

# Britain: Tory Party undergoes major UKIPisation - The Brexit, the Left & the Theresa May's government

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Theresa May's government, established in a few frenzied weeks of infighting after the referendum in June, is the most right-wing administration of modern times in Britain, and not just in terms of Brexit but across the board. It is also the most racist, xenophobic and English Nationalist.

The Tory right, who have been skulking in the background and sniping about the EU since Cameron won the Tory leadership in a contest with both David Davis and Liam Fox in 2005, are back with a vengeance.

The opportunity they have been handed by the outcome of the referendum could shape British politics on the scale that Thatcher was able to do through defeating the miners in the 1980s—and they intend to grasp it with both hands.

It won't be easy; there are many pit-falls in the Brexit process, but unless the May leadership is stopped at next election, this is the profoundly dangerous direction of travel.

Cameron went immediately. Osborne is gone (replaced by Hammond), Morgan gone (replaced by Greening), Michael Gove gone (replaced by Liz Truss), Amber Rudd is home secretary and Jeremy Hunt remains at Health—in order to further confront health workers 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.

There were big changes in the structure of government as well. The Department for Energy and Climate Change has been abolished and merged with Industry—which is a disaster for the environment and the struggle against climate change.

Most significantly, the key positions in terms of Brexit—the issue that will define the administration—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. These people have been handed the power to reshape Britain's place in the world for the next generation if they get away with it.

Three million EU citizens in Britain, denied a vote in the referendum, are left fearful about their

status in Britain will be after they have been used by May as a bargaining chip in the negotiations with the EU elites.

Although the May government is openly split on the issue of the implementation of Brexit—she made the meaningless statement that ‘Brexit means Brexit’—the so-called hard Brexit or soft Brexit, there is no doubt who is running the show. The hard-liners are calling the shots and the re-emergence of UKIP stands in the background if she back-slides on the fundamentals, and this means first and foremost and end to free movement.

UKIP has been sidelined for the moment, by what is in effect, the partial UKIPisation of the Tory Party. Farage understood this when he resigned from the leadership of UKIP less than two weeks after the referendum, saying his political ambition had been achieved. It is unsurprising, therefore that the party has been haemorrhaging members to the Tories as its *raison d’être* ebbs away.

This process has now reached crisis point with Diane James lasting less than three weeks as Farage’s successor before she stepped down and with UKIP MEPs involved in fist fights over who might be next to defect to the Tories.

## **The left and the referendum**

The response of the left in Britain both to the referendum and its aftermath has been divided and chaotic.

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.

A Brexit vote was always going to bring down the Cameron government, but, as we argued its replacement, was always going to be well to its right. The referendum opened the way for a dangerous realignment of the hard right— which could either have been 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.

And it 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 welcomed it with both hands and promised a similar referendum in France if she wins the Presidency next year.

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 and even increase the chances of a Labour government, got it dramatically wrong. In fact, some were still arguing that there has not been a shift to the right after the formation of the May government.

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. Counterfire’s John Rees accused us of practising what he called ‘the linear school of historical analysis’ [[1](#)]:

*“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."*

The SWP's Alex Callinicos was in a similar mode in *International Socialism* [2] 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?

The Socialist Party's Peter Taaffe, three weeks after the vote in *Socialism Today* argued [3]: "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."

They were 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.

In the October 3 edition of *Socialist Worker* [4] Dave Sewell says the following: 'The Tories and right wing press are ramping up their racist assault against migrants. Theresa May wants to bring in new restrictions on European Union (EU) migrants' rights—and some Tories want to end free movement altogether. Not a day goes by without newspapers pushing racist lies, myths and half-truths about migrants.'

## **Violent attacks**

Yes, this is indeed the situation. There has been a panoply of violent attacks on EU citizens that are taking place—on Polish people in particular—as a direct result of the Brexit campaign and the Brexit vote. EU citizens are living in fear of deportation as hardline Brexiteers—David Davis, Liam Fox, and Boris Johnson, along with Amber Rudd—take control of government policy and ramp up the rhetoric.

