

Absolute boy – The Youth Revolt that led Corbyn to a victory of sorts

An anarchist analysis of the British election result June 2017

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Corbyn's strong showing in the June 2017 UK elections has given a big morale boost to the left. A considerable youth vote, self-mobilising in larger part as a reaction to the 'me and mine' selfish society revealed by the Brexit vote seriously set back Tory plans for a fresh wave of Brexit required austerity. Activists used social networking to overcome what had previously been seen as an all powerful smear machine of the billionaire print press. Very few outside the radical left expected this outcome, what drove it and more importantly where can it lead?

This piece is not going to answer that in terms of assumptions and assertions but as far as possible through hard numbers. 66% of 18–24 year olds voted Labour, only a quarter of that, 18% voted Tory [p4]. 27% of those 18–24 year olds said the NHS was the most important issue for them, even though they are least likely to need it [p40]. For the over 65 age group this was flipped, only 23% voted Labour and over twice as many (58%) voted Tory [p4]. In fact, given the way the UK election system works, if only 18–24 year olds had voted, Labour would have been heading for 500 seats. If it had only been those over 65 voting the Tories would have had over 400 seats.

A note on the figures used in this piece. I've obtained them from the exit poll conducted by the Tory, Lord Ashcroft, the page numbers refer to the page in the 161 pages of data tables he provide. I also used his earlier Brexit exit poll to analysis that referendum, writing at the time "*Michael Ashcroft is an interesting character, the former Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party and the 74th richest man in Britain, the Sunday Times reckons he was worth 1.32 billion in 2015. The polling seems to be part hobby, part philanthropy*". If anything the fact he is a Tory Lord helps in being certain that the numbers we will be talking about here are not the product of wishful think and bias from our side, quite the opposite.

The story of the election is primarily the story of younger age groups becoming politically active to change the Brexit 'me and mine' agenda they perceived as being imposed by the older age groups in the referendum. This is a point that we'll return to later in the piece but as the table below shows age more than any other factor predicted how people were likely to vote with each older age group being more right leaning than the previous one.

Those who voted Labour came together not primarily on a basis of self interest but rather with a collective ideological belief in some form of 'caring & sharing' society, best captured by the defence of the National Health System by the age group least likely to need it in the short term. A lot of journalists and politicians have presumed it was free tuition fees that swung the youth vote. In reality, that was only the 3rd most important issue identified in the 18–24 age group at 10% – with almost 3 times that percentage (27%) identifying the NHS [p40].

Labour, for the first time in a long while, ran on a platform that was primarily one of 'caring and sharing'. That is of using the government to redistribute wealth through increased taxation of the wealthy and the closing of tax loopholes. The extra income would be used to fund health, education and welfare. It's a long, long way short of the introduction of socialism. Indeed as appendix 2 demonstrates it is not that the Labour swing was on the basis of class, this 2017 election had almost none of the intense class polarisation of 1974, if we stick to the standard and outdated understandings of class divisions. This is important in understanding the lack of a movement outside of the Labour party behind this swing and why this is a major weakness.

It is unlikely that a future Labour government would be able to introduce such policies without there being a massive popular mobilisation to deter the capital flight that typically defeats such left wing economic moves within the framework of the constitutional politics. But all that aside in effect the Labour V Tory choice broke down into one between 'caring and sharing' V 'me and

mine.' I'm not a Labour party supporter, in fact as an anarchist I reject the idea that electoralism can bring about fundamental change. But in so far as the results are a poll of opinions that polarises between 'me and mine' or 'caring and sharing' I can certainly root for the later.

The question that remains, is can this movement now break out of the barriers of Labour electoralism which, in particular with Labour's defeat, has nothing to offer in the short term. And if it can, how and where might it organise. With a fragile Tory government propped up by the hard right DUP there is a huge possibility for a fight in communities, workplaces and educational establishments as well as the streets if that government tries to push ahead in imposing the reactionary politics that reflect its composition. The danger is that, in the name of respectability, Labour will curtail that fight and limit it to mobilisations that just serve to build for the next election.

