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**Election won, now to get Brexit done**

[**GREG SHERIDAN**](https://www.theaustralian.com.au/author/Greg%2BSheridan)

**Boris Johnson is ‘the strongest and best placed prime minister since Blair at the height of his powers’. Picture: AFP**

Bold Boris rules Britannia! This was an earthquake in British politics. This Conservative election victory was exactly the vote Theresa May plotted, designed and desperately wanted in 2017, but she couldn’t deliver it, or anything like it.

Johnson’s Conservatives have won swags of seats in the north and northeast of England, in Wales and rural England, in the towns and shires. And yet they also won leafy, affluent, Remain-voting Kensington in the posh west end of London.

Johnson declared: “This one-nation Conservative government has been given a powerful new mandate to get Brexit done and to unite the country.”

Almost the next thing out of his mouth was yes, his government would hire 50,000 new nurses for the National Health Service, hire 6000 new GPs and build 40 new hospitals.

Johnson is a one-nation Conservative in the tradition of Benjamin Disraeli, who tried to bridge the deep gap between north and south in Britain. He’s tough on crime, like Margaret Thatcher. He’s a strong patriot, like That­cher. But on economic policy, he’s not Thatcherite.

While this election consigns to the dustbin of history the foul, half-mad, reductionist Marxism of Jeremy Corbyn, it also for the ­moment, and probably for quite a long time, spells the death of Thatcherism in economic policy.

The election count was mesmerising. Johnson is on track for a majority of 80-odd, a staggering outcome. It is the biggest majority any prime minister has won since Tony Blair. It is the biggest majority the Conservatives have won since Thatcher.

Johnson has won a five-year term. Given the unpredictability of modern elections, he will surely want to use every day of those five years. That means by the time of the next election, the only Labour leader to have won a majority in 50 years will be Blair.

It’s fashionable to mock Blair these days, but if British Labour has any brains it might try to think through what that means. Blair was at the centre of one of the symbolic key moments in the election night count. His old seat of Sedgefield, located in Labour’s heartland of the northeast, was created in 1935 and continuously represented all that time by ­Labour. But the northeast of Eng­land was the killing fields for ­Labour, and Sedgefield is now a Conservative seat.

Blair’s genius was to steal the middle class from the Conservatives. Johnson’s genius is to steal the working class from Labour.

This is a trend across Western politics. Pennsylvania voted for Donald Trump, smashing the Democrats’ so-called Blue Wall of safe, working-class, mid-west states. Western Queensland, in an unlikely populist revolt in favour of direct investment from India in the Adani mine, delivered a surprise victory to Scott Morrison.

Johnson did not so much breach Labour’s Red Wall in the midlands and the north, he smashed it to bits.

Centre-right parties are unlocking working-class votes all over Western politics. They switch from their long social democratic or socialist orientation on four bases: alienation from the postmodern liberal elites of the inner cities; attachment to conservative, though not reactionary, social ­values; the sense very often that they have been shut out of the benefits of globalisation; and an abiding patriotism that contemporary left liberalism despises.

But the centre-right leader seeking to take advantage of these predispositions has to be able to connect with them personally himself — as Trump, Morrison and Johnson have done — and must also demonstrate pragmatic, workable policies that are likely to make life better.

The other tellingly symbolic moment of the night came when Green MP Caroline Lucas won a handsome victory in her constituency of Brighton Pavilion. She was “deeply angry”, she said. Who or what was she angry at, I wondered. Corbyn for making left of centre politics so toxic and sectarian?

She was indeed angry at ­Labour but not for anything as trivial as proposing programs of wild spending, massive nationalisation, sectarian identity politics, lunatic economic policies, or even for tolerating anti-Semitism.

No, the Greens were angry at Labour, as they were similarly angry at the Liberal Democrats, for having allowed an election to be called at all. The tribunes of ­participatory democracy cannot stand elections.

Parliament, the old parliament, was on the brink, Lucas said, of calling a new referendum on ­Brexit to reverse the 2016 referendum in which Britain voted to leave the EU. The old parliament was a reliable enemy of Brexit. It hated the will of the people, it hated the referendum result, it did all it could to frustrate it. John Bercow, the pro-Remain Speaker of the old House of Commons, turned every convention upside down to try to help thwart Brexit.

Sky UK, for reasons best known to itself, chose him as one of its election night commentators as an allegedly neutral analyst, and he kept up the insults of Johnson all night.

