Working-class

For a significant part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the working class of the United Kingdom was also largely the middle class.

Thanks to improved working conditions, skilled and unskilled manual labourers enjoyed a relatively high quality of life. While the work itself was demanding, the workers were relatively well paid and had access to affordable housing. The community spirit that developed around life in these working class areas was also beneficial to the quality of life: while coal miners would be in a hole in the ground for a large portion of the day, they had enough financial means to be able to afford a relatively comfortable lifestyle once above ground. These areas were at the heart of the British labour movement, and, for more than a century, this was where the core of the labour movement's support came from.

## 1.3 Deindustrialisation & Thatcherism

However, this begun to change significantly in the 1980s. As the title of Eric Hobsbawm's 1981 book, 'Forward March of Labour Halted?' suggests, the voice of the labour movement in British public life was about to be lost. Margaret Thatcher

had led her Conservative Party to victory in the 1979 General Election and replaced James Callaghan as prime minister. With her victory, the power of the unions — put on display during the Winter of Discontent<sup>1</sup> — was about to be smashed.

“The power of organised labour was radically diminished through a combination of legal changes, state confrontation and the creation of mass unemployment,” (Murray 25) the last mentioned being a tool left unavailable for more than 40 years because of memories of the 1930s.

This diminishing of the power of organised labour was exemplified by the Miner’s Strike of 1984-85, which involved some 150,000 members of the National Union of Mineworkers. During the strike, the miners defended their pits against organs of the state with orders to close them. Thatcher won this confrontation, and what ensued was the gradual disappearance of the union-led labour movement from political relevance; as well as the shifting of the nucleus of political discourse on the Left from the coal mine to the café — metropolitan, university-educated, middle-class leftists employed in services had an ever larger voice in the labour movement, especially in the Labour Party itself.

What developed was not only a lack of understanding or a connection between the liberal Leftists and the working-class Leftists, there was a literal antipathy, a feeling of mistrust. Liberal Labour supporters were considered elitist and sanctimonious in their liberality by working-class Labour voters, who themselves, on the other hand, were considered uneducated, unenlightened, and even racist by many city-dwellers (Knight).

It would be a mistake to characterise this split as an issue exclusively related to Brexit. The division was long in the making, with Labour support in post-industrial, working class areas dwindling throughout the Blair and Brown years. But Brexit does appear have been the electoral ‘last drop’. This divide was exposed and

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<sup>1</sup> The Winter of Discontent was a series of strikes that took place during the winter of 1978-79. The strikes, organised predominantly by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), were a reaction to pay caps introduced by the Labour government in order to curb inflation. Although the government and the unions eventually reached an agreement, the failure to quell the strikes was what, in part, led Thatcher’s Conservatives to victory in the 1979 General Election.

exacerbated by the 2016 EU Referendum and capitalised on by the Tories in the 2019 General Election.

## 2 A history of the position of the British left towards membership in the European Union/EEC

Discussion on the Left about membership in the EU/EEC is as long as British membership itself.<sup>2</sup> The United Kingdom joined the European Economic Community in 1973 under a Conservative government, led by Edward Heath.<sup>3</sup>

After the two 1974 general elections, the Labour Party, led by Harold Wilson, formed a government with a slim parliamentary majority, propelled to power in part by the promise of holding a referendum on membership. This promise pacified the Eurosceptic wing of the Party, a strategy David Cameron sought to emulate 41 years later — with almost exactly the opposite result. Opposition to membership in the party was relatively widespread, “when the [House of] Commons had debated the application in May 1967, 86 Labour MPs — almost a third of the parliamentary party — had defied a three-line whip [and voted against the Labour government on membership in the EEC],” (Saunders 58).

This opposition to membership did, however, dissipate over time. During the years of Tony Blair and New Labour — which embraced centrism and neoliberalism — the EU was acclaimed as a pinnacle of social, and economical, liberalism. By the time of the 2016 Referendum, all the mainstream Labour parliamentarians had switched to supporting remaining in the EU or remained mostly silent on the issue. This left the anti-EU position of the Brexit debate entirely to the right, which the Conservatives capitalised on in 2019 (Wilkinson). The Brexit debate also laid bare the split between the Labour Party and the trade unions – the latter supported leaving overwhelmingly, even in 2016.

### 2.1 The Labour argument against Europe, and how it has evolved

“The wage gaps between rich and poor countries exist not mainly because of differences in individual productivity, but mainly because of immigration control,”

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<sup>2</sup> The EEC, the European Economic Community, was the EU’s predecessor.

