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Britain

The UKIPisation of the Tory Party -The Brexit left in denial

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It was clear, long before it was launched, that the EU referendum held serious dangers for the left as well as for multiculturalism and anti-racism in Britain. The campaign itself was always going to be a carnival of racism and xenophobia and an outcome in favour of Brexit would trigger a major shift to the right in British politicsâEuros"both at the level of government and in terms of social attitudes. Racism and xenophobia would be strengthened and the left thrown onto the defensive.

And now we have it. The Theresa May government, established within a remarkable few frenzied days, is the most right wing in modern times, not just in terms of Brexit but across the boardâEuros"and she is playing all this to the full. Osborne is gone (replaced by Phillip Hammond), Nikki Morgan gone (replaced by Justine Greening), Michael Gove gone (replaced by Liz Truss), Amber Rudd is home secretary, Jeremy Hunt remains at HealthâEuros"for confronting the doctors no doubt.

Possibly the most frightening, hard line Brexiteer, Andrea Leadsom goes to the environment (DEFRA). She is not just a climate denier, and in favour of bringing back fox hunting, but she has close links to the Tea Party movement in the USA.

Leadsom would have been to the right of May had she been elected to the Tory leadershipâEuros"which she might well have been had the vote gone to the Tory âEurosÜrank and file'âEuros"and the way she was removed from the race in advance of this might well reflect divisions in the ruling class over how far Brexit should go.

The change of leadership to May, however, is still a big shift to the right and has left the Tories in a stronger, more united, and ideological coherent position, that they were under CameronâEuros"despite the problems they face in implementing Brexit. UKIP has been sidelined, at the moment, by what is in effect, the partial UKIPisation of the Tory Party.

Most significantly, the key positions in terms of BrexitâEuros"the issue that will define her administrationâEuros"go to hard-line right-wing Brexiteers:David Davies as minister for Brexit, Liam Fox as the newly created Minister of foreign trade and Boris Johnson as Foreign Secretary. It means that these people have been handed the power to reshape Britain's place in the world for the next generation if they get their way.

There are big changes in the structure of government as well. Most significantly, the Department for Energy and Climate Change has been abolished and merged with IndustryâEuros"which is a disaster for the environment and the struggle against climate change.

The Tory right, who have been skulking in the background and sniping about the EU since Cameron won the Tory Leadership from David Davis (and also Liam Fox) in 2005, are back with a vengeance. They are now in charge and are running the show.

It is these people who have now been handed the opportunity, by this referendum vote, to reshape British politics (and Britain's place in the world) on the scale that Thatcher was able to reshape British politics after the defeat of the miners in the 1980sâEuros"and they intend to grasp it with both hands. It is not going to be easy and there are many pit-falls in the Brexit process, but unless the May leadership is stopped at next election (and only Corbyn can do it), this is the very dangerous direction of travel.

Even if May is inclined at any point to make concession on Brexit, there will be plenty on the right ready to step in and stop her. UKIP will be waiting to capitalise on any back sliding and there are plenty on the Tory back benches ready to rise up against it.

This whole situation is not just a blow to the left in Britain, but it is serving as an inspiration to right-wing forces right across Europe. Le Pen is already welcoming it with both hands and promising a similar referendum in France if she wins the Presidency next year.

Young people in Britain, who have lost the most under recent governments and who, for the first time, face a reduced standard of living in comparison with the previous generation are the most hostile to all this, and were the most pro-remain section of society, and once again have the most to lose.

Three million EU citizens in Britain, who were denied a vote in the referendum, are left wondering what their status in Britain is likely to be after they have been used by May as a bargaining chip in the negotiations with the EU elites.

This was reflected in the 100,000 strong demonstration of mostly young people that took place in London immediately after the vote—organised through social media. It was not a demonstration organised by the left or of the labour movement but it was organised on a progressive basis and was strongly pro-immigration.

The situation of the left

Socialist Resistance argued for a remain vote on the basis that the referendum would be a carnival of reaction leading to a major shift to the right in British politics, and we have been right on both counts.

Those far-left organisations—the SWP, the Socialist Party, and Counterfire, along with the CPB—that argued for exit from the EU on the basis that such a vote would bring down Cameron, push the political situation to the left, and open up new opportunities for radical politics, even increase the chances of a Labour government, got it dramatically wrong. In fact, some are still arguing that there has not been a shift to the right a week after the formation of the May government.