The big weakness is the movement around Corbyn is very much just a movement around him. It's not the case that powerful movements already fighting for a 'caring and sharing' society took advantage of the election to try and make some gains in that sphere. Rather the movement has for the most part been the electoral process so now we have to hope it flows into and becomes a movement of resistance and change outside of that process independent of the Labour Party. The danger is that instead it will become a movement internal to the Labour Party, where energy will be used to try and unseat Blairites and on other internal factional disputes.

Abandoning the centre

It's long been a given in the British Labour party that any move to the left would see the party destroyed by a concerted and vicious media smear campaign. This wasn't an unreasonable fear, 80% of the British press is owned by billionaires and they make no secret of wielding that ownership as a political tool, particularly on election day. Rupert Murdoch who controls a huge segment of the printed media claims with justification to have decided the 1992 and 2015 elections with anti-Labour party front page spreads. In 2015 from this point of view it was 'The Sun wot won it' for the Tories, the Independent revealing that *"Mr Murdoch personally instructed The Sun to turn the heat up against Mr Miliband, telling editors that the very future of News Corp depended upon the result."*

These smears also played a useful role for the more centrist politicians in the Labour Party in terms of being able to use that threat against the left. Lots of these Labour politicians were more than happy to go to the Murdoch press during the Corbyn election campaign and initial attempt to unseat him as well of course as the more respectable if also biased media like the BBC.. There was no sense whatsoever that such disputes should be internal to avoid damaging the chances of Labour getting elected.

It's impossible to know with certainty the impact of these past campaigns but the media campaign against Corbyn in 2017 was more sustained and vicious than ever. The front page of the Sun on election morning, showing Corbyn sticking his head out of a bin, was so atrocious then when it was circulated online many of us at first assumed it was a spoof. The list of accusations against him opened with 'Terrorist friend' (bearing in mind that there had been two mass terrorist killings in London and Manchester just before the election) and proceeded to call him a destroyer of jobs and other accusations before ending with 'Marxist Extremist'.

The 2017 campaign saw such smears used over and over again but they failed to work, in particular with younger voters. Social media was used to answer and parody the smears making them increasingly ineffective and indeed probably counter productive – the circulation of that Sun cover online probably got a lot of additional Labour voters down to the polling stations. With the announcement of the exit poll revealing Labour had gained a substantial amount of votes, billionaire Rupert Murdoch stormed out of the media party he was at, hopefully to spend the remainder of the night tearing out what is left of his hair.

This mainstream media V social media story is important because there was a lot of hope as the internet developed that it would help overcome the rule of the billionaires. But the aftermath of the Trump election saw a panic that the right had discovered how to manipulate fear through social networking at a subconscious level, in particular through serving paid Facebook ads to targeted groups on a very localised basis that would not be visible to others. This allowed for fairly obvious racist messaging to be aimed at elderly whites that wouldn't be seen by people of colour and younger, less racist white voters. Targeting people in such an insidious manner allows for more of a chance for such positions to go unchallenged. We know the Tories spent a lot on targeted Facebook ads in this election but it clearly didn't work for them in the way it appeared to work for Trump. This suggests that cash for targeted ads can't necessarily overcome the positives of mass social networking by a very large number of highly motivated people.

The Brexit effect

Much of what I write above won't be controversial to anyone on the left. But early on I want to expand on one element that I think will be controversial: the role played by the youth rejection of the forces that delivered the Brexit vote which served to mobilise the young to campaign and vote for Labour. The connection is almost undeniable, below I present the breakdown by age groups of the Ashcroft Brexit exit polls above the Ashcroft 2017 election exit poll. They almost mirror each other, in particular when you view them as Conservatives V the combined Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Green vote.

