

Britain: The Left After Leave

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Brexit offered the Left bad choices, and its aftermath has emboldened a racist right. What do we do now?

In a debate that was, from the beginning, dominated on both sides by the Right, there was only ever going to be one winner in last month's referendum on British membership of the European Union — the Right.

Given that the original decision to call the referendum was intended as a political maneuver on the part of David Cameron to outflank an insurgency from the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) the basic coordinates of the campaign were never in much doubt. This was always, in effect, a debate structured as an internecine contest within and among the Right over issues identified and framed in largely right-of-center, neoliberal terms.

On the one hand the mainstream Remain camp cohered a range of political forces under the hegemony of the “moderate” Cameron wing of the Tories and leading sections of capital. On the other, Leave organized a motley alliance under the domination of the Tory hard right and UKIP.

Operating on a political terrain not of its own making, in a struggle in which major camps on both sides were dragooned under the leadership of opposed factions of the Right, it was predictable that the Left would exert little influence over the contest.

Any realistic assessment on the part of the radical left of the likely consequences of a victory for either side had to conclude that neither a victory for Remain nor for Leave would constitute a positive outcome. The real question was not so much which side we should want to win, but which of them we should desire most to lose.

For many of us, except a small band of Left Exit (“Lexit”) campaigners, it was clear which of the two was the least-worst option. For while Remain promised little other than business as usual (neoliberalism, austerity, “sensible controls on immigration”) under the aegis of continued European Union membership, Leave represented something much more dangerous.

In the end the worst-bad option emerged victorious.

We have to be absolutely clear about this: the Brexit vote is a major triumph for forces of national chauvinism, xenophobia, racism, and the hard right. As such it is a catastrophe for workers — particularly immigrant workers — and the Left.

Much media commentary [[1](#)] sees the vote as an anti-establishment uprising — an expression of disaffection and anger at the status quo on the part of alienated, poorer sections of society. The Lexit left insists, along similar lines but with a Marxist inflection, that the referendum result represents a “rebellion by working-class people” against neoliberalism and austerity.

There's certainly something to this analysis. Leave does seem to have won the support of many of

Britain's poorest and indeed was able to tap a deep well of anti-establishment resentment born out of many years of growing class and regional inequality, deindustrialization, structural unemployment, job insecurity, and so on.

That Leave — headed up by elites like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage — was able to channel such grievances reflects the Remain campaign's weakness.

In an age of anti-political populism, Remain's ability to cohere major political party leaderships (with the partial exception of a semi-detached Jeremy Corbyn), much of big business, a large tranche of the "great and the good" from the world of culture and entertainment and to attract the vocal support of powerful international politicians and technocrats — from Jean Claude Juncker to Barack Obama — turned out to be more of a liability than a strength. It was almost as if Remain's core strategy was to present itself as the voice of UK and international political and economic elites closing ranks. It was punished accordingly.

But although there was a significant anti-establishment component to the Leave vote we should reject the idea that the vote can be adequately interpreted as some sort of working-class revolt.

First, the most advanced demographic analysis of the vote that we yet have to hand — the Ashcroft poll [2] — doesn't bear this out. The poll draws on one of the standard UK measures of social class, distributing voters into a class hierarchy measured in terms of occupational category.

The proponents of the "working-class revolt" thesis make much of the fact that, according to the Ashcroft figures, a majority of AB voters — those in the top tier of occupations — voted Remain and a majority of voters from the lowest categories — C2 and DE — voted Leave. Needless to say, however, occupational category measures of social stratification do not operate on the basis of a Marxist understanding of class. Indeed, as Charlie Hore points out [3]:

"AB includes 25 percent of the population, including key groups of workers who have been in struggle recently — teachers, nurses, doctors and other health professions — and, in fact, most trade union members."

In addition, the DE figures are skewed by the fact that this category includes pensioners (some rich, some poor), among whom there was a large turnout.

Further, the Ashcroft figures show us that 73 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old voters and 62 percent of twenty-five to thirty-four year-olds chose Remain while "a majority of those aged over 45 voted to leave, rising to 60 percent of those aged 65 or over" — suggesting that, in fact age, rather than income or class, was the key determinant of this ballot.

The statistics on voter choice by race and ethnicity are also striking. They show that while 53 percent of white voters chose Leave, "Two-thirds (67 percent) of those describing themselves as Asian voted to remain, as did three-quarters (73 percent) of black voters" and that "seven in ten Muslims voted to remain."

The regional and geographical breakdown of the vote [4] does little to back up the idea of a "working-class uprising" either. All major cities with the exception of Birmingham voted to Remain.

All districts in Scotland and nationalist areas of Northern Ireland — areas that encompass pockets of major deprivation — voted solidly to Remain as did the vast majority of London boroughs, including those containing high levels of poverty such as Lambeth and Hackney (79 percent and 78 percent Remain respectively).

