

Truth to tell: immigration and populism in Brexit Britain

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We are living in a world where it's no longer 'the economy, stupid'. That's not to say that real wages, the cost of living, tax and spend don't matter to people any more. Clearly, they still do. But they no longer trump pretty much everything else when voters make up their minds. Politics has always been multidimensional, of course. It's just that analysts of voting behaviour and public opinion used to be able to conveniently (and more or less convincingly) collapse most of those other dimensions into the dominant left-right axis of competition. Nowadays, that's getting harder and harder to do.

In the UK, as in many European countries, that familiar horizontal axis is now intersected by another, vertical one. Call it what you will – *GAL-TAN* (Green, Alternative, Libertarian – Tradition, Authoritarian, Nationalist), *demarcation-integration, communitarian-cosmopolitan*, or simply *open-closed* – this dimension suddenly seems to matter much more than it used to. Certainly, it helps explain why, in June 2016, 52 per cent of those voting in the country's EU Referendum plumped for Leave rather than Remain. It also gives us an insight into why, despite the fact that the country's first-past-the-post electoral system meant most of them were 'wasting' their votes on candidates without a cat's chance in hell of winning, nearly four million Brits chose the populist radical right UK Independence Party (UKIP) at the 2015 general election, giving it a vote share of almost 13 per cent, albeit only one seat in the House of Commons.

In short, just as many political scientists, especially in the UK, had begun to take it for granted that we had moved from an era of 'position politics' (the clash of big ideas between two tribes) to an era of 'valence politics' (where managerial competence and credibility counts most), culture and identity are back with a bang – and made all the more explosive by a pervasive feeling, especially among so-called 'left-behind voters' dispossessed and disoriented by the dizzying pace of social and economic change, of 'disconnect' with the mainstream politicians supposed to represent them.

Migration, and the multiculturalism that inevitably comes with it, is not the only contentious issue in all this. But it is as both opinion polls, focus group and media coverage attest, by far the biggest – not surprisingly, perhaps, given it is both a cause and a symptom of this wider discontent.

The UK has, of course, experienced waves of immigration before, most obviously in the fifties, sixties and seventies as the Afro-Caribbean and South Asian citizens of its former imperial colonies journeyed to the mother country to fill labour shortages created by the long post-war boom. But that country had never previously experienced the sheer pace, volume and intensity of the influx of migrants occasioned by the Blair government's decision not to impose restrictions on the rights of citizens of the countries that joined the EU in 2004 to live and work in the UK.

The arrival of millions of foreigners from Central and Eastern Europe, then, was bound to spell trouble. After all, the post-war, postcolonial wave of immigrants were not absorbed without considerable political conflict – race riots, increasingly

restrictive legislation (albeit balanced by the introduction of anti-discrimination laws), periodic (although mercifully brief) spikes in support for the far-right (the NF and the BNP), and often none-too-subtle attempts by the country's Conservative Party to paint its Labour rival as 'soft' on immigration. If anyone thought similar problems could be avoided simply because those people pouring after 2004 were white rather than black or Asian, they were forgetting xenophobia can be just as powerful a force as racism. They were also far too complacent about the willingness and the ability of the UK's political class to engage honestly and responsibly with its citizens.

On the centre-left, Labour politicians signally failed to fess up to the fact that they had massively underestimated the numbers of Eastern Europeans who would flock to take up the job opportunities provided by a booming economy. Moreover, given it was clear that that self-same economy benefited from their presence, those Labour politicians decided not to do anything practical about it other than to provide additional funding for areas where that presence was putting extra pressure on public services and to commission (admittedly reassuring) studies into the financial impact of unskilled migration on workers the lower end of the labour market. Worse, this inaction was clearly at odds with the government's *rhetorical* response, which culminated in Gordon Brown as Prime Minister promising 'British jobs for British workers' and, in so doing, either revealing himself as a hypocrite or else creating expectations that he couldn't possibly fulfil.