Now it is also true that about 31% of Labour voters had voted to Leave [p6] in the referendum. Also 17% of those who voted UKIP in 2015 voted Labour this time around, this was some 5% of the total Labour vote [p5]. We could certainly expect that those UKIP voters would be pretty serious about wanting Brexit to go ahead but in a sense that's not the issue here as Corbyn didn't take an anti-Brexit stance, the election was not fought on Brexit. The majority (57%) of those who want to resist Brexit voted Labour, but 25% of those who are enthusiastic about Brexit also voted Labour, as did 42% of those who accept it [p6].

As we will see below, however, it's clear from other questions that getting out of the EU was not the main priority for Labour voters who had voted Leave in the referendum. The Labour Leave vote would include those who voted for Brexit for progressive reasons, chiefly to try to escape any potential future EU involvement in opposing a radical Labour government. There is a certain irony to this as the UK government was one of the main proponents of inserting compulsory neoliberalism into EU treaties.

57% of 2015 UKIP voters switched to the Tories [p5] and 68% of Tory voters had voted Leave [p6]. 59% of those enthusiastic about Brexit voted Tory, only 11% of those who want to resist it did so [p6]. So although there were a significant amount of Leave voting Labour voters there

were far more Leave voting Tories and they are more serious about it. Ashcroft also asked what was the most important issue for each voter, with Brexit being one option. Only 8% of Labour voters opted for Brexit as against a fairly incredible 48% of Tory voters [p42].

As the Financial Times has pointed out there is some evidence that Labour areas with a high Leave vote had a strong Tory swing in this election — these areas ran against the island wide pattern of a swing to Labour. In other words if you were strongly in favour of Brexit you probably voted Tory rather than Labour even if you had previously voted Labour.

So my argument here is not that the Labour vote represents an anti-Brexit vote but rather a vote against the ‘me and mine’ forces that drove Brexit.

This is because the Brexit vote was overwhelmingly a crystallisation of the most reactionary elements of Britain — driven by colonialism, racism and to a lesser but significant extent other reactionary rages against everything from feminism to environmentalism. That included the section of the working class whose employment chances, wages and conditions had been devastated through deindustrialization and automation but who had blamed migrants rather than the robots and bankers. I presented a very detailed analysis of this at the time in Making Sense of the Brexit Tide of Reaction and the Reality of the Racist vote but its self evident that in that context a Britain alone exit from the EU is an attempt to return to the racist — colonial days of Empire rather than a blow against neoliberal capitalism.

The immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote saw a useless wave of pro-EU protests, overwhelmingly comprised of young people who felt betrayed by the older generation. I view these as not being useful because the EU is also a racist, colonialist project, just with more people inside it. They’re also not useful because that sort of generational conflict does not address the underlying causes of the Brexit vote, the robots and banks on the one hand and the rival racist — colonialism of the EU and Empire on the other. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that older generations did have legitimate reasons for wanting to strike back against the forces who have delivered them cut after cut and demolished the welfare system they once saw blossom. This does become complicated however when you combine this with other reasons, such as racism in the form of shutting down migration. And even though a restaged referendum might well have the opposite result — the Ashcroft data says 49% of voters this time around voted Remain and only 47% Leave [p19] — the current reality is that even most Remain voters want to just get it over with, on the right terms.

In summary if you were horrified by the reactionary nature of the Brexit vote demanding another referendum was not the way to deal with that as Brexit was a symptom rather than a cause. The early post referendum demonstrations against the decisions faded away and the subsequent mobilisation has been against the ideas that won it rather than the result.

A sharing caring future

What happened instead was more and more young people came to see the Labour Party under Corbyn as a vehicle to construct a society that was the opposite of that reflected in the Brexit vote. Despite being an anarchist I’m going to hold off with what I see as the problems with using electoralism to achieve that. For now I’m going to acknowledge that the manifesto the Labour Party fought the campaign on was a manifesto that in many respects sought to use parliament to construct a society much more centred on caring and sharing than in any election for decades.

