

EDITORIAL

After 2016

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It is rare to live through a year and to know, with some degree of certainty, that it will be a marker in scholarship and memory for generations. Rarer still, perhaps, to know this while also doubting whether coherent and truthful public reflection on politics will be possible for much longer.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US Presidential Election, it is nearly impossible to overstate the extent of the peril. We are facing a virulent, networked neo-fascist International, which now has roots in Silicon Valley, the Kremlin, the White House and many European capitals, including our own. Wherever this achieves access to the awful resources of post-9/11 security states, liberals, greens and socialists may rapidly find themselves numbered among the 'enemies of the people'. The process is already underway in Poland and Hungary. Nascent left populisms are currently too weak to prevent this, although they could plausibly benefit in the short-term from increasing political polarisation (here, America may still offer some hope). Media organisations are commercially crippled and often enjoy less popular legitimacy than the politicians they scrutinise. Whatever their constitutional settings, judiciaries are too easily bypassed to be relied upon. In short, there is no reason to believe that advanced capitalist societies are rendered immune to authoritarianism by virtue of superior institutions, economies, or 'national characters'.

All this should not be as terrifying as it sounds. It is only in the contemporary liberal west that it has become habitual to regard politics as a genteel, limited set of consensual procedures, insulated from matters of life and death. What is surprising is that, despite the glaring evidence of twentieth-century history, so many thought this way for so long. An older political generation, now passed into death or retirement, knew that the fragile gains of the post-war order demanded constant, vigilant protection against the twin dangers of market fundamentalism

and nationalist revival. In more recent decades, this perspective has been sorely lacking.

The immediate danger faced by the British left after the European referendum and Trump's victory is irrelevance. Overcoming this danger, and taking some worthwhile stands for democracy, pluralism and social transformation, requires an understanding of the current politics of both the mainstream and the radical right. As Alan Finlayson argued in a previous editorial, committed left activists have a tendency to substitute introversion for analysis: to talk about who 'we' are, and what 'we' should be doing, without acknowledging the dynamic context within which politics occurs or the peripheral relevance of our decisions.¹ In this context, the Labour leadership's ongoing attempt to portray Trump's victory as a boon for outsider politicians everywhere has been unedifying, shallow, and irresponsible.² It is depressingly representative of the solipsism of a left that has forgotten how to identify and challenge its real opponents; indeed, the threats to its very existence.

In Britain, as in the US, the most urgent conflict of the current moment does not involve the left at all. It lies between the contradictory neoliberal and social-conservative impulses of the 'New Right' formed during the later twentieth century; the 'alt-right' techno-fascists increasingly feature as a rising spectre at the feast. In what follows, we set out our analysis of this conflict as it plays out in the politics of Brexit, and explore how opposition parties might intervene to influence the situation for the better in 2017.

Faultlines on the Right

In a final blow to David Cameron's historical reputation, the 'Leave' vote has clearly deepened, rather than eliminating, the Tory division over Europe. On one side stand the libertarian Brexiteers who viewed the European project as protectionist and parochial. These Conservatives see Brexit as an opportunity to let the harsh winds of global competition blow more heavily than ever through Britain. 'Hard' Brexit will, in their eyes, be a strong tonic for the British economy, even if rights of entry are restricted to carefully chosen members of the global plutocracy and an exploited guest worker class. For the left, this looks like nothing less than a turbo-charged race to the bottom: a recipe for gated communities and Special Export Zones, tied to the nineteenth-century race ideology of the 'Anglo-Saxon world'.

By comparison, the Osbornites, pitted against the libertarian Brexiteers seem a lesser, familiar evil. As representatives of the mainstream of British business

opinion and promoters of the ‘National Living Wage’, the Northern Powerhouse, and NHS ring-fencing, they recognise (at least rhetorically) that some aspects of our social and economic settlement cannot be trashed without political consequence. It is no secret that Osborne and Cameron, the architects of the referendum, ultimately found the EU of Schäuble and Sarkozy to be a relatively congenial place. They want Brexit to be as ‘soft’ as possible.

Theresa May straddles the divide between these two camps, and adds her own brand of authoritarian economic populism to the mix of Tory ideologies. As Tim Bale writes in this issue, when May walked into Number 10 over the summer – by dint of ending up the only credible candidate; indeed, the only candidate still standing – she was in a position of unexpected power. Having been a ‘reluctant Remainer’, May had a chance to shape a clear stance on Brexit, to insist on a soft, rather than catastrophically hard, exit from the EU. Instead, she took what may have seemed like a safer route, appointing Fox, Johnson and Davis to positions where they would be responsible for negotiating the Leave package and British trading relations thereafter. By bringing in the Tory right and making a strong pitch for votes against immigration, May has opted to prioritise wiping out UKIP once and for all, sucking its supporters towards the Tory party. The Prime Minister exemplifies the longstanding Conservative tendency to prioritise taking and holding power through the British electoral system over substantive conceptions of a national interest. What her own ideological position might be in relation to the EU is less clear.

