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Britain

British Conservative Party tacks right

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The election of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister and the bitter defeat of the hopes of the Labour left represent a deeper cultural and institutional shift in the politics of the British Conservative and Unionist Party. They are not fools, the entitled gang who head the party, and the election and its aftermath has seen some canny moves that ride the wave of xenophobic reaction harnessed and amplified by the 2016 EU membership referendum.

On the one side of the equation, there is a deliberate appeal to patriotic inward-looking sentiment in which the hard right of the party have succeeded in riding the wave of hostility to interference by foreign powers, this despite Johnson's own prevarication, the notorious writing of two articles - one in favour and one against the EU in the lead-up to the referendum - to see which one would play better for his own career as well as for internal party manoeuvres.

The Tory-right with Johnson as their figurehead know well, and do not care, that this fingering of foreign powers is ambiguous racist dog-whistling that is designed to include the widest-possible range of paranoid and, why-not they would say, conspiracy theory themes; Brussels one moment, Islam the next and, as a potent not-so latent sub-text, suspicion that hidden hands control the economy. A government has now been elected in Britain that inspires and panders to those who peddle the idea that the capitalist economy as such is not a problem - far from it - but external manipulation of it is.

This is where the hypocritical hand-wringing about antisemitism on the part of the Tories, along with their helpmeets on the right of the Labour Party and in the press, comes home to roost. At the very same moment as they complained about supposedly antisemitic criticisms of the Israeli state, they have fuelled the conditions in which racism of all kinds, including antisemitism, thrives. And the most peculiar, toxic versions of racist rhetoric, the kind that searches for the kind of alien influence that is supposedly responsible for our ills, have been fed into political discourse.

The recent antisemitic attacks in north London, and these are not the only incidents, mirror Trump-inspired xenophobic and conspiracy-theory political reaction across the Atlantic. This is the real effect, the real crystallisation of right-wing propaganda in the last three and more years, of which Johnson's election victory is the latest manifestation. Johnson knows well that this is the time to drop the promises to protect the rights of child migrants, for example - present in his pre-election Queen's speech, and notably absent after his electoral triumph - and then to abandon even his internal party inquiry into Islamophobia.

On the other side of the equation, alongside this nationalist fervour that the Tory-right at the leadership of the party promotes and revels in, there is the closing inward and the nationalist protectionism that sets strict limits on who should be included while shoring up the support of those who might benefit from it. This includes not only an increase in funding for external and internal 'Euros' security' - that is to be expected, and it addresses an anomaly in Theresa May's mishandling of the police force, but also cynical injection of funding, insufficient, of course, to protect the National Health Service. This, at the same time as already opening up further, in the first few weeks of the new government, of NHS contracts to private tender, privatisation by stealth a la Blair. This is to reengineer the NHS as a service for the British, and bring down the shutters on outsiders - the 'Euros' health tourists' the gutter press is obsessed with - introducing new increased charges for those living here who do not have residency or settled status.

The far right have been quick to draw their own conclusions from this shift in the Tory Party, and have made it clear that this now is the party for them. Tommy Robinson has joined the party, encouraging his supporters in the English

Defence League and the Football Lads Alliance to follow him in. Paul Golding, leader of the explicitly fascist Britain First group claims to have had his application for party membership approved, also claiming that 5,000 members of Britain First have joined, with the avowed aim of creating, he says, a 'Momentum-like' movement inside the party. Golding's announcement directly referred to Boris Johnson's negative comments about Islam and women who wear burqas; this, Golding said, showed that this was the party for him, that 'Boris Johnson is like us'.

The centrists, those who were queasy about the shift to the right during the run-up to the election, have been effectively squashed, with none of those standing as 'Independents' or as the laughably named 'Independent Group' retaining their seats, and many of those who campaigned for them have already started creeping back into the Conservative Party. Archaic and insulting figures of the right, those who would have brought bad press during the campaign, such as Jacob Rees-Mogg and Iain Duncan Smith - now knighted for his vicious attacks on disabled people on benefits - are back in the limelight. The limelight of the Tory right reflects well the internal shape of the party apparatus.

For all of this, we need to be clear about the nature of this defeat. The Tory Party has tacked right because it needed to in order to capitalise on what Brexit offered a section of the ruling class, but that is only one section of a divided class whose pro-EU elements are now sidelined within the party. And, for all of the desperation and exaggeration of Johnson's apparent electoral triumph, it was a rather hollow one, with a bare 1.3 percent rise of the vote from the 2017 general election. The first past the post system tipped the Tories into power, and the real danger lies in what they will do now to hold onto it. That will include the mobilising of quasi-fascist motifs to energise their own supporters, the 'patriots', and a clampdown on those who oppose them. There will, as a consequence, be a stepping up of Islamophobia across Britain, and an increase in antisemitic hate-crimes.

Remember that fascism never came to power through victory of the ruling class and its ideology, but through and upon the defeat of the working class and the oppressed. What we are seeing of fascism now in Britain follows the same pattern, the same logic. The new-look retooled racist Conservative Party under Boris Johnson is triumphant now precisely because of the defeat we have suffered, and the only way to turn that around is through increased self-activity and confident collective mobilisation of the left. One by one, and then as a combined movement for a better life for everyone who lives here and in solidarity with those who are struggling for their future outside the country's borders, we need to build upon every act of resistance to austerity. We need to make it clear that every claim by Boris Johnson to speak for the whole nation is a lie, that the Conservative Party more than ever only speaks for one class, for one section of the nationalist and unionist ruling class at that.

30 December 2019

Source [Socialist Resistance](#).

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