This meant that lots of 21 to 44 year olds who didn't see the 2015 election as offering anything went to the polls this time. The Ashcroft data has 27% of 18–24 year olds voting for the first time but I presume that includes those too young to vote in 2015 so the 9% first time voters in the 25–34 year old age group give a better snapshot. In contrast only 1% of those over 65 said they hadn't voted in 2015 [p13]. Labour this time around won 29% of Lib-Dems and 58% of Green voters from the 2015 election, but as these were two smaller parties they only combine to about 12% of the Labour vote. 8% of the total Labour vote had not voted in 2015, in fact Labour captured 59% of those voters who had not voted in 2015, the Tories only 22% [p5 + 14].

Of course we've seen something like this before in recent history, Obama with a somewhat similar message mobilised a lot of people who normally saw little point in voting in 2008. In a warning to those who see change coming through Corbyn, Obama's record in power — where he almost completely failed to deliver on the 'hope' agenda — meant he lost almost all of these voter's by 2012. And they all understandably stayed at home for Clinton and her 'America is great already' schlock. Trump is the cost when electoral mobilisations succeed but prove unable to deliver on their promises, few get fooled a second or third time, they stay at home.

Indeed when we look at the exit poll data we have to wonder why the hell are older voters so comparatively reactionary, even on the issues like the NHS where they need 'caring and sharing'? It's not like older people are having it easy in 2017 Britain, as Fionnghuala who read an early draft of this section points out *"According to data collected by Age UK (2016) 26% of older people 'are just about getting by' or finding it difficult', with 27% of those over 60 'worried about the cost of food, and 41% are worried about the cost of heating their homes in the winter.' The 'from the cradle to the grave' mentality has truly vanished from UK society with over 90% of all care-home provision in the hands of the private sector and rent costing double the average state pension older people are being cast aside by the state."* And ahead of this election Theresa May gave extra incentives to the older generations to not vote Tory by carelessly unveiling the 'dementia tax'

So why despite all this did the over 65s so overwhelmingly vote Tory? A speculative explanation is that these age groups have gone through previous rounds of Labour Party promise and disappointment and so were the generations least likely to believe that Corbyn in power will deliver. Indeed that there were almost no new voters amongst the 65+ group confirms that such potential 'hope' voters stayed at home. There is a major warning here for those who favour the electoralist approach to change, that is if you get power and fail to deliver you don't necessarily get a second chance with that generation. Fool me once, shame on you, fool me a second time shame on me, comes into play.

Policy V Personality

The Ashcroft data shows the very different reasons to vote Tory or Labour with a set of 8 questions that cover motivations that range from party loyalty to policy promises. Across the board the Labour voters opted for policy options like 'I preferred the promises..' (26%) while the Tories went for loyalty and skills "I thought the leader.." (25%). The major exception being the Brexit negotiations where 31% of Tories against only 3% of Labour voters selecting on that basis [p28+29]. Again confirming that the Labour Leavers don't see Brexit as central. When you cross check against the age groups you see these preferences are very strongly reflected in an

identical fashion there, older votes being motivated by party loyalty and leadership, younger ones by policy and goals.

The final and strongest confirmation of the ‘caring, sharing’ argument made here is the responses to the questions about the most important of the “wider issues facing the country” [p40, 41, 42]

For Labour voters these were NHS (a massive 33%), Austerity (11%), Brexit (8%) and Poverty (6%).

For Tory voters these were Brexit (a massive 48%), Leadership (13%), Economy/Jobs (11%), Immigration (9%) and Terrorism (7%).

Only 3% of Tory voters identified the NHS as most important. The breakdown by age group of the NHS as the most important issue is quite startling. If this was motivated by self-interest, people wanting a good service for themselves, then you would expect the older groups to be the ones saying the NHS was most important – they after all will be the ones most in need of medical care in the short term. In fact the pattern is the complete opposite, those least likely to need care for themselves, the largest percentage who put the NHS first were from the 18–24 age group care (27%) while only 13% of the 65+ group did so.

