

Labour's Defeat

In his novel *The Northern Clemency* (2008), Philip Hensher described the Sheffield neighbourhood in which I lived at the time (Letters, 20 February). It was in the least affluent corner of the city's most affluent constituency, Sheffield Hallam. The people there lived secretive lives, as Hensher saw it, and were narrow-minded and selfish. That wasn't my experience. And in December's election, Sheffield Hallam returned Olivia Blake as its MP – for Labour.

Hensher will see what he chooses to see, and he is unlikely ever to see things the way I do, even if we did walk the same streets. He takes issue with James Butler's claim that Jeremy Corbyn received a level of opprobrium almost unprecedented in public life, contrasting the abuse Corbyn received with the treatment Margaret Thatcher got when in office. But Hensher could at least recognise that where Thatcher was a prime minister vilified for what she did in power, Corbyn was a man who never became prime minister vilified for fear that he might one day hold power.

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[Note: version submitted follows before being edited to fit the space that the Review had to publish it.]

Philip Hensher (LRB 20 February), in commenting on James Butler's excellent article on the December election, takes issue with Butler's claim that Jeremy Corbyn received a level of public opprobrium almost unprecedented in public life.

Hensher contrasts the abuse Corbyn received while attempting to become Prime Minister with that Margaret Thatcher received when in office, and for all her life after that. The crucial difference is that Margaret Thatcher was vilified for what she did. Jeremy Corbyn was vilified because of what it was imaged he and his party might do. The Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn committed itself to increasing public spending in the UK to a level just below that of Germany. They promised to do this – in part – by raising taxes on the highest paid twentieth of people in the UK, in effect to the levels paid in Germany. Such tax rises alone would have not balanced the books, as they do not in Germany, but they help foster an economy that can support normal European levels of public services, such as those enjoyed in Germany.

Public opprobrium was poured onto Labour's figure-head by many of those in the top twentieth who determine how public debate is fashioned. Labour threatened to end their way of life and to do so within just five years. The large majority of the highest-paid 5% opt out of the state education system, but they would not have been able to do so under the tax regime Labour was promising. Many, if not most in this small group, use private health care. This tiny group contains almost everyone who owns more than one property. A Labour party that had become a normal European Social Democratic Party was an existential threat to their way of life and so every kind of abuse was hurled in its direction. This, above all else, contributed to Johnston's victory. The largest flow of the vote was Labour voters in 2017, who had voted then for Jeremy Corbyn's party, being persuaded and encouraged not to vote at all in 2019.

In 2008 in 'The Northern Clemency', Hensher wrote a disturbing description of the neighbourhood of Sheffield I lived in at the time. It was the less affluent corner of the most affluent constituency. He misjudged one key aspect of its people. He saw them as narrow-minded and selfish, living secretive lives and out mainly for themselves. While that might have been true of some, it was and is not true of the majority. In December 2019, despite the core of that constituency being one of the most affluent parts of the North – Sheffield Hallam returned Olivia Blake as their MP – for Labour.

Hensher will see what he chooses to see, perhaps what he is destined to see, and he is unlikely to ever see things the way I do, despite us both having trod the same streets. But he could at least recognise the difference between a Prime Minister vilified for what she did, and a man who never became Prime Minister vilified and accused of all manner of crimes and misdemeanours for fear that he might one day have held power. Jeremy Corbyn's footnote in history may be far less damning than many currently believe. He was always ahead of his time. Margaret Thatcher, in contrast, once spoke in favour of flogging young people when she was an MP in 1961. And, of course, in office (from 1979-1990) she did far worse than that.

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PS for fact checking: a reference to the flogging issue (she also spoke in favour of birching earlier as an MP): <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/101088>
