Things fall apart. But then what?
Gideon Calder

This was always an unusual UK election. Partly this is to do with circumstances. The poll is happening ostensibly because current prime minister, Theresa May, wants a 'strong mandate' from across the electorate to strengthen her hand in the upcoming Brexit negotiations. Those themselves are uncharted territory. Their implications are potentially seismic, and uncertain. But the whole sequence of events leading up to here has been marked by shifts and dramas marking out this period as a departure from what we'd been used to. Brexit was as much an effect of these, as a cause. Things are changing. Established orders are being unsettled. A 25-year consensus between major parties - broadly, around the political tenets of neoliberalism - has been strongly shaken, if not entirely dismantled. What's less clear is just how it will be replaced.

Exceptional times...
There's plenty of drama in the immediate political backdrop to the election. There has been the rise and fall of UKIP, a party whose response to achieving its defining aim – leaving the European Union – has been to melt into an acrimonious and shrinking puddle. (At the local elections on 4 May, the party's number of councilors went from 146 to 1.) There is the rise (just the rise, so far - though it seems the peak has been reached) of the Scottish National Party, whose case for an independent Scotland is strongly tied to one for an ongoing close relationship to the rest of Europe. Since the previous general election in 2015, the SNP has held 56 of the 59 Westminster seats, albeit with 50% of the vote. (In the UK's eccentric voting system, the relation of seats to votes remains drastically non-proportional.) There is a complex twist in Northern Ireland, where the Brexit vote has raised the prospect both of a 'hard border' with the Republic, and on the other hand, of a reunited Ireland. And after decades of apparent convergence between them, there are now hefty ideological divides between the Conservative and Labour parties. Both have relatively new leaders – May and Jeremy Corbyn, respectively – each of whom, has shifted party direction away (rightwards and leftwards, respectively) from the neoliberal consensus. Even compared to a couple of years ago, things are not as they were.

... schisms and nostalgia...
Some of this, of course, mirrors what's happening elsewhere. Brexit, Trump, the strength of support for the far right in recent elections in the Netherlands and France… these are familiarly taken as variations on the theme of a venting of discontent by those 'left behind' or squeezed by globalization. There is a good deal to be said for this reading, and of course a good deal *has* been. Much of this focuses on schisms. As elsewhere, the UK is splitting. As elsewhere, this is happening on various fronts. There are growing gaps of different kinds between rich and poor (the UK has the widest income inequality in the EU), urban and rural, liberals and convervatives, cosmopolitans and communitarians, graduates and non-graduates, 'leavers' and 'remainers' – and perhaps most glaringly, between young and old. An opinion poll published this weekend showed Labour with a 69%-12% lead over the Conservatives among 18-24 year-olds, and the Conservatives with a 66%-16% lead over Labour among the over-65s. As with other divisions, these numbers are

reinforcing those exposed by the EU referendum, in which 75% of under-24s voted to remain, while 61% of over-65s voted to leave.

Some of these are divisions along the lines of perspective, attitude and doctrine. Others are gulfs in the experience of everyday life: in resources, prospects, security and wealth. All, as the geographer Danny Dorling has observed, reflect the final death throes of the British empire. We're living through what happens as a country first denies, then (gradually, now) confronts, and then (at least one hopes, in time) reconciles itself to the fact that it isn't a major global player, and won't again reap the dividends of colonialism. Brexit gives the UK its last big chance of a nostalgic grab at a version of the past it can no longer retrieve. Strikingly, there is a sense in both the Corbyn and May agendas of a lingering affection for a world before globalisation took hold - for a post-war conjuncture where optimism, social cohesion and a shared sense of direction came more easily. Corbyn channels Clement Attlee, Aneurin Bevan and the egalitarian vigour behind the establishment of the modern British welfare state; May, the 'them and us' wartime rhetoric of Winston Churchill and the patrician Toryism of Harold MacMillan. Some of their strongest support comes from those who think we used to think better about economic and social priorities.

... and an unpredictable campaign
That's to take a grand view of the landscape. The election campaign playing out has not been electrifying. The Conservatives began with a sizeable lead over Labour, of around 20%. This has steadily shrunk and shrunk since the campaign began. While Theresa May is overwhelmingly likely to remain prime minister, the prospect of a huge majority is fading. There are various possible reasons for this. One is that Corbyn has run a more effective campaign than many expected. Increased exposure has led to rising poll ratings. He is at ease in this mode - with people, on the streets, dealing in values and hopes, whooping up a crowd. Meanwhile May has appeared faltering and evasive, avoiding contact with journalists and real voters, and opting out of an appearance at a BBC party leaders debate on 31 May. But the defining motif of the campaign so far, and of May's declining ratings, has itself been something unexpected. Her popularity really dipped when news got around of the Conservative manifesto stance on social care.