Something similar is seen in the concern about immigration, if that was created by job competition and driven by self interest then we’d expect the young to care the most and the old the least. Again the pattern is reversed, 7% of the over 65s, almost all of whom are retired so not competing for jobs, identified immigration as the most important concern while only 2% off the 18–24 age group where unemployment is concentrated identified immigration as most important.

The high correlation between the Labour vote and the youth vote on these two questions tells us that the youth vote is motivated much more by ideology – the desire for a caring, sharing society than primarily by self-interest. Likewise the older voters also are motivated by ideology, but a much grimmer ‘me and mine’ which sees people who are different as a problem. In terms of the progressive youth vote this isn’t just the Labour party activists saying the right thing but voters as demonstrated by the NHS 27% as the most important issue for 18–24 year olds. Emma Rees of Momentum in a post election piece reveals that they had about 100,000 activists who checked to see where they should canvass and 10,000 who pledged to spend election day knocking on doors to get Labour voters out, that’s a tiny, tiny fraction of that 27% even if all them were in the 18–24 age group.

The influence of ideology, positive and negative is an important reality to acknowledge. There is a section of the left that sometimes falls into believing only self-interest can mobilise the working class and conversely that anything that might be perceived as being against that self interest should be avoided as divisive. In British politics this has led to some who would otherwise be quite hard left offering de facto support for immigration controls rather than arguing against the segment of the working class that wants those controls. What swung the 17% of 2015 UKIP voters who went Labour this time [p5] and what can retain them – assumed answers to this and to the importance of that segment (5% of the Labour total [p14]) can lead to some pretty terrible political decisions which is why this data is important.

General attitudes

The Ashcroft poll continues with asking a number of questions about social attitudes. These also confirm the pattern I argue above, with a ‘caring & sharing’ youth vote contrasted with a ‘look after me and mine’ older vote.

Q summary: If you work hard it is possible to be very successful in Britain [p49+50]

Age – 70% of those 65 and older agree as against only 46% of 18–24 year olds.

Labour 36% agree, Tories 84% agree

Q summary: The government should do more wealth redistribution through taxation [p55-57]

Age – 63% of 18–24 year olds agree as against only 42% of 65+

Labour 79%, Tories 23% agree

Q summary: People have a right to housing, healthcare etc [p61-63]

Age – 76% 18–24 year olds agree as against only 45% of 65+

Labour 81% agree, Tories 29%

If the high ratio of 65%+ voters who seem to be against policies that would be good for them like a right to healthcare it’s worth remembering again this is not a sample of all 65+ people in Britain but only of those who voted (themselves a subset of those allowed to vote). And as we will see in Appendix 2 this voting segment is disproportionately drawn from the more wealthy class divisions. We will also see that women opt for the ‘caring and sharing’ options in higher numbers and in what would not be expected there are more men voting in the 65+ group than women, 54% against 46%. Given that this is the age category in which the greater life expectancy for women over men starts to play out that difference is startling, if anything you’d expect the reverse. The 18–24 age group was 60% women, 40% men (the overall total for the Ashcroft voters was 54% women, 46% men) [p123].

The reactionary vote

The final section of the exit poll looks at social attitudes. Now it’s hardly going to be a surprise to anyone on the left that the reactionary end of this is concentrated amongst Tory voters. It’s still worth throwing these in to underline the nature of that vote but more significantly we again see how age group skewed it is. It would be interesting to compare with other countries but my suspicion at least is that what we are seeing is the ideological victory of Thatcherite neoliberalism in winning over that section of the older age groups that has continued to vote. It’s not obtainable from this data but as already stated my suspicion would be that there is a large over 65 segment that learned that voting for Labour made no difference to what then happened to them when Labour won, so they also stayed at home this time resulting in the bizarre reactionary age skew visible here.

This section was a set of questions asking people to assign a score out of 10 indicating to what extent they considered things like feminism a force for good or a force for ill. For reasons of space I’m going to simplify this to the aggregate percentages considering each of them a force for ill, check Ashcroft’s raw data for more subtle results.