<sup>3</sup> Two, unsuccessful bids for membership were also made in the 1960s, by both Labour and Conservative governments.

(Chang 23). This point was at the root of the labour movement’s argument against membership in the EEC. “If there were free migration [a fundamental keystone of the EU’s philosophy], most workers could be, and would be, replaced by workers from poor countries,” Chang goes on to say. The protection of the interests of the British workers is the fundamental goal of the unions – and they therefore opposed membership. They argued that membership would “create a continental pool of reserve labour, with capital free to switch across borders in pursuit of the lowest wage costs,” (Saunders 177).

Despite this, the majority of workers did not vote to leave the EEC in 1975 - the workers, treated relatively well by the Labour government, took the advice of their prime minister rather than their local union on a macroeconomic issue such as membership in the single market.<sup>4</sup> The same cannot be said for the 2016 referendum, where voters were weighing advice from a prime minister whose administration had systematically disadvantaged the poorest, most vulnerable members of society — often people from post-industrial areas — over the course of the past 6 years.

When talking about the Labour argument against EU membership, it’s not so much a question of evolving as of disappearing. By the time of the 2016 referendum, the Left’s argument against membership seemed to have disappeared completely from mainstream public discourse.

The argument didn’t disappear completely, of course, niche groups such as ‘The Full Brexit’ advocated — and still advocate — for a ‘Lexit’ — leaving the EU and seizing the ‘historic opportunity that it offers for socialism in Britain’. Some MPs also persisted in their anti-EU stance, notably Dennis Skinner, the former MP for Bolsover — dubbed ‘the Beast of Bolsover’ for his fiery rants in the Commons — who was among the 54 Labour MPs to lose their seats to the Tories in 2019.

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<sup>4</sup> The Labour government, led by Harold Wilson, advised the British public to vote for continued British membership in the EEC in the 1975 referendum.

## 2.2 The Labour argument for Europe, and how it has evolved

Membership in the EU/EEC was always a bipartisan issue. Just as swathes of Labour MPs voted against their own government in 1967 to prevent Britain joining the EEC, many Labour MPs actively participated in the campaign to remain in the EEC in 1975: "... the organisation [BIE, the campaign for Britain to remain in the EEC] signed up eighty-eight MPs, twenty-one Labour peers and twenty-five trade union officials behind an expressively left-wing vision," (Saunders 113-114). Socialist themes such as solidarity, workers' rights and control of multinational finance were emphasised – as they were in 2016.

Over time, this Leftist pro-Europeanism became louder and louder, to an extent correlating with the aforementioned demographic transformation of the British Left. The Blair and Browns governments — the only Labour governments the United Kingdom has had since 1979 — were overwhelmingly pro-EU, and by the time of the 2016 Referendum, being pro-European became practically the default position for someone who considered himself left-wing. Even some my relatives, who have devoted a significant portion of their life to the socialist cause, and perhaps dabbled in Euroscepticism in 1975, now wholeheartedly accept and embrace the EU.

The prevalence of this pro-EU stance is something that was confirmed by an online questionnaire that circulated in my social media bubble — my respondents were predominantly pro-EU 'liberals' who identified as 'generally left-wing'. More than 85% of respondents voted to remain in 2016.

### 3 Why Labour lost

A key question that anyone investigating the recent electoral fortunes of the Left in Britain must ask is: why did Labour succeed — gaining the highest number of votes and vote share since 1997, denying Theresa May a majority — in 2017, but lose in 2019?

The party put forward a similar, if slightly more radical programme in 2019 as it did in 2017; it had the same leadership and stood for the same values.

It can therefore be tempting to put Labour's electoral defeat down to the only significant change of policy — in 2017, the Labour Party promised to enact the will of the British people and leave the European Union (after negotiating an alternative trade deal with the EU). In 2019, however, the Labour Party decided to back a second, 'confirmatory' referendum on membership, in which the country would choose between leaving with a new deal, negotiated by Labour, and, crucially, remaining in the EU; this meant that party was now putting forward a manifesto which could, under certain circumstances, reverse the result of the 2016 referendum. Of course, it is important to remember that it wasn't only leave voters who abandoned Labour — 16% of people who voted remain in 2016 and Labour in 2017 didn't vote accordingly in 2019 (Crawford).

Based on my own research, and many election dissections, there are two, obviously very interconnected, main issues that cost Labour the election — Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and Brexit.