A Brexit vote was always going to bring down the Cameron government, but its replacement, as Socialist Resistance argued throughout, was always going to be well to its right. It was always likely to open the way for dangerous realignment of the hard right—either within the Tory Party or as a part of a wider realignment. In the event it has been the former, and even worse and quicker than most of us predicted.

Those taking SR's position in the referendum—of a critical remain vote to fight xenophobia—were accused by the Lexiteers of being 'liberal leftists' or of departing from basic principles on the class nature of the EU. John Rees accused us (on the Counterfire website) of practising what he called 'the linear school of historical analysis':

"There will not be an automatic lurch to the right even with a figure like Johnson or May as Tory leader. The Tories will just have suffered their biggest reverse since the defeat of Thatcher. Their backbenchers are split down the middle. They only have a 17-seat working majority. They are under investigation for electoral fraud in more seats than that. They have just had to make a series of policy reverses... Only someone entirely wedded to the linear school of historical analysis could fail to see an opportunity for the left in this situation."

Alex Callinicos was in a similar mode in International Socialism just before the vote. He argued "whilst accusing the 'Another Europe is Possible' campaign of "a slide into class collaboration" that a Brexit vote would shatter the Cameron government just a year after winning a general election. Yes indeed! But what comes next?

In the event they were both wrong. The Brexit vote has not brought about a shift to the left, but the biggest shift to the right in British politics since Thatcher took office in 1979 and, unless it is reversed, it could have equally disastrous long-term consequences.

The Lexiteers, however, were still defending the same position three weeks after the vote. This was the position argued by Peter Taaffe three weeks after the vote in Socialism Today: "The vote to leave the EU has rocked capitalist institutions in Britain and internationally. It is yet another reflection of the anger at mass poverty and savage austerity and of the growing anti-establishment mood... It is totally false to draw the utterly pessimistic conclusions which some small left groups have done that this result could lead to a 'carnival of reaction' in Britain and encourage right-wing forces in Europe and elsewhere."

Playing the race card

It should be clear now, if it was not clear before, that this referendum was not, at the end of the day, a referendum on the EU but on immigration: i.e. 'are you in favour of the free movement of people' 'yes or no?' This scenario was played out in interview after interview, on the streets, the response was overwhelmingly: too much immigration and free movement. And the uncomfortable fact is that, given Britain's imperialist and colonialist history, decades of bi-partisan institutionalised racism practiced by both Tories and Labour, and the disgusting xenophobia of the tabloids "the Sun, the Mail and the Express in particular" over many years, it was always going to be thus.

Since the vote racism has been strengthened, the number of racist hate crimes has doubled, the political situation has moved to the right. The Tory Party has also moved to the right, and we are heading for an exit process from the EU that will be shaped by the xenophobic right in which ending free movement of people and cutting immigration to the bone will be the order of the day.

Not that the referendum can be reduced to immigration. There were other important factors involved "not least poverty, alienation and an anti-establishment backlash. In the end, however, it was racism that put the energy (or the venom) into the Brexit campaign. It was the driving force of the Brexit turnout.

Richard Seymour puts it this way: "It was the question of the free movement of labour within the European Union that that harnessed the energies for Leave". He continues: "Not that most of those who voted Leave had much experience of migration "the areas with the highest numbers of EU nationals living in them were also those with the strongest Remain votes. But that is how it usually works with race politics in the UK." There are exceptions to this but it is broadly true.

The racist dynamic, however, could not have been clearer. Immediately the mainstream Brexit campaigns took the decision to concentrate almost exclusively on immigration the Brexit vote went into the lead in the polls. There was indeed an anti-establishment backlash. The problem with this is that such backlashes are not necessarily progressive. In fact much of UKIP's support has been based on it.

In fact the mainstream Brexit campaigns ran the most openly racist campaign in modern times, and they were very effective. What used to be known as playing the race card now passes for 'normal' politics. Unless this is reversed quickly they will have done serious damage to British society. The most damaging long-term damage that the referendum campaign has done in Britain has been to make racism 'unrespectable'.

The answer of the Brexiteers to the dispossessed and the alienated was that immigrants were taking British jobs, driving down wages and living on benefits. Their campaign broadcast featured a map of Europe with arrows streaming towards Britain from across Europe "representing a flood of immigrants on the move, mostly from the East. During the campaign a Labour pro-remain MP Jo Cox was assassinated by a fascist shouting 'put Britain first'. It is hard to separate his actions, at least at that moment, from the politics of the mainstream Brexiteers. It was a warning that some very unpleasant forces were at work.