Feminism force for ill: Lab 10%, Con 25%; 18–24 12%, 65+22% [p87]

Immigration for ill: Lab 23%, Con 49%; 18–24 16%, 65+ 41% [p117, 119]

Capitalism for ill: Lab 36%, Con 13% ; 18–24 32%, 65+ 21% [p111, 113]

So in terms of ideology we see a concentration of pro-capitalist, anti-feminist and anti-migration opinions amongst the older age groups that voted, and, of course, amongst Tory voters. I've taken three examples out of this section of the data, but this pattern is consistent with the other questions Ashcroft asked as well.

Conclusions

Election and referendum results are often the most important measures we have access to of the opinions of the section of the population motivated to vote. But a huge amount of left discussion of election and referenda results is based on assertions about the election result itself with all sorts of inbuilt assumptions about class, gender etc based on nothing much beyond suiting what the author wants to argue. Detailed exit polls of the Ashcroft type which ask a wide range of additional questions beyond 'how did you vote' allow us to test those assertions and assumptions. And hopefully, as I've tried to do here, to construct an analysis based on looking at the data.

This June 2017 election is strange in that it's seen as a massive victory for the left even though the left was actually defeated and the most likely result is a very right wing informal minority government. The victory isn't in the result but in the large increase in the Labour vote in a situation where the leadership very deliberately moved the party to the left in the face of extreme media hostility.

Digging into that victory is precisely why this exit poll is unusually valuable. We might have assumptions in what the substantial increase in the Labour party vote means, we might want to assert certain reasons for it but looking at the data allows us to confirm or deny these assertions and assumptions in a way that hopefully reveals additional and more important factors

I didn't expect the clear ideological shift to the left that the data reveals, if anything I expected that self-interest as measured by free tuition fees would top the interest list for the 18-24s. I had also no clear idea what the role of the Brexit vote would be within the Labour vote — although I certainly considered the Brexit referendum to be disastrous in unleashing a reactionary agenda. Indeed here I think there is evidence for a Brexit effect I did not expect, a reaction against the sense of what that vote was that generated the emergence of a substantial progressive and youth based movement, if one so far limited to electoralism.

The electoralism is what concerns me. As you probably know by now I'm an anarchist and anarchists don't think fundamental change can come about through electoralism. It's a top down system that requires us to put our power in the hands of leaders we then have no control over. And those leaders, even when well intentioned are then subjected to all sorts of corrupting influences. If they get to form a government that government then discovers that it has far less power to determine major issues than expected, a wide range of legal, semi-legal and even illegal forces stands in its way. This is a very brief summary of the problems I outline in the article Why elections fail to bring about real change — the 10 filters that make them ineffective for the radical left

So I look at this result with a certain weary 'If I wanted to go there I wouldn't start from here' attitude. It's not simply a question of thinking the Corbyn program is not radical enough. It's

more that in recognising the improvements it would offer I don't see a movement that could ensure Corbyn in power would be able to overcome the obstacles outlined above.

The historic experience of the left in power when it lacks a powerful movement in the workplaces, communities and streets is not only that it fails to implement its policies but it fails to even try. Faced with capital flight in particular it quickly becomes clear — within the confines of parliamentary politics — there is little chance of success and will be a huge cost to failure. The retreat is called before any significant if doomed battle is fought and that destroys hope in the possibility of socialist transformation, possibly as the age figures in the exit poll suggest, for generations. In some cases that hope then flows into extra parliamentary movements, but generally only when they are already strong enough to pose a clear alternative. That's certainly not the situation in Britain today.

However we are living in a very different time for movement building, one where social networking means that sharp changes in direction can happen very quickly and without requiring huge resources. The Corbyn Momentum campaign is the formal structure around which this movement emerged but alongside it are all sorts of Facebook and Whatsapp groups, and dozens of other instant communication methods outside the control of the party. When the Tories get themselves together and start to rule those networks may well shift their facing, away from the narrow electoral terrain they won ground on and instead towards the communities, workplaces and educational institution that will bear the brunt of Tory attack.