Many have turned to the writings of the Prime Minister’s chief of staff, Nick Timothy, to try to understand where ‘Mayism’ points (if such a thing exists at all). In early profiles and think-pieces on the new regime, much was made of Timothy’s admiration for Joe Chamberlain, a nineteenth-century Tory radical champion of the working classes, a local politician of many achievements in Birmingham, and an imperial protectionist. Many of these themes surface in May’s speeches; May has, for example, foregrounded the concept of the ‘working class’, and vowed to govern on their behalf. It is a mark of our times that both she and Corbyn are seen as somewhat iconoclastic in even using the term ‘class’. What governing in the interests of the ‘working classes’ seems to indicate is that May will take a more protectionist stance on questions of migration and (perhaps) the foreign ownership of corporations; depending on what ‘access’ to the European single market means, she may also be willing to accept tariffs on British trade with the continent. In the absence of the imperial market or domestic industrial base that formed the twin backbones of Chamberlain’s policy, it is difficult to see what this will achieve; more difficult, still, to know what the Prime Minister or the government really believe, or even care to know, about the dilemmas facing the country.

Mandates and meanings

The dearth of information regarding May's intentions is, of course, a political strategy in itself; or at least a good approximation of one. The slogan 'Brexit means Brexit' is generally pilloried on the left. It has become one of May's defining statements, and its frequent repetition is usually taken to indicate the hollowness of May's thinking. But the slogan is, in fact, a stroke of genius. All opponents can do is mock it as a mindless tautology; but if there's one lesson of 2016, it's that 'stupid' works. Repeated *ad nauseam*, 'Brexit means Brexit' cements in public discourse two key ideas: that May is a tough leader (remind you of anybody?) and that May's definition of Brexit – whatever it turns out to be – is the only 'common sense' one. In the 1920s and even more so in the 1930s, the Conservative Party under Stanley Baldwin tried to naturalise itself; to redefine British political culture so that Conservative Party ideas were common sense, and Labour ideas were dangerous, dogmatic ideology. The Tories under May are doing the same. By repeating over and over the idea that Brexit means what May says it does, the Tories are trying to take the issue of what Brexit 'means' out of the very sphere of political argument.

This is a wilful denial of reality because Brexit could mean many things. Since the referendum result in June, myriad different suggestions have been offered about the precise nature of the instruction offered to parliament by the people. Most are more or less overdetermined by what the commentator in question wants the political solution to be. For some within Labour, what it means more than anything is that we must have a more honest 'conversation' with voters about immigration, not ignoring or downplaying the issue. Quite what this means in practice is unclear; indeed, this has been the constant refrain of large parts of the party for nearly a decade now. The evidence shows, however, that it was not high levels of ethnic diversity, but high levels of *change* in immigration in recent years which best predicted a large Leave vote.

Others want to insist that the *real* grievances are not about immigration at all – again, a position we should all be familiar with from the pre-Brexit era. Kezia Dugdale said in a recent interview that:

If you spend thirty seconds with one of those voters [Leave voters] you'll leave believing you've just had a conversation about immigration. Spend three minutes or ten minutes with that voter, you've actually just had a conversation about globalisation.³

Gordon Brown agrees, and has argued that Labour must become the party of managed and fair globalisation. Anti-globalisation ‘exploits grievances but offers no answers’.⁴

There are other arguments about what the vote ‘meant’. Some suggest that Leave voters were voting against a more nebulous formation than the EU or even free movement of people: ‘the Establishment’, or the ‘political elite’. There is anecdotal evidence, presented by the LSE’s Lisa Mckenzie and John Harris’s ‘Anywhere but Westminster’ series, to suggest that some voters did not think voting Leave would improve their lives, but they did think it would be a major defeat for the political classes.⁵ And this was a defeat they were happy to finally have the chance to inflict.

Then, of course, there’s the fact that it was not just disaffected ex-Labour voters in places like Sunderland who delivered the vote for Leave. An even larger number of Leave voters came from relatively prosperous ‘middle England’ and were long-standing Tory voters. Perhaps we should be less concerned to divine precisely what the voters ‘meant’ by their Leave votes. We must recognise the indeterminacy and complexity of political motivation. The ballot box is a black box, and we can have no secure understanding of the complex interplay of long-term and short-term inputs in shaping the outcome. This complexity of motivation leaves significant room for political leadership.