Worse than that, the findings of the Ashcroft poll immediately taken immediately after the vote found that by big majorities, voters who saw multiculturalism, feminism, the Green movement, and immigration, as forces for good voted to remain in the EU, whilst those who saw these things as forces for ill voted, by even larger majorities to leave. It is a frightening picture.

There has been another remarkable development as well. Lexit organisations with long histories of anti-racism have been talking down and seeking to minimise the racism and xenophobia involved in this referendum both before the vote and after. The same has been the case with the situation of the 2.4 million EU citizens living in this country who are set to be used as a bargaining chip in the Brexit negotiations with the EU.

The Lexit campaign refused to regard the fate of these people as any kind of problem right through the campaign and has said nothing about it since. When I raised this issue at the launch meeting of the campaign earlier in the year I was told that 'it was very unlikely to be a problem'.

General election

The possibility of an early general election is very dangerous for Labour because the Brexit vote has pushed the situation to the right. One of the reasons that May stresses 'Brexit means Brexit' and that a big reduction in immigration is her red line in the negotiations with the EU, is in order to claim to speak for the Brexit vote for the next general election whenever it comes.

She will only go for an early election if she has a big lead in the polls and feels confident that she can tap into the Brexit vote effectively. Labour needs time to tackle the Brexit effect and start to turn the situation back towards the left before it can be sure of winning an election.

Those in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) who are ganging up with the Tories to remove Jeremy Corbyn on the basis that his departure is essential to winning the next election could hardly be more wrong. The key to defeating the kind of government that May is constructing is precisely the kind of radical anti-austerity and anti-racist alternative that Corbyn represents. It is only this approach which has a chance of cutting through the xenophobic fog of the referendum, give real hope to the dispossessed and the marginalised, and build the kind of movement necessary.

The argument of the PLP plotters that the best way to win the next election is to go back to the politics that lost the last two elections makes no sense. It is a complete misunderstanding of the dynamic of politics in Britain today.

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Winning the next election for Labour will require, not a reversion to past failed policies, but a radical programme of austerity busting measures that can mobilise the deprived the alienated and the forgotten. Another thin gruel of Tory policies will not mobilise the movement necessary.

A majority Labour government could become increasingly difficult to achieve, particularly if, as is likely, the boundary commission proposals to reduce the number of seats at Westminster goes through by 2018. Labour needs to call for a progressive anti-austerity alliance in Parliament with the SNP and the Greens now and in the run up to the next general election, whenever that comes.

One way that Labour can boost its chances at the next election is a pledge for radical electoral reform. First and foremost getting rid of the notorious first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system. This would not only win votes in the election itself but would reshape the system for the new realities of British politics. It would also increase the turnout in elections since every vote would count—which was a factor in the high turnout in the referendum.

The political structure in Britain that prevailed throughout the 20th century has fallen apart with the rise of multiple parties. The voting system that sustained it has become a byword for everything undemocratic and corrupt. Smaller parties (of both right and left) have been emerging with substantial votes—the Green Party and Ukip in England and the SNP in Scotland in particular. We now have what is effectively a six-party system. Under these conditions the FPTP system has gone from the undemocratic to the outrageous.

In the last election we had parties of both the left and the right winning millions of votes but getting minimal representation. Scotland, quite rightly, is heading for independence—though whether the May administration will agree to it as Cameron did is an open question. In any event Scotland will still be not be independent in 2020, but after that who knows.

Jeremy Corbyn has to grasp the nettle over this and come out strongly in favour of electoral reform. John McDonnell, Clive Lewis and others have already called for it along with Caroline Lucas and Owen Jones. It would be a big mistake for Labour to go into the next election whenever it comes without radical proposals for a proportional voting system that would ensure that every vote counts and not just a few marginal constituencies. PR is not just a vote winner in itself but it is crucial with the situation so volatile and the old consensus breaking up. To this should be added the proposal to give the vote to 16 and 17 year olds.

This as part of a manifesto that deals with the housing crisis, the decimation of our NHS, with the growth of zero hours contracts and food banks, the rise of racism and other forms of inequality is the path that we need to go down - a path that will inspire even greater numbers than Jeremy Corbyn has already done over the remarkable last year.