Appendix 1: How accurate is Ashcroft

The Ashcroft poll is an exit poll asking 14384 voters how they voted. It's somewhat off, Tories got 1% more than he predicted, Labour 2% more, LD 1% less, SNP 1% less, UKIP 1% less. But that's pretty close to the actual results so we can presume the other responses are accurate.

With the finer graduations the accuracy will decrease, what that means is that small differences of 1–3% may simply be artefacts of the sampling method rather than an indication of real differences amongst all actual voters. What I select out above are large differences, large enough so that even if the exact size is a bit off the general pattern should remain true.

Appendix 2 — complex intersections

Class

The Ashcroft exit poll included divisions into classes but unfortunately not the capitalist class / family business (middle class) / worker that would have been very useful. Instead it uses the ABCDE classification system which was also the case with his Brexit exit poll. In comparison with the other groupings you have to start making a lot of assumptions and approximations to use the data here to talk about class in a way useful to anarchists, below I do what can be done.

I discussed the limitations of this NRS class classification system in my piece on Brexit as follows

“Definitions of who belongs in what class are enormously controversial and could be fought over all day. Left groups tend to use the term working class in both a broad

sense that includes almost everyone (if they are trying to recruit you) and in a narrow sense (if they want to denounce you)...

He uses the 50 year old NRS system, a common market research classification. NRS standing for National Readership Survey at its origins lie in advertisers' desire to know what sort of people read different publications in order to crudely target their advertising on that basis. Broadsheets often boast of having a high ABC1 readership to attract high value advertising as that segment has much greater disposable income.

From the Wikipedia table of the NRS

A – upper middle class

Higher managerial, administrative or professional

B – middle class

Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional

C1 – lower middle class

Supervisory or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional

C2 – skilled working class

Skilled manual workers

D – working class

Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers

E – non working

Casual or lowest grade workers, pensioners, and others who depend on the welfare state for their income

The NRS class classification system is flawed, apart from anything else the ruling class are invisible in it, presumably because although the power and wealth of that group is enormous their numbers are too few to make a distinct division worthwhile. The classification being 50 years old is rather tied to old ideas about the relative merits of manual labour and desk jobs, desk jobs are middle class as it appears are retail and service workers.”

So this system only crudely maps to the way anarchists and others on the left talk about class, the capitalist class vanishes into AB along with the family business owners and some categories of well paid skilled workers. Computer programmers who spend their entire day labouring to create wealth for mega corporations probably end up in A or B. The table below shows the percentage of voters in each category in the Election exit poll.

36% – 5905 = A+B

22% – 3791 = C1

11%- 1912 = C2

16% – 2360 = D+E

So as the NRS labels them a rather extraordinary 68% of voters were middle class and above (the ABC1s). It's worth noting in passing that in 2015 under the NRS classification 54% of people in the UK were middle class and above, the very sizeable 14% higher boost when the sample is amongst voters is a measure of the greater participation of this group in electoralism. The C2DEs are only 28% of voters in 2017 but 46% of the population. C2DEs are likely to understand that in general politicians don't act in their interests.

Again I'd prefer "looking at whether people have to make a living through working for others (the working class), have enough skills, tools and space to independently work for themselves (the middle class) or have so much wealth that most of their income comes from having the rest of us work for them. For the UK that would give you more of a 80%+ working class, 20%- middle class and 1%- ruling class, with the actual section of that class that rules being more like the top 0.01%."