The Greens and Bercow and the most passionately pro-­Remain Tories were all on a unity ticket to keep the zombie parliament among the walking dead, to keep it semi-functioning in a twilight of frustration, all to stop Brexit.

Johnson responded to this in the very best way possible. He put it to the people. His position on Brexit in this election was absolutely clear. Every Tory candidate signed a pledge that they would support Johnson’s withdrawal deal, which means Britain leaves the EU by January 31.

Yet there were still Labour people arguing that while Johnson now had a parliamentary maj­ority, he still didn’t have a majority for the sort of Brexit he wanted. Even the BBC’s Andrew Neil, no friend of Johnson, was moved to expostulate: “What on earth does he have to do?”

So let’s just recall the electoral and political legitimacy of Brexit, how many times the British people voted on it. The rise of Nigel Farage’s old United Kingdom ­Independence Party saw growing stress on the Conservatives on this issue. UKIP had only one policy — a yes-no Brexit referendum. It took millions of votes in general elections and won an election for the European parliament.

David Cameron, who barely snuck into office in coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 2010, promised in 2015 that if he were elected he would hold such a referendum. He was elected and he honoured the promise. That 2016 referendum produced the biggest vote in British history, and the ­result, against the urgings of every major political party and almost all the media, was a 52/48 victory of leave.

At the 2017 election both Conservative and Labour promised to honour the referendum result and Brexit itself was not the ­dominant issue. The two main parties, both promising Brexit, won 80 per cent of the vote. The explicitly pro-­Remain party, the Liberal Democrats, went nowhere. But that election produced a hung parliament and a minority government. All the forces of the British establishment, including the majority of pro-Remain MPs in both parties, did everything they could to delay, frustrate and destroy Brexit.

Now we have this election. Johnson, the most explicitly pro-Brexit prime minister imaginable, with his withdrawal bill ready to go, won a smashing majority, ­substantially increasing his popular vote and the number of Conservative MPs.

The Liberal Democrats, again the most explicitly pro-Remain party, picked up a couple of percentage points from Labour but got nowhere in terms of MPs. Their failure is devastating. The Lib Dems’ leader, Jo Swinson, lost her own seat. The formal Lib Dem position was anti-democratic. Its preferred Brexit policy was not even to have a second referendum but simply to reverse the notice of withdrawal and just deny the referendum’s results.

The worst result, though, was the Labour Party. All night it looked on course to record its worst result in seat numbers since 1935. It may just equal Michael Foot’s calamitous defeat in 1983, when Labour frontbencher Gerald Kaufman described the party’s election manifesto as “the longest suicide note in history”. Yet ­Corbyn makes Foot look like a centrist. After the 1983 landslide loss, it took Labour nearly 15 years to get back into government.

Surely now no one can possibly doubt the electoral and political legitimacy of Britain’s withdrawal from the EU.

There will now be a civil war in the Labour Party, a battle for the party’s soul. The original sin for Labour was to allow non-members who were willing to pay a £3 ($5.80) fee for the right to vote in a popular ballot for their parliamentary ­leader. This does not produce party democracy but activist capture. An election by the genuine party membership would be conducted among people who had been members, say, for two years or some such.

Many Labour MPs were bitter at Corbyn and his egotistical decision to stay as leader after his parliamentary party had completely lost confidence in him. Many ­reported that in campaigning they encountered endless popular hostility to the idea of a Corbyn prime ministership.

The one thing Corbyn was good at was consolidating the ­institutional control of a cadre of far-left apparatchiks within ­Labour. They will not be easy to shift. Even the hostility to Corbyn himself will be part of their tactical response. A lot of Labour leftists effectively argue now that Corbyn was rejected but not Corbynism.

These folks, like everyone in Labour, concede that Johnson’s “Get Brexit done” slogan cut through and was effective. Corbyn’s ridiculous position on Brexit, that he would negotiate a new deal with the EU and put that deal to a referendum for ratification, during which he would remain personally neutral, was impossible to sell, ­almost impossible to explain.

The left of Labour will therefore try to blame their election ­defeat entirely on Brexit and Corbyn’s personal failings, and hope they can salvage most of the radical left program they took to the election. Corbyn announced he would not try to lead Labour to ­another election but would stay on as leader while the party went through a period of reflection. ­Labour moderates are likely to oppose this, as Corbyn and his ruthless office would use the leader’s patronage powers through that period to advantage the far left.

