

## Corbyn revives left v. right debate

Labour's 'zen master' could become PM

by Meghnad Desai in London

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Two earthquakes have hit British politics. The first was Prime Minister Theresa May's gamble of calling a general election three years earlier than necessary. She mistimed it badly, given she had already invoked Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon, which started the two-year period for negotiations on Britain's exit from the European Union.

May wasted seven weeks over the needless poll and lost the meagre Conservative majority bequeathed by David Cameron, her predecessor. The episode came across as a meticulously planned train-wreck. May's position is precarious. Her power is drained. Both parliament and the EU's negotiators understand this. The result will be neither a 'soft' nor 'hard' Brexit – it will be a mangled Brexit.

The second earthquake is in the opposition Labour party. Many expected a massive defeat and a subsequent attempt to oust Jeremy Corbyn, who took over the party's leadership in 2015, with a view to reconstructing Labour for elections in 2022. But Corbyn proved to be a crowd-puller. In this campaign, he was brilliant. He obviously loved every moment. According to my new colleague Chris Ostrowski, who joined OMFIF this week and stood as Labour's candidate in Watford, where the party achieved a 16% swing against the Conservatives, 'Jeremy's effect was remarkable. He generated a lot of enthusiasm and his new politics won over the people of Watford.'

Corbyn is one of the few people I know who holds beliefs which he will not trade for more popular ones. Such rare consistency came across in interviews with the BBC. Though he knew it would win votes to say he would 'press the nuclear button', he refused – Corbyn is a life-long advocate of unilateral nuclear disarmament.

All the 35 years I have known Corbyn, I have always had pleasant memories of our conversations. I got to know him during my tenure as an activist and later Labour party chair in Islington South, a neighbour to Corbyn's North Islington constituency.

The leaking of the Labour manifesto was a great help. For a week, newspapers had no other topic to discuss. Every proposal was analysed, shock and horror expressed. And then the shocks were dismissed. Labour got a lot of free publicity.

Corbyn means to carry on in uncompromising socialist style. The media attacked him but there was little new to say – Corbyn has not changed his views for 35 years. His critics' ripostes no longer impress older voters. Being hated by the tabloids makes Corbyn a hero to younger voters.

The Conservative manifesto was an unmitigated disaster. The contrast with Corbyn was loud and clear. From then on, May's lead over Corbyn began to slip. She was nervous and stilted, and the phrase 'Maybot', coined by journalist John Crace, became her moniker. Corbyn, in comparison, was described as a cross between a zen master and Star Wars character Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Momentum, the left-wing grassroots movement, showed its skill in social media by connecting Corbyn with young voters through platforms like Facebook. They made films and went where the traditional print media would never go. The youth vote made all the difference. Instead of losing seats, Corbyn delivered more than his predecessors in 2015 and 2010.

Corbyn is reviving right-wing v. left-wing ideological politics in Britain. That debate had disappeared under Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's centrist 'third way'. This election, too, was a return to two-party politics in the UK. 82% of all votes cast went to either the Labour party or the Conservatives, compared with 67% in 2015.

The reconstruction of the Labour party is postponed. Rebuilding the Conservative party has become the more urgent task – but it is impossible. Meanwhile, the EU deadline looms. Come March 2019, Brexit negotiations must be concluded. It is not outside the realm of possibility that, by then, the zen master will be prime minister.

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