The need for demands

The Parliamentary Labour Party must therefore think very carefully about whether it is willing to accept that Brexit means whatever May says it does. Unlike the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens – all of whose supporters overwhelmingly voted Remain – Labour’s dilemma in this situation is genuine. The risks of a botched exit are evident, but the perception of ‘backsliding’ on Brexit could snap the fragile thread linking the modern Labour party to its surviving redoubts in northern England, the Midlands, and southern Wales. In spite of the formidable presence of Keir Starmer, a lack of basic information or organisational resources for contesting the detail of the process or the negotiation surely poses a further obstacle to political efficacy; if Whitehall itself is overwhelmed, how on earth can a gaggle of Labour advisers and MPs hope to have an impact on the outcome? Given the complexity and peril of the situation, it will be tempting for opposition parties to sit back and allow the Government to ‘own’ what may well be an epochal disaster.

The logic of this position, however, is that Labour permanently abandons the leverage afforded to it by the Tories’ narrow majority, signing away its right to

criticise the government's direction and conceding the principle that Brexit means whatever May says it does. Retreating to rallies, seminar rooms (and journal pages), we can enter a comforting, traditional cycle of introspection, in which we can talk about maybe starting to talk about things that might start to show 'our people' we are 'listening'. For a party that already struggles – to say the least – to be taken seriously as a governing proposition, signing over the issue of the day to one's opponents seems like a losing game. These are not normal times. A lack of clarity and resolve could be as damaging to Labour as a jump in the wrong direction.

Needless to say, the damage will go well beyond immediate political perception. Rather than heralding a return to social-democratic economic nationalism, May's politics will most likely result in a form of uneven, illiberal corporatism, in which big capital will remain free to move and exploit even as migrants are punished, the public realm destroyed, and cultural openness abandoned. In this context, John McDonnell's argument that 'moral pressure' should be Labour's principle weapon against the government does not inspire confidence.⁶ As a veteran of the Greater London Council, abolished by Thatcher in 1986, the Shadow Chancellor knows full well that Tory governments aren't often moved by a generous spirit of concession. If you get out of their way, they will simply ignore you.

The obvious place to apply real pressure on the government is in the succession of parliamentary votes that will govern the process of withdrawal, when May's majority will be on the line. Demands for greater transparency and consultation, in parliament and beyond, should be levelled by Labour in collaboration with other parties, including Osbornite Tories, if and when the Article 50 notification comes to a parliamentary vote. They would offer one way to force the opening of what has hitherto been an entirely closed process, establishing that the process of Brexit is a matter of transcendent importance that cannot be decided by party interest and executive fiat.

There is a sense across much of the party, however, that even to contest the *process* of Brexit is an inherent betrayal of Labour's values; as if commitment to European trade was something alien, imported by Tony Blair in the 1990s. In fact, the party's mid-twentieth century moment as an economically nationalist party was a comparatively brief one (sustained, at least in part, by the convenient continuation of a Sterling area by the exporting economies of the Commonwealth). From the 1960s, increasing numbers within Labour were attracted to the European project as a free trading bloc that might reinvigorate British industry. This position represented a reversion to the party's earliest traditions, rather than their repudi-

ation. You would not know it from reading Maurice Glasman, but the early Labour movement was profoundly shaped by Victorian liberalism, at the level of the rank and file as well as the much-maligned Fabian elite. This is why Labour remained the axiomatic party of ‘free trade’ – the Liberal rallying cry since the 1840s – until the Second World War. The party entered Parliament in 1906 on a shared platform against Tory protectionism, and maintained a steadier commitment to the principle than even the Liberals themselves.

Something like the multivalent politics of the later nineteenth century, with its shifting local coalitions, its international solidarities, and its attention to the visceral national and spiritual dimensions of working class life, is probably needed now. Labour was built in a world where class was refracted through plural identities, trade unions were weak, and racist imperialism on the rise. It grew by taking positions, choosing leaders, making demands, and building difficult alliances, not by aping the (highly successful) working-class Tory politics of the day.

Do something!

Options for contemporary resistance and reconstruction lie in either seeking to bring down May to save the single market, or offering a fleshed-out, parallel vision of a considerably less globalised Britain. Neither choice would represent a ‘betrayal’ of anything essential about Labour: each has a long heritage in the party’s tradition, and is consistent with a defensible view of an emancipatory, egalitarian, internationalist politics. At this point, the key thing is to *make a choice*, and accept the immediate implications of that choice.

