



488

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PHONEY POPULISM MEETS IT MATCH – GENUINE RADICALISM

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Voters under 25 flocked to the polls in the British general election which humiliated Theresa May and saw the Conservative party lose its majority in the House of Commons. An election called by the prime minister allegedly to strengthen her hand in Brexit negotiations produced exactly the contrary result. How the Brexit negotiations start and what form they might take is anybody's guess. What is not in doubt is that what appeared to be the cast iron rule of the past generation, that old people turn out on polling day and young people do not, seems to have been overturned. The impact of younger voters finding their voice deserves to be measured. The reasons behind this change also need to be understood.

In the 2005 election, just 38% of the 18-24 year olds bothered to vote. In 2015 that figure had risen to 43%. By last year's referendum and contrary to initial appearances at the time, 64% cast a ballot. Reliable breakdowns of voting by age are not yet available but, on the eve of this election, pollsters Starvation reported that 82% of 18-24 year olds intended to vote. A more than doubling of the figure in just over ten years heralds a new willingness of young people to channel their hunger for change towards the traditional democratic process, rather than just through marches and protests.

Nowhere was this more keenly felt than in university towns. The Labour Party's promise to scrap tuition fees explains why the former Liberal leader Nick Clegg lost his seat in Sheffield Hallam and why the party captured Canterbury which the Conservatives have held for a century. It was not just students who turned out massively

for Labour, it was young people across the class spectrum. Jeremy Corbyn offered to reinstall free school meals – recently scrapped by Theresa May, better housing and gave hope to an age group which has paid a heavy economic price for the austerity policies of successive Conservative governments since 2010. Young voters backed Labour over Conservatives in the general election by 51 points more than the national average. Meanwhile over 65s favoured the Tories by 32 points more than the average. Over the course of seven years, the partisan age gap has rocketed from 14 points to 83.

To add insult to injury, many younger voters remain deeply convinced that the older generation had ambushed them in last year's Brexit poll, blighting their future. Younger voters are more socially liberal than their parents and are more likely to believe in a Britain which is "open" to the outside world, Europe in particular, than "closed". Second they are more likely to be graduates than the older generation – as a result three quarters were in favour of Remain. This will lead political leaders to spend less time protecting the incomes and benefits of the old and more time addressing the needs of the young who find it far more difficult than a generation ago to buy a house, start a family, let alone get a steady job.

To his credit, Jeremy Corbyn spotted these trends which allowed Labour to build a coalition across the age groups who have all suffered at the hands of the last two Conservative governments and felt they would be winners under Labour. Personally he appeared a far more attractive personality than a prime minister who kept on repeating she would provide strong and stable leadership while never spelling out in detail her policies. To pretend you are Queen Theresa standing "on the cliffs of Dover (shaking your) spear of sovereignty at the damn continentals" as Fintan O'Toole wittily put in the New York Review of Books made the prime minister look ridiculous. "Phony populism came up against a more genuine brand of anti-establishment radicalism that convinced the young and the marginalized that they had something to come out and vote for."

Corbyn faced a campaign of vilification in a hysterically jingoistic Tory press, especially the Daily Mail which has not been equalled since the 1980s assault on Michael Foot. Theresa May's allies in that newspaper and other Tory dailies have, since the referendum last year, resorted to the language of the French revolutionary terror, characterising recalcitrant judges and parliamentarians as "enemies of the people" and "saboteurs" and the Labour leader as a "terrorist". They cheer led the idea of a one-party state and implied that the opposition would be reduced to a smattering of socialist cranks – ie Jeremy Corbyn, or traitorous Scots ie Nicola Sturgeon. The result is that many middle class Remainers voted Labour even in that bastion of upper class London, Kensington. The younger generation reengaged massively in the electoral process which can only be good for the health of democracy in the United Kingdom. They forced the crash landing of a terrible actor who mouths a script in which there is no plot and no credible ending.