THE AUSTRALIAN

A tunnel, a light … but Brexit express a mystery train

HENRY ERGAS
Follow @HenryErgas

By **HENRY ERGAS,** COLUMNIST
12:00AM NOVEMBER 1, 2019 •

With the House of Commons finally agreeing to an early election, the polls point to a substantial Conservative victory.

That is partly because Boris Johnson — who was widely dismissed as a clown when he took over the party's leadership at the end of July — has raised support for the Tories from the catastrophic low of 20-25 per cent it had reached before he became Prime Minister to 35-40 per cent today.

But it is also because Jeremy Corbyn has proven utterly incapable of reversing the 20-percentage-point drop in support for Labour that began as a gradual erosion last year and then accelerated into a precipitous fall in the first half of this year.

To say that is not to ignore the risk Labour poses to the chances of a Conservative victory. Thanks to a surge in membership following Corbyn's 2015 campaign for the leadership, Labour had more than 500,000 members last year, compared with 150,000 for the Conservatives.

While the membership of both parties may have dropped since, Labour's lead remains very large, giving it an advantage in local campaigning that it used extremely effectively in the 2017 election.

Moreover, with Labour standing little chance of winning an outright majority, and in any event placing no weight on fiscal rectitude, its spending promises are likely to be even more unrestrained than they were two years ago. That could well resonate mightily with the voters who believe that public services have deteriorated and who are struggling with increases in fees and charges.

But whether it will be enough to save Labour from a serious defeat is questionable. To begin with, there is, as in Australia, a yawning gap between Labour and its traditional working-class base.

Throughout his leadership, Corbyn has stressed the need for the party to return to its roots as a movement of "working people organising together for a better life", as he put it in 2015. And Labour's share of working-class votes did rise in 2017, particularly among those living in private rental housing, as did its support among workers in lower-paid, routine clerical jobs.

But those gains were far from stellar. In effect, despite a disastrously mismanaged campaign, Theresa May was able to convince voters that the Tories were tougher than Labour on social issues, notably immigration, where Corbyn's lurch to the left had left Labour seriously exposed.

As a result, the Conservatives outperformed Labour among working-class voters, with the likelihood of a working-class voter backing the Tories (calculated corrected for age and education) almost doubling between the 2015 and the 2017 elections.

Additionally, and importantly, Brexit was not an especially salient issue in 2017, as both major parties pledged to honour the results of the referendum.

That affected turnout among working-class voters, whose overall propensity to vote has declined precipitately in recent decades. With Brexit one of the few issues which now brings them to the polls, turnout in the 2017 election among working-class voters with low education levels was more than 30 percentage points below that of tertiary-educated professionals, the greatest such gap on record.

The working-class voters who went to the polls were therefore those with the strongest party loyalty, somewhat boosting Labour's share of the working-class vote.

But Brexit will dominate the political debate this time around. And in that debate, Corbyn's ambiguous stance, and his reluctance to resolve the differences within his own party, will contrast with the clarity of Johnson's position.

As a result, even if some working-class votes go to the Brexit Party, the Conservatives could benefit both from a steep rise in working-class turnout and from a further increase in their share of that electorate's votes. A higher turnout among retirees, who also shunned the polls in 2017, would compound the Tories' gains, helping to offset likely swings against them in Scotland and Wales.

At the same time, Labour seems set to suffer serious losses among better-educated voters.

In 2017, "the exam-passing classes", as British historian Vernon Bogdanor once called them, flocked to Labour, convincing themselves that, far from being a grenade-tossing fanatic, Corbyn was a twinkling, bearded elf.

With Labour promising to abolish university fees, "deal with" tertiary debt and boost public - sector pay, students and recent graduates turned out in vast numbers, inflicting heavy defeats on the Tories in university towns such as previously true-blue Canterbury. Joining them in backing Labour were affluent "Remainers" intent on punishing the Tories for having called the referendum.

Somewhat paradoxically, given the ferocity of its "anti-austerity" campaign, Labour therefore did best, compared with 2015, in the seats where average incomes had risen most over the previous five years, while losing ground where they had fallen.

And while working-class voters, the stated target of Labour's swing to the left, proved more likely to vote for the Tories, voters with a university degree were (all else equal) nine percentage points more likely to vote for Labour.

Since then, however, Corbyn's charisma has worn off, as ongoing accusations of anti-Semitism, the thuggish tactics of his backers, and divisions in the parliamentary party take their toll. While he is unlikely to lose the support of students and young graduates, the large gains Labour made in 2017 among 25-34 and 35-44-year-olds may well be reversed, with those voters instead backing the Liberal Democrats.

The Lib Dems are poised to attract the bulk of affluent "Remain" voters, who have been frightened off by Corbyn's deteriorating image and by Labour's ever more extreme policies, such as its recent pledge to abolish private schools.

Of course, none of that means the Conservatives have the election in the bag. After all, May had a massive lead in the polls when the 2017 election was called — a lead that collapsed after her appearance in front of a live studio audience less than a week before the election, when she patronisingly told a nurse complaining about her pay that "there isn't a magic money tree that we can shake and that suddenly provides for everything that people want".

And, despite the possibility of a tactical alliance between the Brexit Party and the Tories, the split of votes between Labour, the Tories, the Lib Dems and the Brexit Party could still result in a hung parliament, perpetuating the chaos.

But at least Johnson can now see some light at the end of the seemingly endless Brexit tunnel. In what is set to be an exceptionally vicious campaign, his challenge is to ensure it doesn't prove to be a train coming the other way.