

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > On the Left (UK) > **Britain: A new left is forming - it just isn't in the same party (yet)**

Britain: A new left is forming - it just isn't in the same party (yet)

Saturday 21 January 2023, by [CHESSUM Michael](#) (Date first published: 16 January 2023).

Fourteen years on from the collapse of Lehman Brothers, writes Michael Chessum, the financial crash of 2008 feels like the introduction to a much wider moment of political and economic crisis.

Society is about to face another collapse in living standards, but it has yet to recover from the last round. In 2019, before COVID and the energy crisis, wages had been stagnant for a decade. NHS waiting lists were already at all time highs, with tens of thousands of jobs cut from public services. 17% of the adult population was being prescribed antidepressants, with higher prescription rates mapping onto deprived areas.

What is different about the current economic downturn, in comparison to the initial austerity moment, is that the public mood is already hostile to the status quo. The 2010s were an era of rebirth for the left, as explosive social movements gave way to the readmission of left ideas into the political mainstream, but this was from a low starting-point. Cuts seemed inevitable in the aftermath of the 2008 crash and neoliberalism was a secular religion among the commentariat. Today, the establishment struggles to maintain its grip on the public debate. While we are no longer near power in the same way that we were in 2019, the legacy of the past decade - and the mass radicalisation of sections of the population - leaves us in a stronger position.

If we struggle to comprehend the realignment and fragmentation that shook the world after post-crash austerity, that is because we are still living through it. Across the world, radical left electoral alternatives have come and gone, and come again. Within Britain's electoral cycle, two-party domination ended and was replaced by a more complicated set of allegiances and party structures. The SNP's 2015 general election result felt like an earthquake at Westminster, but was put in the shade by the polarisation around Brexit.

On the left, realignment has been just as marked. The organised far left has shrunk and stagnated. As our traditional institutions failed, and the leaderships of Labour and the trade unions compromised, the early 2010s created the conditions for a new kind of left politics. Mass movements were built 'from below', and often nurtured a pluralistic culture and a suspicion of leaders and hierarchies. But before these movements had a chance to cohere themselves, they were sucked up into the Labour Party in 2015. Corbynism itself ballooned into a mass movement but, lacking a democratically coordinated grassroots, was washed away in subsequent years.

New dividing lines on the left

New political dividing lines have also emerged, cutting across the 'normal' divisions, and this has been accelerated by the Brexit referendum and the onset of the culture war. Trotskyists, anarchists,

autonomists, reformists, social democrats, left liberals and communists have all found themselves split in recent years on a series of key issues. But people from different parts of the left can often be found united across a range of touchstone issues. If you are in favour of open borders, it is likely that you are also in favour of trans rights, support Ukraine against Russian invasion, and back proportional representation (PR). On the other hand, there is a strong correlation between opposing freedom of movement, supporting first past the post, blaming NATO for Putin's aggression, and holding reactionary views on trans issues.

In other words, there is now a part of the left which shares a clear-ish perspective, both on issues of organisation (pluralism, internal democracy, grassroots agency) and on a raft of political questions (open borders, PR, trans rights and opposition to crude anti-imperialism). It speaks about class struggle in varying lexicons, and with varying emphasis, but acknowledges its centrality to changing and saving the planet. I am a part of this left - and I think many of Bright Green's readers are, too. This left comes from all manner of traditions, and it is split over multiple different parties, organisations and grouplets. To some extent or another, we all lack a political home - an adequate vehicle with which to fight for our ideas and have a conscious collective presence in politics, and in social and industrial movements.

The thing that separates me from many on the left wing of the Green Party is not a fundamental difference of philosophy but a tactical disagreement. In reality, of course, both of our tactics are dead ends. Under first past the post, it is futile to try to create left-of-Labour electoral alternatives (as evidenced by the fact the Greens have one MP after nearly forty years), and attempting to do so impedes your ability to organise politically within the trade union movement. On the other hand, being on the Labour left (as I am) envelops you in petty procedural battles, and means you end up recruiting new activists to join a party which is literally designed to make them boring and right wing. On the one occasion when the Labour left's strategy came good (Corbynism), Labourism and the structures of the party ground down the project and prevented it from winning.

Sooner than expected, we may find ourselves in the same organisation. If Starmer ends up relying on other parties to form a government, proportional representation could arrive in the next parliament, bringing about a period of electoral realignment and fragmentation in which a progressive eco-socialist party could become a serious political force. Regardless of whether and when this comes to pass, it makes sense for us to recognise what we have in common and talk to each other.

Michael Chessum

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 16 Jan 2023:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/a-new-left-is-forming-it-just-isnt-in-the-same-party-yet/>

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