#### 3.1 Jeremy Corbyn & the Establishment

Jeremy Corbyn's victory in the 2015 Labour leadership election was as unexpected as it was resounding. Corbyn won 59.5% of first-preference votes (Mason). This victory meant that he had secured a mandate for his policies — considered radical by many — of nationalising the railways and the energy sector, properly funding the NHS, scrapping tuition fees and fighting the climate emergency, to name a few. Corbyn's election signalled the death of New Labour and of the neoliberal establishment's grip on party policy

Corbyn had, up until then, been known mostly for his activism, in and out of the Commons, campaigning for everything from freeing Nelson Mandela, stopping the Iraq war to opposing the destruction of a Jewish cemetery in London (Wright).

Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour Party Leader meant that for the first time in more than 30 years, the British business and media establishment faced a serious challenge to the status quo, under which they were able to accumulate absurd quantities of wealth that they stored in offshore tax heavens. Had Corbyn's Labour Party secured an electoral victory, its programme of renationalisation of certain areas of the economy, and the introduction of heavier taxes on multinational corporations and people with higher incomes — above £80,000 annually — would pose a serious risk to the elites' way of life (Stewart).

The full power of the media tycoons was unleashed, manifested especially through their control of the British newspapers, which, despite falling circulation, still have profound influence over public debate in Britain. A smear campaign of unprecedented proportions was launched, and headlines accused Corbyn of being "everything from a shabby dresser to a terrorist sympathiser, Trotskyite, weakling, thug, cult leader, ham-fisted incompetent, and Czechoslovakian spy," (Graeber).

### 3.2 The Anti-Semitism Controversy

What exemplifies the grip that the media-moguls have over British public opinion is the antisemitism controversy.

In 2018, when, amongst Tory internal squabbles, it looked like Jeremy Corbyn might very well be the United Kingdom's next prime minister, anti-Semitism was brought to the forefront of British political discourse. This was because of the Labour Party's failure to incorporate all 11 of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)'s examples of anti-Semitism into the Party's code of conduct. During the following row, Margaret Hodge, a Jewish Labour MP who often brought the allegations of anti-Semitism forward, told Corbyn, in Parliament, that he was a "fucking anti-Semite and a racist," (Staff). The irony of someone who had

spent his entire life fighting all forms of racism being accused of racism was not lost on many.

The main issue in the debate about Labour antisemitism is the often dangerously thin line between criticism of the actions of the government of the state of Israel and anti-Semitism. The 'left wing' of the Labour Party — the wing that Corbyn represents — is known for its criticisms of the actions of the Israeli government, especially in connection to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The description of instances of anti-Semitism that the Labour Party leadership was reluctant to adopt was 'claiming that the existence of the State of Israel is a racist endeavour,' (Pickard).

The Labour Party later adopted all 11 descriptions of instance of antisemitism, but the damage had already been done, and the party leadership's failure to overcome the crisis, caused in part by the controversy's convenience as something to hit the Party over the head with — the combination of the words 'Labour Party' and 'anti-Semitism' never seemed to leave the front pages — contributed to Jeremy Corbyn's unfavourable perception by the wider British public, and therefore Labour's worse electoral performance in 2019 than in 2017 (Curtis). Corbyn's relative unpopularity was something that many, including myself, came face-to-face with while canvassing in the 2019 election: 'no, not with Corbyn in charge' became the dreaded response to 'will you be voting Labour?'.

### 3.3 Brexit

But the issue that, in the end, overshadowed everything else, was Brexit: it was a Brexit election (Butler). Out of the 54 seats that Labour lost to the Tories in the 2019 General Election, over 97% of them voted to leave in 2016 (Crawford). In the election campaign, the Labour leadership was in the ever-precarious position of balancing the support of remain-voting, liberal, metropolitan wing of the party, and that of the traditional, working-class, perhaps socially conservative, Brexit voting wing. The Labour Party had to tread a fine line in order not to alienate either, and ended up alienating both.

The Labour Party's official 'middle-ground' approach, with Corbyn himself remaining neutral in the case of a second EU referendum, fell short, especially in contrast with the Conservatives' direct, straightforward, repeatable and simple mantra of 'get Brexit done'. The Conservatives also succeeded in taking attention away from non-Brexit topics; they promised spending increases in the public sector — albeit smaller ones than Labour — including, crucially, in the NHS, which made public spending and the NHS a virtually wedge issue, and channelled more attention to the Labour Party's controversial position on Brexit.

