



It's all over now, baby blue. Joe Giddens/PA

How Labour failed to connect with the British working class

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Labour entered the UK general election with a double handicap. Brexit was peeling away many of its 2017 voters, especially among the working class in the north of England and West Midlands. Jeremy Corbyn was also hugely unpopular – and perceptions of which leader will make the best prime minister are a major voting driver.

Both factors devastated Labour in the north of England and West Midlands as the so-called Labour “red wall” crumbled. Labour’s fate was probably sealed even before the election was called. Yet these handicaps were aggravated by Labour’s campaign strategy, which was poor enough to turn defeat into disaster.

To understand what went wrong with the campaign, we need to step back and ask what makes an effective campaign strategy. There are three separate factors: the communicator, the message and the message transmission.

1. The communicator

Many voters today are instinctively sceptical about anything that emanates from parties, particularly their leaders. Research indicates that voters’ views on what politicians say are heavily influenced by

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the extent to which they seem trustworthy, that is, can be relied upon to make truthful statements; and have the personal qualities and competence needed for leadership.

On both measures Corbyn was viewed poorly, even next to Johnson, who has his own well documented problems. Corbyn's low rating was partly the result of unremittingly hostile media coverage. Yet even the most sympathetic observer would struggle to view his communication abilities, and his capacity to inspire trust and confidence, as other than mediocre.

Two obvious examples were his refusal to apologise over anti-semitism until late in the day and his bungled response to a question over whether he watched the Queen's Christmas message. These demonstrated his lack of mental agility, verbal fluency and emotional intelligence.

Jeremy Corbyn refuses to apologise over anti-Semitism allegati...



How voters view a leader in an election campaign is also filtered by their existing image. Corbyn was already the least popular opposition leader in half a century – seen as unpatriotic; unwilling to stand up for British interests; hostile to treasured institutions like the military and the monarchy; and too weak on terrorism. As a result, policies that may otherwise have been well received were treated with disdain or disbelief. It did not help that Labour offered up loyalists such as Laura Pidcock, Rebecca Long-Bailey and Andy McDonald for media interviews, while it locked down more accomplished performers like Keir Starmer.

2. The message

A policy will be credible to the extent it is seen as affordable and deliverable. Labour seemed to have problems grasping this. Hardly a day elapsed without the party committing billions to another worthy cause: for the NHS, education, public sector pay, benefits, pensions compensation for “Waspi women”, multiple nationalisations, free broadband, and so on.

Labour strategists seemed to think that the sheer scale, generosity and radicalism of the programme would enthuse voters supposedly desperate for transformative social reforms. In fact, evidence from

focus groups showed that voters were massively sceptical about Labour's ability to fund and deliver its pledges.

"Where are they going to get the money from?" was a constant refrain. It played straight into the hands of the age-old Conservative motif that Labour can't be trusted with your money and will bankrupt the economy.

The Tories understood that voters rarely follow policy detail, so a party needs to hammer away relentlessly on a few carefully chosen messages: above all, "get Brexit done". Labour was much more scattergun. Rather than highlighting key Tory weaknesses like the NHS or social care for the elderly, it seemed to flit between policies, never settling on one for very long.



The Boris bulldozer. Stefan Rousseau/PA

Many voters seemed almost obsessed with getting Brexit done. But both Labour and their 2017 supporters were seriously divided over whether it was desirable. The leadership tried to balance these conflicting pressures through "constructive ambiguity", but this made them seem indecisive, vacillating and confused.

Brexit also represented something deeper: a collision between Remain-voting civic-minded social liberals and Leave-voting ethno-nationalist social conservatives. This cut across left-right divisions and had been losing Labour votes in its heartlands for years. For many working-class social conservatives, Corbyn and his inner circle embodied the "metropolitan liberal elite".

Certainly, there is no easy resolution for a party that cannot out-compete the Tories over issues like immigration and law and order. But the fact that Labour promoted policies that could have been expressly designed to infuriate such people – the pledge to teach British imperialism as part of the curriculum and apologise for the country's past colonial misdeeds, for instance - did not help.

3. Transmission

Trying to change attitudes in a short election campaign is usually fruitless. Parties instead try to ensure that issues that benefit them preoccupy the public mind by securing generous coverage in the media. Labour was heavily handicapped in this “air war” by the predominantly right-wing slant of the print media. This has a knock-on effect on the BBC, since the editorial agendas of its news programmes appear to be unduly influenced by the press.

This meant that Labour needed particularly to use effective and sophisticated techniques for designing and transmitting its arguments. You do this by **developing** an overarching narrative that identifies problems, interprets events and invokes values in a way that mobilises public support for its policy agenda. Margaret Thatcher used to do this very well with notions like, “you cannot spend what you haven’t earned”, using homilies about family housekeeping and balanced budgets.

Labour lacked such a narrative, opting instead to **berate** the rich and corporate elites in a simplistic way. The underlying reason was the Corbynista conviction that people’s views reflected their class, and that the working classes were naturally left wing. By this reasoning, Labour’s faltering hold on the working-class vote in recent years was due to doubts about its determination to pursue truly radical policies for workers.



Corbynistas out in force. Owen Humphreys/PA

Labour saw its principal task as convincing these voters that the compromises of the past were over and that the party could be relied upon to implement promised radical social change. It followed from this that a programme of sustained political education, persuasion and engagement was not necessary. The net result was that, for the first time since the second world war, the Tories gained the largest proportion of the working-class vote.

Labour's ideological preconceptions seemed to distract from a cold, dispassionate analysis of the facts. Deluding others is wrong; deluding yourself is fatal. Corbyn's team were all but reduced to relying on events to derail the opposition. Without any great change of fortune, the die was cast. The question for the future is, what lessons will Labour learn from this calamity?

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