So all in all as Hore puts it:

“It’s an odd “working-class revolt” that doesn’t include Scotland, West Belfast, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bristol, London, most union members, most Black and minority ethnic voters, and three-quarters of young voters.”

The second major reason to reject the idea that the Brexit vote represents a popular rebellion to be celebrated and supported is that, whatever the demographic profile of this “revolt,” what should matter just as much to socialists is its specific political character.

There are of course populisms of the Left and the Right — it is absurd to imagine that all such political movements are inherently progressive or conceal within themselves somehow a fundamentally socialist dynamic.

It’s quite clear that the forces now riding the crest of the Leave victory are hard-right forces in the Conservative party and beyond. Their strategic achievement was, as Richard Seymour puts it [\[5\]](#), to have,

“successfully articulated a broad antiestablishment sentiment — originating in class injuries, regional decline, postindustrial devastation, generational anxieties, etc. — along bigoted, national-chauvinist lines.”

In particular, the Leave side focused relentlessly on immigration, conducting one of the most racist and xenophobic electoral campaigns ever seen in Britain. Effectively they transformed the referendum into a plebiscite on immigration [\[6\]](#).

Clear indication of this can be seen in the Ashcroft poll which reveals that a third of Leave voters said the main reason for their choice was that Brexit “offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders.”

It is also possible to deduce from the figures we saw above on the distribution of votes among black and ethnic minority voters that the large majority of nonwhite voters were aware of the way in which the Leave campaign pivoted on the question of race.

This isn’t to say that everyone who voted for Leave was racist or anti-immigrant or that the vote did not express dissatisfaction about a range of legitimate issues — but this was, in effect, the core “meaning” that the Leave campaign successfully conferred on the referendum.

Indeed, sadly — but predictably — there seems to have been a spike in the number of reported racist attacks and hate crimes since the Brexit victory. The British news is filled with such stories: xenophobic graffiti scrawled across the doors of a West London Polish community center; a man on a rush hour Manchester tram told to “go back to Africa” [\[7\]](#); laminated cards with the words “Leave the EU — no more Polish vermin” [\[8\]](#) delivered to the houses of Polish families in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire; a Muslim girl cornered by a group in Birmingham and told “Get out we voted leave.” [\[9\]](#) These are just a small selection of incidents, no doubt there are many more.

On Monday, a distraught student with a Portuguese passport came to my office and told me that she doesn’t want to stay in a country where she and her family “are not welcome.” Many similar conversations will have taken place in workplaces and households up and down the United Kingdom in recent days.

Britain has become a frightening place to be a foreigner and many immigrant people can see the referendum result clearly for what it is — the harbinger of intensified xenophobia and a political

mandate for the hard right to ratchet up anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies.

An atmosphere of tension, uncertainty, and fear has descended on the country since the vote. There's a real sense that the threat of serious violence and civil unrest is simmering just under the surface, waiting to erupt. In no small part this is because every racist, every far-right group, got a major psychological boost from the Brexit result. They feel their time has come.

Though intensified xenophobia is the main determinant of the heightened anxiety throughout British society currently, there is another source too. The signs of an imminent plunge back into serious economic recession will have escaped the notice of few.

The day after the vote, Sterling fell off a cliff in the money markets [\[10\]](#) and stock markets went into turmoil [\[11\]](#). Foreign investment in Britain is widely expected to fall, as is GDP growth and it's widely suspected that many multinational corporations who were drawn to Britain as a stepping-stone into the wider EU market are considering winding down their British operations.

Of course, the interests of labor and capital are not synonymous — and not all of this will be bad news for those who can't afford current house prices for example — but neither are they counterposed in some zero-sum relationship.

The structural power of capital, after all, pivots on the fact that under capitalism wage labor is dependent on the social class that exploits it. A recession for capital is also a recession for workers — more so, in fact, given that workers and the poor always bear the brunt of restructuring and readjustment necessary for profit recovery.

Already the chancellor, George Osborne, has indicated that Brexit means more cuts and austerity [\[12\]](#). Again, everyone knows this and can feel it coming. Most know too, that the insurgent hard right has a vision of Britain as a "neoliberal fantasy island," [\[13\]](#) more extreme than Cameron and Osborne were willing to conceive.

Of course, not everything is going swimmingly for the forces that led Leave. Many have noted that Tories on the Leave side looked strangely subdued in the aftermath of the referendum result [\[14\]](#) (compare this with Farage's sinister gloating and braying in the European Parliament [\[15\]](#)) — as if they realize, in the context of the economic instability Brexit has unleashed and the apparent unwillingness of EU elites to make things easy for British withdrawal with an amicable deal [\[16\]](#), that they have just been handed a poisoned chalice. Maybe this is the reason Boris Johnson dropped out of the Tory leadership race [\[17\]](#) (though only to be replaced as the candidate of the Conservative hard right by the equally obnoxious Michael Gove).