The centre-right, however, proved itself just as unequal to the task of treating the public like grown-ups. Casting around for anything that might put it on side with the voters who had slung it out of office in 1997, it tried just about every trick in the populist playbook: the people, claimed their then leader (and later Foreign Secretary) William Hague, had been betrayed by a 'liberal elite' wilfully deaf to their concerns about 'bogus asylum-seekers' and the threat to sovereignty posed by the single currency and the EU more generally; if nothing was done, he claimed, Britain would soon become 'a foreign land'. Hague's successors, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard, did more of the same, with the latter adding gypsy travellers to an already long list of proverbial others and, in the run-up to the 2005 general election, commissioning the infamously insinuating *It's not racist to talk about immigration. Are you thinking what we're thinking?* billboard posters. For a while David Cameron turned down the volume on migration and the EU, but it wasn't long, especially once he'd got the party into government, that he was bashing 'Brussels' and 'banging on' about immigration, supporting his Home Secretary (one Theresa May) in pushing through increasingly draconian measures designed to fulfil a pledge – possibly one of the craziest on record – to reduce net migration into the country 'from the hundreds to the tens of thousands'.

If all this was designed (as it most certainly was) to shoot the fox belonging to the United Kingdom Independence Party, a Eurosceptic, anti-immigration party led by that consummate populist, Nigel Farage, it proved completely counterproductive. By talking up clashes with the EU and the need to get a grip on immigration – at the same time as signally failing to do so – the Tories (aided and abetted by their friends in Britain's notoriously partisan media) simultaneously turbocharged UKIP's

signature issues and normalised an ‘us vs them’ discourse with which, in times past, mainstream politicians had only occasionally flirted rather than exchanged as common currency. The genie was out of the bottle, released not by the extreme but by the mainstream.

And so it was that, driven by a fatal combination of panic (how else to lance the boil?) and complacency (I’m a winner, bring it on!), Cameron called the EU Referendum. And so it was that he lost it, a manifest assertion of defiant, nativist nationalism overcoming the latent fear of the economic consequences which the government (and its pro-European Labour opposition) wrongly assumed could be relied upon to sweep all before it. Cowed by the evidence that hostility to immigration played a huge part in Leave’s win, and by the equally irrefutable logic that access to the EU’s single market and the customs union are irreconcilable with permanent limitations on the free movement of its citizens, Cameron’s successor as PM, Theresa May, seems to be preparing herself, and the country, for the hardest of Brexits.

The irony – as bitter as it is delicious – is, of course, that Brexit, however hard, will not see the UK ‘take back control’ of its borders, let alone fulfil May’s aspiration (it is no longer a target) to reduce annual net migration to the tens of thousands (the latest figure is well over 300,000), unless, that is, the government is prepared to crash the economy as well as crash out of the EU. In the longer term, an ageing population will, unless it is counterbalanced by immigrants, lead to an unsustainable dependency ratio. More pressingly still, without continuing inward migration, the country’s health and social care system (such as it is), as well as its construction sector, will begin visibly to collapse. So, too, will much of its fruit and vegetable sector, unless farmers are suddenly prepared to pay premium wages to persuade Brits who currently think such work is beneath them to consider returning to the fields and orchards. Employers across a range of businesses have made this crystal-clear to Mrs May, and she and her colleagues appear to have conceded that they are right and that immigration will need to continue. They have also admitted that free movement is will probably need to be part and parcel of any post-Brexit free trade deals they manage to do with non-European countries.

The contradictions of this position are as obvious as they are ridiculous. If the referendum was won in part because of the lie that tens of millions of Turks were about to descend on Britain unless it left the EU that Turkey was apparently about to join, then it is hard to see how Brits are going to welcome a deal with Ankara that will mean exactly that. Similarly, while they might cope with a few thousand New Zealanders making their way to London, they are bound to balk at millions of Indians and Chinese. Sure, they’re not Muslims – a group to which many Brits, in common with many continental Europeans, seem to have a particular aversion nowadays. But nor, we should remember, were the Poles and the Romanians to whom people in Brexit voting areas seemed to take such exception in the decade before the Referendum.

Quite how those contradictions can possibly be resolved is difficult to see. Indeed, there is no sign whatsoever that Conservative politicians will eventually level with the public on the immigration issue. And if they don’t, their Labour counterparts won’t dare to either – not in opposition anyway (and probably not in government,

presuming they ever get there again). All of which means the continuation of the glaring gap between rhetoric and reality that has provided politicians, whether mainstream or more extreme, with the opportunity to appeal in predictably populist fashion to voters who sense, not unreasonably, that they're not being told the whole truth. Whether, of course, they are capable of handling that truth, should they ever be presented with it, is another matter entirely.