What would a post-globalised Britain look like? The national route to socialism was kept alive in the 1960s and 1970s by the Bennite left of the Labour party, and is revived in the current leadership’s apparent nonchalance over the economic consequences of a ‘hard Brexit’. McDonnell and Corbyn were among the left activists who voted against Wilson in the 1975 referendum on remaining part of the European Economic Community. The Alternative Economic Strategy was the focal point of the Labour left’s economic thinking for much of the 1970s and early 1980s, with a strategy of import and capital controls at its core. As Joe Guinan and Matthew Brown have detailed in these pages, modern thinking on the Labour left maintains the previous focus on the centrality of ownership and wealth, but offers a new emphasis on localism and democratic control, which have displaced older varieties of socialist planning.⁷

Superficially, the short-term politics of this position are quite straightforward. Let May own Brexit, while building Labour’s next transformational government in the

municipalities. This implicitly fits with a reasonable scepticism regarding Labour's immediate prospects in Westminster elections: it is a strategy for the 2030s as much as now. Its immediacy is further blunted by a number of other factors: a lack of interest in answering the immigration question directly; a failure to discuss seriously how Britain might retreat from globalisation without creating significant additional poverty; the stubborn refusal of the electorate to turn out in local elections, or to vote on local issues when questions of national leadership and identity are stake. Allowing the competing conservatisms described above to monopolise these is a heavy risk indeed.

Defending the single market would require an entirely different set of priorities. A form of 'progressive alliance' would be necessary, albeit one considerably more uncomfortable, and provisional, than that discussed by Lisa Nandy, Caroline Lucas and others in *The Alternative: Towards a New Progressive Politics* (reviewed in this issue). The crucial parliamentary votes for overturning May's majority are not those of the Liberal Democrats or SNP, but the Osbornites and the Northern Irish parties, particularly the DUP. The latter vociferously supported the Leave campaign but cannot have a genuine interest in the imposition of controls on the Irish border; they are ripe for conversion by an enterprising opposition leader.

What demands could this unlikely alliance mobilise around? The international situation would also have to be recognised and used to Labour's advantage, with more skill than the party has achieved at any point since Blair and Mowlam's brokering of the Good Friday Agreement. Fundamental discussions over Britain's defence and foreign policies, largely settled by the Labour government of 1945-51, will need to be reopened. The mere fact of Trump's election, and his early alignment with Putin over Syria, represents a significant weakening of NATO. If the UK abandoned its irrational aversion to autonomous, collective European defence endeavours, then it could improve its parlous position in future negotiations with the EU 27, potentially trading military muscle and budgetary contributions for some degree of immigration control, alongside full EEA membership.

In domestic politics, a form of anti-Trump populism would be the order of the day. According to a survey published the weekend before the vote, the new American President was preferred to Hillary Clinton by just twelve per cent of the British population.⁸ This makes sense: Trump's crass, moneyed ostentation is ridiculous even to the minority of Britons tempted by the saltier right-populism of Farage, Nuttall or Banks. If Labour, instead of tying themselves to Trump, attacked the Tories and the media for their shameful attempts at normalisation, and outmanoeuvred the hapless Johnson in staging amicable public conversations with

reassuring, respectable European leaders, the politics of Brexit could start to look very different. This would benefit both party and country.

Readers are able to judge for themselves whether or not Labour, in its current state, is capable of pursuing either strategy with conviction or success. Regardless of party faction, there is far too much emphasis on abstraction and introversion, and not enough engagement with the rapidly changing realities of an unprecedented political situation. A vastly more ambitious, imaginative and serious form of politics is required from both the leadership and the broader party. We will do our bit to help construct it. 2016 has been a year of drift, delusion and panic, one pulverising blow following another. There remains, however, work to do, and choices to be made. The task is now, very clearly, one of survival.

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Further Reading

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- Skidmore, Patel and Raab (eds.) *Britannia Unchained: Global Lessons for Growth and Prosperity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)
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Notes

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- 2 'Thornberry: There are "similarities" between Corbyn and Trump', LabourList, 10.11.16, <http://labourlist.org/2016/11/thornberry-there-are-similarities-between-corbyn-and-trump/>.
- 3 Alex Dean, 'Interview: Kezia Dugdale – compromise from Corbyn would go a long way', *Prospect*, 2.11.16, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/interview-kezia-dugdale-compromise-from-corbyn-would-go-a-long-way>.
- 4 Gordon Brown, 'The key lesson of Brexit is that globalisation must work for all of

- Britain', *Guardian*, 29.6.16, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/29/key-lesson-of-brexit-globalisation-must-work-for-all-of-britain>.
- 5 Lisa Mckenzie, 'Brexit is the only way the working class can change anything', *Guardian*, 15.6.16, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/15/brexit-working-class-sick-racist-eu-referendum>.
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