The Tories' position on Brexit, on the other hand, was unequivocal, due to the purge of moderate members from the Party in early September 2019, which, as well as the eagerness of moderate voters to keep in line and vote for Boris Johnson, in order to prevent a 'radical' like Corbyn assuming office, contributed to the Conservatives' essentially exclusive franchise on pro-Brexit voters (Wilkinson).<sup>5</sup>

The Labour Party lost heavily in Brexit voting, post-industrial areas, often areas that had voted Labour for over 100 years.

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<sup>5</sup> Many also chose to vote for the Liberal Democrats, but, because of the British 'first-past-the-post' voting system, this was in essentially a vote for the Conservatives. Under 'FPTP', the country is divided into 650 constituencies, each electing its own MP (Member of Parliament). This means that smaller parties (such as the Liberal Democrats) tend to be underrepresented in Parliament, as they are unlikely to beat one of the two main parties in a given area.

## Conclusion

Despite defeat, Jeremy Corbyn's leadership will have a lasting legacy in British politics. The centre of political discourse in Britain has shifted to the left: policies that were considered to have been 'left in the 1970s' — nationalising the railways, state intervention in the economy — are talked about in day-to-day political discourse.

Nonetheless, the 2019 General Election must be seen for what it is: a failure of the British left. A failure that means five, if not more, years of Conservative government, with all that that entails: five more years of the poorest, most vulnerable members of British society being systematically disadvantaged; five more years of the British economy being dominated by multinational corporations; a Tory Brexit and much more.

But precisely for that reason it is vital to understand why Labour lost, and what the new Labour leadership do to prevent further defeat in 2024, when the next general election will take place.

It is important that the new Labour leadership, headed by the former shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, Sir Keir Starmer, learns from last year's defeat. Starmer faces an unenviable task: he has to unite a party so desperately divided culturally, politically and economically on everything from Brexit to the way the word 'bath' is pronounced. To stand a chance of forming government after the next election, Labour needs to win back swathes of seats it lost last year — in Brexit-voting regions. It is therefore questionable whether Starmer, the architect of Labour's second referendum policy, is the right leader to perform this arduous feat. But the argument can also be made that a 'middle-ground' politician, like Starmer, is exactly someone who will be able to unite the party.

There hasn't been a change in the polls in Labour's favour since Starmer was elected leader and winning at least 124 seats — the amount Labour needs to secure

a majority — at the next election will not be an easy undertaking. But, in these times of political gloom, it is an undertaking to believe in.

## Závěr

I přes drtivou porážku ve volbách bude předsednictví Jeremyho Corbyna mít v britské politice určitý ‚odkaz‘. Politický ‚střed‘ se od Corbynova předsednictví posunul doleva - v Británii se momentálně znovu mluví o politice, která byla považována za výstřelek sedmdesátých let; a i nově zvolené předsednictvo strany by před 10 lety bylo považováno za levicové.

Volby v prosinci 2019 je ale nutné brát za to, čím jsou – selháním britské levice. Selháním, které umožňuje konzervativcům na dalších pět let systematicky znevýhodňovat nejchudší a nejzranitelnější členy britské společnosti. Boris Johnson má nyní také ‚zelenou‘ pro svou, konzervativní formu Brexitu, která, mimo jiné, bude znamenat pokračování dominance nadnárodních korporací v britské ekonomice.

Ale právě proto je nesmírně důležité zjistit, proč Labouristé prohráli, a co mohou učinit, aby se v roce 2024 (kdy budou příští volby) vyvarovali další porážky. Je klíčové, aby se Keir Starmer, bývalý ministr pro odchod z EU, který se v dubnu stal předsedou strany, poučil z loňské prohry.

Starmer je v nezáviděníhodné pozici - musí sjednotit stranu, která je rozdělena kulturně, politicky i ekonomicky kvůli snad úplně všemu. Je proto otázkou, zda je Starmer, strůjce slibu o uspořádání druhého referenda, správným vůdcem – zejména v situaci, kde je valná většina křesel, které potřebují Labouristé vyhrát, v oblastech, které drtivě hlasovaly pro brexit. Na druhou stranu lze také říci, že zastánce ‚zlaté střední cesty‘, kterým Starmer bezpochyby je, je to, co k sjednocení Labouristé potřebují.

Tak či onak nebude získání 124 křesel, které Labouristé potřebují k vítězství, jednoduchým úkolem, ale, v těchto politicky poněkud pochybných dobách, je to úkol v jehož splnění je třeba věřit.

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