

Left-Horizons

Autumn promises Tory splits

As the holiday season draws to a close and real politics returns with the autumn winds, both of the main political parties will face unprecedented crises in the next few months. The Tories in particular are riven with splits over Brexit. In the coming weeks, serious negotiations with the EU will be renewed; there is the Tory conference for Theresa May to endure and, not least, parliament reconvenes in the first week of September. The so-called 'Chequers' agreement, by which May was hoping to paper over the Brexit cracks in her party, has done anything but. There is enormous pressure on the Tory leadership by every single big business organisation for the government to negotiate a 'soft' Brexit, so that trade in goods and services is as free and frictionless as possible. This is the preferred outcome of Chancellor Phillip Hammond, half the Cabinet and half the parliamentary Tory Party. Indeed, the Chequers agreement was designed as the starting point for a series of further concessions to the EU that would position Britain as close as possible to actual membership of the customs union, without actually being a member.

On the other hand, realising what the Chequers deal would mean, the 'hard' Brexiteers in the Tory Party, led by former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, are attempting to push May and the Government towards a no-deal scenario, by which means – they argue – it would be possible for Britain to just 'walk away' from the EU next Spring and continue to trade with the EU on the terms of the World Trade Organisation.

Such a hard Brexit, despite Johnson's reassurances to the contrary, is likely to create economic and political chaos. All aspects of the modern British economy: manufacturing, food production and processing, services, finances, travel and tourism and even energy production, are interlinked across borders in a complex network of relationships and trade. The idea that there can be a sudden and dramatic disruption of these processes, without any economic consequences, is cloud-cuckoo

land. Even a few minutes delay for the tens of thousands of lorries crossing the Channel every day, would lead to miles of traffic jams, stretching from Dover to the M25 in London. On the basis of a hard Brexit, there is currently no mechanism in place across the Channel or on the Northern Irish border with the Republic that would allow for a 'free and frictionless' trade.

On the other hand, Theresa May is ham-strung by the fact that Boris Johnson is enormously popular among Conservative party members. That, of course, is Johnson's calculation all along. There is now a strong likelihood that if May is unable to deliver the 'hard' Brexit demanded by the 'UKIP wing' of the Tory Party, that there will be a leadership challenge and the splits in the Tory party will widen to breaking point. The hard Brexiteers will not accept Theresa May remaining leader if the government does not deliver the Brexit they want. In opposition to these Brexit zealots, there are other Tory MPs who are now on record as saying that they will leave the Party if May is ousted and Johnson is elected leader. Small wonder, therefore, that sections of business are tearing their hair at the shambles of 'their' party and many are now openly touting for a second referendum as a means of cutting across the economic-illiterates of the Tory Party, who seem to be in the ascendant at the moment.

Tory Party: the dying in the grip of the dead

The crisis in the Conservative Party is also evident in their financial situation. In the past it has been the Tories, as the main party of big business, who have easily outshone the Labour Party financially, thanks to their millionaire and billionaire donors. But today, big business isn't particularly enamoured with the Tories' awful handling of Brexit and as a result their donations to the Party are considerably reduced. Besides that, the membership of the Tory Party – with an average age around 71 years – is

bringing in much less than before. In fact, in 2017 the Tories raised more money from *legacies* - £1.7m – than they did from *members* - £835,000, showing that it really is a party in which the dead have a grip on the dying.

For any MP or senior politician – Labour or Tory – it is no trivial matter to leave the party in which they have built their careers and in which they have most of their political and social connections. It is not a step taken lightly, because there is no going back. It usually takes a political crisis of historic proportions for a serious split to occur. But, on the other hand, ***the Brexit crisis IS a political crisis of historic proportions.*** When David Cameron agreed to hold a referendum on EU membership, neither he nor the big business backers of the Tory Party seriously expected that they would 'lose' it. Now that the Brexiteers are rampant in the party and in the press, there is a serious question mark against the established trading patterns, economic relationships and profits of British business, including its bloated financial sector. A crisis can get no more 'historic' than that. And that is why the next six to nine months could well see a major split in the Tories and the realignment on the right-wing of British politics.

A Labour victory would unleash a wave of expectation.

As for the Labour Party, all the latest opinion polls are showing that it is creeping ahead of the Tories and is therefore likely to win a general election called in the near future. The increasing hysteria of the media and the avalanche of bile and slanders against Jeremy Corbyn – to a level unprecedented in modern times – shows the very real fear within the Establishment of a Labour victory. Once elected to power, whatever the intentions and policies of the Labour leaders, a victory would unleash a huge wave of expectations and Labour voters would demand the implementation of policies in the interests of ordinary workers: policies ***For the Many, not the Few***, as Labour's slogan puts it.

The vicious campaign around the fake "anti-Semitism" issue in the press is part of the effort by the billionaire-dominated media to derail a Labour victory. The fact that Labour's right-wing have enthusiastically embraced these slanders and the secondary fact that Labour's 'soft left' have caved in to them should come as no surprise. It does not look, however, that this will derail the trajectory of the Labour Party. Indeed, its membership is still growing.

As a result of the increase in membership under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, the Labour Party has broken all previous records in its donations and income. So great

has been the influx of members that the Labour Party managed to raise more than £10m more than the Tories last year, an unprecedented turn-around. Labour raised nearly £56m last year, compared to the Tories' £46m. For the first time in living memory, the Labour Party is clear of debts and is in a strong position to fight the next general election when it comes.

In the years when the Labour Party was dominated by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, its membership fell to a record low. Apart from losing four million votes, Labour lost tens of thousands of members. Like a pale shadow of the Tory Party, Blair's 'New Labour' relied increasingly on a few large donations from rich backers and friends in business. Even the donations of the wealthy were not enough to prevent the Party from sinking deeper into debt with each passing year. Now, under Corbyn, the Labour Party membership is soaring to nearly 700,000 and its income is overwhelmingly based on the small donations of those ordinary members. It is as a result of the Corbyn revolution that Labour has been able to pay off the debts of the Blair years and put itself well into a healthy cash surplus.

Labour's parliamentary right-wing will never be reconciled to the huge growth in membership because a lively and active mass membership places right-wing MPs and their personal political careers in some jeopardy. Nor are they reconciled to a party committed to radical policies. Just as the Tory Party faces serious splits, therefore, so too will the Labour Party, as the likelihood of a Labour government comes face-to-face with right-wing MPs whose fundamental political outlook is the same as the Tories. Already, there are discussions behind the scenes for the formation of a new 'third' party, comprising anti-Brexit Tories, Liberals and Labour right-wingers. Such a new party has already been promised a bank-roll to the tune of £50m. ***It is not a question of if but when, and under what circumstances, Labour's right-wing will split away from the party.*** When that happens, there will be enormous ferment and debate in the party – in which *Left-Horizons* will participate – but it will not shift the fundamental movement of party towards radical and socialist ideas. Autumn promises to open up an eventful period in British politics. Unprecedented change, unprecedented splits and challenges – but also an unprecedented opportunity for socialist ideas.

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