For all of Johnson’s spectacular victory, he faces three obvious problems: he presides over a ­nation with deep regional, generational and ideological divisions; it is unclear whether his new working-class supporters can become permanent Tories or if they just lent their votes to the Conservatives to get Brexit done; and, finally, can he indeed deliver a clean, orderly Brexit?

In this context, though, it is worth pausing to register the spectacular personal endorsement of Johnson this election represents.

I lived in London for a few months this year while under­taking a visiting fellowship at Kings College. The extent of the vitriol and abuse and contempt that most of the media class and the London bubble directed at Johnson was astonishing. Actor Hugh Grant described him as “an over-inflated bath toy” and said he led a cabinet “of masturbatory public school boys”.

Johnson played into this a bit with his shambolic personal life and indeed his shambolic appearance. His politics are quite different to Trump’s, but like Trump he says and does things other politicians cannot get away with.

Yet, also somewhat like Trump, there is much more method than madness in the whole Johnson performance. He has never lost an election. He understands the ­dynamics of media and communication. He is a powerful strategic communicator.

Like Trump, you cannot discombobulate him. Trump’s ­response to abuse is anger and counter-abuse but he’s always in control of what he’s doing. Johnson’s response to abuse is humour. He drives his critics mad partly ­because he doesn’t take their criticisms seriously.

Johnson does have profound beliefs. He believes in Britain and the sovereign responsibilities, and capabilities, of his nation. If you think being twice elected mayor of left-wing London, then leading the Brexit campaign in 2016 to unexpected victory, then triumphing in Conservative Party elections for the leadership, manoeuvring an election and winning this smashing victory are the achievements of a shallow dilettante, you are not really paying attention. (And I’d like to meet a few more such shallow dilettantes.)

Still, there is nothing inevitable about Johnson’s future course.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is deeply divided by regions. The Scottish National Party won all but a handful of seats in Scotland. It wants a left-wing government, a referendum leading to independence, and continued membership of the EU.

Under Johnson, it’s not going to get any of these. The threat of Scottish independence is, I think, overblown. Although the SNP won the constituencies, a majority of Scots who voted actually supported unionist parties: Conservative, Labour, Lib Dem, etc. The unionist votes were split.

Similarly, if Scotland did vote for independence, it would not be a member of the EU and would lose its budget subsidy from London. Nor can it be assumed that everyone who voted SNP would vote for independence in a referendum.

Northern Ireland’s votes, ­focused on internal politics, mean almost nothing for Johnson. Sinn Fein won a couple of extra seats but Sinn Fein MPs refuse to sit in the Commons so their votes are wasted. A Johnson government would never countenance a referendum on Northern Ireland joining the Republic but there is really no evidence such a vote would succeed anyway.

And London still votes in ­majority for Labour. Johnson will strive to be prime minister for all of Britain. He will need to be always talking to Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Transforming the new Tories of northern working class Eng­land, and their analogs in Wales, into permanent Tories is a critical challenge. Johnson must deliver them real infrastructure benefits, quickly, and put a good number of them in his cabinet.

Labour people were still ­describing Johnson as xenophobic and racist, sexist and deregulationist, on election night, but this is ­absolute baloney. Nor are the people of northern England racists. Johnson’s cabinet is the most ethnically diverse in British history, which the identity politics mavens of the British left cannot cope with or even acknowledge.

Priti Patel, the Home Secretary, a woman of Indian heritage, is tougher on crime than any left ­orthodoxy would allow. Sajid Javid, the Chancellor, of Pakistani background, is a life-long Conservative, meritocrat and former successful businessman. James Cleverly, the Conservative Party chairman, is of African background. These are not tokenistic appointments. They all rose ­organically through the Conservative Party. Similarly, the Conservatives have had two female leaders, both of whom became prime minister. Labour has had none.

Johnson is in some ways a very traditional English conservative — Eton, Oxford, all that. But this is complimented by the openness of the modern Conservative Party. This ethnically diverse cabinet connected with northern England on values and on Brexit. It’s a formidable combination.

Johnson’s biggest challenge is still Brexit itself. He will get his withdrawal agreement passed but he will then have to negotiate his long-term free trade agreement with the EU. It can be done if there is goodwill but there has never been goodwill in Brussels.

If the EU won’t give Johnson a decent deal then there could be new Brexit crises next year, as the transition period is scheduled to end in December 2020. But the British public has just voted to end Brexit crises if they can.

But whatever he confronts, Johnson is the strongest and best placed prime minister since Blair at the height of his powers. Who would have thought it?

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