Already we see signs of Leave backtracking on issues like free movement and exiting the single market [\[18\]](#). The danger here, however, is that if and when the Conservatives fail to fully to deliver on Leave's anti-immigrant rhetoric and fantasies about remaking the country as a powerhouse of global trade, the forces poised to take advantage of mass disappointment are those even further to the right — UKIP or perhaps even something much nastier currently lurking in the shadows.

Though the Tories certainly have their problems at the moment, they are nothing compared to the civil war now raging in the Labour Party [\[19\]](#). According to the Lexit narrative Brexit would split the Conservatives and propel Jeremy Corbyn into power.

But this simply isn't happening. The Labour right have seized the opportunity provided by the defeat of Remain to launch a serious and sustained bid to unseat Corbyn.

Given Corbyn's determination to stay in place as leader and his continuing popularity among the

party membership, it seems likely that this bid will fail, at least in the short term.

But it's clear that the Rubicon has been crossed by the Labour right and if they can't get rid of Corbyn immediately, they will seek to grind him down, and if they can't do that before the next election they will seek to wreck the chances of a Labour victory to fulfill their prophecy that Corbyn is "unelectable."

This — the collapse of Labour, not the Tories — is one of the greatest political legacies of the referendum result.

So what must the radical left seek to do in these bleak circumstances?

A priority for the section of the British far left that continues to delude itself about "Lexit" — and indeed for those sections of the international left that indulged this fantasy — must be to look reality in the face. There is no Lexit on the cards. There never was.

What we face now is serious growth in officially sanctioned racism and anti-immigrant prejudice, the embedding of reactionary discourse within the political mainstream, drawing strength from a mobilized reactionary populism, the immediate prospect of deepened austerity, and the implosion of the Labour Party. We are not on the offensive. The referendum was not a victory for us.

Our practical priorities in terms of mobilization and campaigning must be to work to defend migrants — a small beginning has been made in this respect already [20], but we will need to do much more and it will need to be sustained. A second practical priority must be to do what we can to defend Corbyn [21].

I don't hold out much hope for a Corbyn victory in the next general election, but his continuing leadership is all that stands between having a Labour Party that defends immigrants and one which, on the basis of political expediency, follows the political drift to the right in the name of "legitimate concerns about immigration."

Some on the Left hope for a second referendum [22] or for some sort of legal-constitutional blocking of Brexit by the Scottish government [23]. These developments may, indeed, yet happen — and, of course, the European Union is no stranger to rerunning referendums (or ignoring them) until it gets the "right result." But it would be a big mistake for the Left to give its backing to such maneuvers. It would look like the worst kind of antidemocratic manipulation and be hugely counterproductive.

Besides, we don't hope for salvation from above. Our primary focus has to be on mobilization from below. We must start with defensive measures to hold off the racists and keep Corbyn at the head of the Labour Party for as long as we can and hope for the tide to turn.

I don't think our chances are good. The odds are against us. But then again, they always are.

Ed Rooksby

P.S.

* Jacobin. 7.1.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/brexit-uk-eu-leave-farage-johnson-ukip-tories-immigration-labo>

[ur-corbyn/](#)

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/24/brexit-democracy-i-voted-leave-divisions-campaigns>

[2] <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>

[3] ESSF (article 38334), [The EU, Britain & “Brexit”: Seeing the whole picture after the referendum](#).

[4] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36616028>

[5] ESSF (article 38346), [Britain after Brexit: Union Jacks Flutter Over a Widening Gyre](#).

[6] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/brexit-referendum-leave-remain-immigration/>

[7] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/29/manchester-tram-racism-two-bailed-one-remains-in-custody>

[8] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/29/manchester-tram-racism-two-bailed-one-remains-in-custody>

[9] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/26/racist-incidents-feared-to-be-linked-to-brexit-result-reported-in-england-and-wales>

[10] <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-36611512>

[11] <https://www.theguardian.com/business/live/2016/jun/24/global-markets-ftse-pound-uk-leave-eu-brexit-live-updates>

[12] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/george-osborne-warns-uk-to-expect-spending-cuts-and-tax-rises-after-brexit-vote-a7106921.html>

[13] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/16/brexit-eu-referendum-boris-johnson-greece-tory>

[14] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/24/a-pyrrhic-victory-boris-johnson-wakes-up-to-the-costs-of-brexit>

[15] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nigel-farage-brexit-speech-european-parliament-full-transcript-text-a7107036.html>

[16] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/26/eu-may-refuse-informal-brexit-talks-until-uk-triggers-article-50>

[17] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36672591>

[18] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36672591>

[19] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/28/jeremy-corbyn-loses-labour-mps-confidence-vote>

[20] <http://www.itv.com/news/2016-06-25/hundreds-march-in-protest-at-anti-immigration-tone-of-brexit-campaign/>

[21] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/jeremy-corbyn-labour-brexit-cameron-leadership-momentum-coup/>

[22] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/29/uk-voted-for-brexit-but-is-there-a-way-back>

[23] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/26/nicola-sturgeon-threatens-to-block-brexit-in-face-of-english-fur/>