(Eventually) caring about social care
Everybody knows there's a crisis in social care in the UK. Everybody will be affected by it, at some level, already or in the future. Politically, the crisis is about two main things. One is the lack of funding for social care provision, which has been repeatedly squeezed over recent years, at a time when the population is ageing. Over the next 20 years, the UK's pensioner numbers will rise by 40% to more than 16 million. The other is intergenerational fairness. The baby-boom generation - those now in or nearing retirement - have done very well out of the post-war welfare settlement (most especially, in terms of wealth accrued through home ownership and a robust pensions) in a way which, for the generations succeeding them, will be well out of reach. The inequalities here are partly about now: older people are better off than younger people. But they are partly about the future: younger people will not expect to be doing as well as current over-65s, when they reach that stage. Real wages are have been falling since 2007. And the dominant rhetoric of 'responsibilisation' - and the assumption that care and welfare systems work best when

individuals themselves are deemed primarily responsible for their own care and welfare - has reinforced the problem. There is a lack of political vocabulary in which to talk about care, dependency, rights and responsibilities. And so there has been a poor national conversation about it. (Things have been better in Wales and Scotland, where relevant areas of policy are devolved - and a more joined-up strategy on health and social care has been pursued for some time.)

Against this background, May's grappling with the social care elephant looks brave. The Conservative manifesto pledged a shake-up of how care for older people is funded. Anyone with assets of more than £100,000 would now fund their own home care. This clearly has a redistributive element, from older to younger people. Perhaps May felt emboldened to grasp the nettle by her huge opinion poll leads, and proofed against a backlash. But a backlash was exactly what her proposals got. They were instantly branded as a 'dementia tax', a label which has stuck. As was quickly pointed out, its burden would be distributed according to luck. Anyone with a long-term conditions such as multiple sclerosis, or dementia, it would mean a high likelihood of spiraling bills. For economist Andrew Dilnot - whose government-commissioned review in 2011 proposed a [£35,000 lifetime cap](#) on care costs - it meant that especially vulnerable older people would be left 'completely on their own' until down to their last £100,000, including their house. May u-turned on the commitment, saying that there would be an unspecified cap. Her poll ratings settled, having dropped steeply. But they did not return to their previously stratospheric levels.

Talking care and justice
And thus, in a juddering way, we have begun a kind of conversation about the value of social care, and its rightful place in the overall architecture of social policy. The conversation is not yet a particularly healthy one. The vocabulary in which care is addressed, as a matter of social justice, remains emaciated by decades of individualist orthodoxy, misperceptions of the welfare system, a sometimes-simplistic valorisation of 'independence' over a recognition of inevitable dependency, and a neglect of issues of inter-generational fairness. The Conservatives have been especially culpable in all this - consistently seeking to reduce inheritance tax, for example, in the name of a parent's privilege to pass down wealth and privilege to their children being, in the words of David Cameron, 'the most natural thing in the world'. The legitimacy of that assumption is creaking badly. As it comes under extra strain, there is the chance of a better kind of conversation about care.

Will that happen? We'll see. There is a week to go, and a Conservative victory remains overwhelmingly favoured by the bookmakers. The resonance and progressive bite of the [Labour manifesto](#) may fade, as those of losing parties do. But anyway, the box has been opened. As the Brexit drama enters its next stages we can hope that at least, in political terms, we'll also be talking more about social care. Perhaps, we'll be talking *better* about it too.

About the author: Gideon Calder

Gideon Calder (1971) teaches at Swansea University, and co-edits the journal *Ethics and Social Welfare*. His recent book *How Inequality Runs in Families* explores the complex relationships between the goods of family relationships and intergenerational inequality. In that same vein, he is now working on what 'equality of life chances' might mean in practice, and on childcare as a social justice issue. He is also involved in collaborative research projects on the ethics of co-production, and on what a joined-up approach to well-being would look like, in policy and in theory. With Jurgen De Wispelaere and Anca Gheaus, he has co-edited the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Childhood and Children*.