And predictably racism has targeted people who are not EU nationals, with attacks on communities that have lived in Britain for decades, including people born here. People from other continents have faced violence and prejudice based on the colour of their skin or assumptions about their religion.

But the problem with David Sewell's article is that the SWP was not only in favour of a leave vote in the referendum, but was in denial of what was absolutely clear in the campaign itself; that a leave vote would not only result in a more-right wing Tory government but would ramp up racism and put EU citizens in a disastrous situation.

It should be clear now, if it was not clear before, that the referendum was not, at the end of the day, a referendum on the EU but primarily 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—end free movement. Immediately the mainstream Brexit campaigns took the decision to concentrate almost exclusively on immigration the Brexit vote went into the lead in the polls.

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.

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, through making racism ‘respectable’.

Of course the referendum cannot be reduced entirely to immigration; there were other important factors involved—poverty, alienation and an anti-establishment backlash. There was indeed an anti-establishment backlash. But such backlashes are not necessarily progressive; indeed much of UKIP’s support has been based on such a dynamic.

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.

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.

## **Reactionary carnival**

The first Tory party conference under Theresa May’s leadership was a sickening carnival of reaction, focused on racism, xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Amber Rudd announced her chilling proposal to require employers to draw up lists of foreign employees, which is both a direct pressure (and threat) on bosses not to employ them and a way of intimidating foreign workers themselves.

Theresa May (who as Home Secretary sent vans around during the election campaign urging foreigners to ‘go home’) again insisted that her red line, with the authority of the Brexit vote behind her, is to end the free movement of people and massively cut immigration. EU citizens living in this country, she again made clear, are to be used as a bargaining chip in Brexit negotiations.

She went on to say that doctors from EU countries, working in the NHS, are welcome to stay for an 'interim period' whilst they are still needed. Put the other way round this means that they would be required to go if could be replaced by British doctors. The *Observer* quotes an Italian journalist, Gianni Riotta, as saying that this amounts 'the ethnic cleansing of doctors and nurses from British hospitals'. The same can be said, of course, of the requirement of employers to list foreign workers.

It's of course positive that the outcry over Rudd's proposal has forced a partial retreat [5] - with the CBI's concerns probably cutting rather more ice than the complaints of anti-racists. Michael Fallon told the BBC that companies will not be told to list or name foreign workers they employ. But he added that firms could be asked "simply to report their numbers" - which is of course still not acceptable.

When she first took office in July, Theresa May talked from the steps of Downing Street about her "mission to make Britain a country that works for everyone." [6] In her first conference speech as leader, she continued that rhetoric [7] talking about planting the party on the centre ground and making populist jibes at 'the privileged few'. But at the same time, she reinforced the racism of others saying, for example "But if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means."

This is the Prime Minister who has talked about extending the horror of grammar schools - which absolutely don't work for the majority and who used the same speech to lambast left wing lawyers and well as delivering snide attacks on Labour under Corbyn. This is the Prime Minister who has overturned the decision of Lancashire County Council to ban fracking.

She may talk about the working class, but the reality of her programme and her party will be to deepen the class divide, the exclusion and the alienation that millions experience every day in austerity Britain.

**Alan Thornett**

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**P.S.**

\* <http://socialistresistance.org/tory-party-undergoes-major-ukipisation/9158>

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/18382-the-eu-vote-this-is-what-a-social-crisis-looks-like>

[2] <http://isj.org.uk/brexit-a-world-historic-turn/>

[3] <http://www.socialismtoday.org/200/referendum.html>

[4] <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/43477/Whats+behind+Labours+migrant++panic%3F>

[5] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-37600566>

[6] <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may>

[7] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-speech-tory-conference-2016-in-full-transcript-a7346171.html>