

A blue tide sweeps the region to leave Labour red-faced

THE electoral map of the North East has been totally re-drawn after a series of devastating results for the Labour party in the 2019 general election.

Bishop Auckland, held by Labour since 1935; gone.

Blyth Valley, also held by Labour since 1935; gone.

Tony Blair's former constituency in Sedgefield and until this election held by Phil Wilson; gone.

North West Durham held by Jeremy Corbyn loyalist and much-touted future Labour leader, Laura Pidcock; gone.

All of the region's other seats which did not go Tory saw a huge swing to Boris Johnson's party.

The Tory leader himself joked after capturing Redcar in Cleveland that it was now 'Bluecar'.

The list of losses and near-misses for Labour is as damning as it is shocking for its leader Jeremy Corbyn's party. Labour can never take the North East for granted again.

So what exactly happened? While Corbyn's leadership has proved controversial - he described himself as being political marmite - the overarching reason can be captured in one word: Brexit.

The North East voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU at the 2016 referendum and has become as frustrated as the rest of the country at the extraordinarily slow progress towards achieving that goal.

From the start the Conservatives ruthlessly set out their stall for the election with the memorable motto 'Get Brexit Done'.

While Labour countered with its 'Not For Sale' mantra in an attempt to push the NHS to the forefront, it did not have the same impact.

It's Brexit policy - go to Europe to renegotiate a better deal than Johnson's and then put it to the people with another referendum in which Corbyn said he would stay neutral - proved too complex.

The simple - critics would say too simple - Tory message to 'Get Brexit Done' resonated more and saw tribal loyalties dating back decades in the North East forgotten.

Former mining communities where memories of the bitter miners strike of 1984/85, and the years of struggle after Margaret Thatcher, almost turned Tory.

Wansbeck in Northumberland, a Labour seat since 1945 with former NUM president Ian Lavery occupying it since 2010, held by just 814 votes compared to a 10,435 majority in 2017.

What were once seen as the

Mike Kelly



Labour heartlands were threatened by a blue tide, the political version of climate change.

While Johnson and his party contemplate their extraordinary majority - its biggest win in terms of seats since 1987 - the Labour party is about to become consumed by a painful, possibly self-destructive inquest.

There is a huge disconnect between its near 500,000 members who mostly saw Corbyn as their political soul mate and its now 203 MPs - the majority of whom have long said Corbyn was a political liability.

He has already said he will not lead the party into the next election and a new leader must be found.

Who it is has an enormous task ahead of them - not just to bridge the gap between members and MPs, but between the party and the country too.

The Conservatives have cast themselves as the party of Brexit.

Much now depends on whether Johnson can now deliver on his promises. With the mandate he has been given by the people, there is no one else to blame if he fails.

Today, the Labour party has to forge a new identity to recapture the trust and support of the people of the North East who helped form it 119 years ago.

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The voters had a choice and they went for ruins

Paul Benneworth



I'VE been working in Spain this week, so I voted by post and followed the election results by Twitter. I've been in Cordoba, an architectural jewel successively settled and rebuilt by Romans, Visigoths, the Arab Caliphate and finally the Spanish empire.

The real centrepiece for me has been the Roman bridge dating back over 2000 years.

Like many Roman bridges, it is held up on mini-arches resting on distinctive lozenge shaped mini-islands. Running across it this morning let the dawn light showed off the bridge at its atmospheric best, a sandstone arch whose sheer majesty impels you to cross.

But what made the bridge so beautiful was its meticulous preservation and landscaping with floodlights to portray this magnificent structure in its best light. It reminded me of drawings of our old Roman bridge at Pons Aelius.

But its living modern beauty was in rather stark contrast to the Roman remains I am familiar with. Hadrian's Wall is rightly a world heritage site, but it's an act of imagination to bring the ruined stables, walls and forts to life.

The famous forts we all know in Vindolanda, Chesters and Housesteads were abandoned following the Roman departure.

Scavenged for their precious stone resources, they fell into disrepair until they were rediscovered by Victorian entrepreneurs as a potential tourist attraction for the booming railway industry.

In the last thirty years, more efforts have been placed into a serious reconstruction and restoration efforts of the Roman artifacts. Segedunum visitors centre was opened at the end of the wall with a visitors' tower allowing views of the whole site.

My friends from Holland all know Hadrian's Wall, and a local museum in Twente even has a replica altar stone from a Mithras temple apparently carved by an ancient Dutchman.

So whenever friends they visit, they clamour to

see this world-famous site for themselves.

That took me to Segedunum recently for the first time in a decade, and I was surprised about how little space the whole fort took up. Given the number of legionaries and horses stationed there, the site covers little more than a local football ground might.

My one disappointment was that a restored building had been closed to the public since 2007.

The bath houses had offered a realistic view of Roman bath-house culture, but a leaky roof had made them unsafe for visitors.

I naively asked why they hadn't repaired them, and the volunteer raised their eyebrows at me quizzically. He reminded me the council spent all its money on regenerating the Spanish City, and that we just couldn't afford to repair this visitor attraction.

I've been away for so long that this line always surprises me.

It amazes me a provincial Spanish town can afford to maintain an undistinguished Roman bridge, but a large British city can't afford to restore a world-famous tourist attraction.

It's a choice of course, a choice made by people we choose to take political decisions affecting us. From 2010, we've chosen national governments delighted to squeeze northern cities to fund cash handouts to their friends in the prosperous south.

On Thursday, we had another chance to choose our leaders, and we made an objectively bad choice. We chose people on public record as saying they believe in managing the North East of England's rundown.

So we know when our social, health and education services collapse in the next five years, we'll be told we can't afford to repair it. I hope those responsible for this coming catastrophe won't be allowed to hide again in a fridge when we have the chance to kick them out.

■ Paul Benneworth is a Professor of Innovation and Regional Development at HVL in Norway with long-standing North East roots.



► A 'painful, possibly self-destructive inquest' is now likely to engulf Labour after Jeremy Corbyn led the party to a shattering defeat