All those disclaimers issued its still not very surprising to see that 43% of ABs voted Tory, and 34% of them voted Labour. A ratio more or less reversed with DEs with 33% voting Tory, and 43% voting Labour. It's not so clear cut with the two C classes, C1 actually being more inclined to vote Labour 41% than C2s at 38%. C1s were 40% Tory, C2s 43%. [p4]

Taking the relative percentage of each voter block into account it's clear that the AB vote is crucial for the Tory victory. Labour were substantially ahead if you total just C1C2DE. Within this however the Tories have a substantial lead amongst C2s, what the NRS calls skilled workers. It's worth realising though that the NRS system would probably include some plumbers and other skilled construction workers – who actually own their own business and may well employ a labour at least part time – as C2s. In left terms these are more usefully understood as middle class because they own their own means of production and may be small employers.

The Financial Times also looked at the Ashcroft data using this NRS class classification system. On that basis it argued that "*class no longer divides Britons at the ballot box, another characteristic has stepped into its place: age*". While this claim obviously crosses over with what I write above I suspect that the real cause of this effect is the use of the NRS system which increasingly no longer provides any sort of useful indicator of class in the way we might find useful. The distinctions it makes between 'middle class' desk jobs and working class 'dirt & oil' jobs no longer has the relevancy it might have in the 1950s. The nature of work is very different but so too are the effects race and gender have on class composition, more on this below.

But if you want to stick with the NRS system the transformation is indeed huge. In comparison with the 1974 election the FT points out that the "*middle classes were 40 percentage points more pro-Conservative than the electorate as a whole, and the lower working classes were 32 points more pro-Labour: a total partisan gulf between the classes of 72 points. But fast-forward 43 years to today, and the gap has plummeted to just 15 per cent.*"

The FT analysis is really just another wake up call to a Nostalgic Left with an idealist view of a working class that can be brought into being in a pure form through the excommunication of heretics who are preventing this miracle occurring. The route to a recomposition of the working class instead exists through struggles that will create unity across its many modern identities, ideology has a role in shaping these but not at the level where idealism can create the class regardless of these realities.

Age, Gender & disability acting on class (and how people voted)

A final note on these ABC1C2DE voters. The proportion in each group is not consistent across gender and in particular age. This is probably quite different to the 1950s when almost all women were living with parents or a husband and probably assigned to the same class as the 'head of household'.

Let's look at escape from the workforce through retirement first [p145-46], 35% of ABs are retired (who are 31% of 65+ age group) as against only 24% of C2s (22% of 65+), and 28% of DEs

(24% of 65+). So we find far from the same proportion of people in each class being found in each age group it varies quite significantly with the higher classes have a higher proportion of older (and retired) people than the lower classes. What's important here is simply recognising that this is significant. The optimistic interpretation could be class mobility across the life span or on the pessimistic (and to my mind more likely) side it could be an indication of a society where the divide between rich and poor is increasing and so class mobility almost non-existent.

In terms of gender [p129] 46% of Men were ABs and 17% were DE while only 38% of women were AB but 22% were DE. Outright home ownership [p135] also reflected this divide with 44% of men but only 38% of women saying they owned their home outright. Although the classification is crude this is a useful reminder that you can't talk about class without considering how it intersects with gender and other factors including disability. 15% of ABs self-reported a disability of 12 months duration that has an effect on day to day activities as against 41% of DEs and 20% of both Cs [p156]

In summary these stats show that the upper class individuals were more likely to be older, male and able bodied while the lower classes were more likely to be younger, women and disabled.

Gender in particular also had a major impact on who you voted for. 43% of men voted Tory, 35% vote Labour. This reversed for women with only 39% voting Tory as against 41% Labour [p4]. *(Note — as I published this a YouGov poll came out that did not show these gender differences)*

In other words if only women voted there would probably have been a Labour majority and the Tories would certainly have been nowhere near forming a government. This is reflected in an even stronger sense in the question asking if capitalism was a force for good, 51% of men thought it was as opposed to only 35% of women agreeing with that statement [p111].

A major flaw in the gender data is that it's a binary man / woman that adds up to 100%. I've recently seen an academic survey that at least offered 'other' as an additional option and among a 18-24 population 3% selected that, I wonder what happened with the Ashcroft data in that regard, were such people forced to choose or perhaps even dropped from the data

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