

Britain - Building a progressive majority: Left strategy after the Brexit vote

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After the EU referendum we are seeing both horror at anti-migrant sentiment and pandering to it, writes Joseph Todd - but only a radical economic offer can carve a way through

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As the recriminations start to fly and the dust continues to swirl, two competing Brexit narratives have begun to emerge.

The first brands the Leave vote as inherently xenophobic and racist. Farage, Johnson and Gove have given political expression to an undercurrent of working class racism, one that is rooted in British identity and small-C conservatism. The regional, small town and rural working class voted in their millions to 'send them home' – be it Eastern Europeans, Muslims or black and brown people – and reclaim 'Britain for the British'.

The left's response, according to this narrative, should be to fight racism and xenophobia on all fronts. Pro-migration and anti-racist movements need to be strengthened. Rising fascist sentiment must be militantly policed. A culture war must be pursued where metropolitan tolerance triumphs. We must battle to keep Britain in the EU, whether it be through the signing of petitions or calling demonstrations in London. The resurgence of working class racism, the reassertion of 'British' identity, must be vehemently opposed.

The second narrative runs a little differently. Yes, they admit, immigration was a central issue in the referendum, but at its core the Leave vote was anti-establishment. It was a revolt by the working class, motivated by decades of industrial decline, economic marginalisation and an uncaring metropolitan elite. Every expert roped in by the Remain camp only served to reinforce their resolve to leave. The barrage of condescension and scaremongering made their position all the more resolute.

Our response, according to this narrative, has to be one of understanding and reconciliation. We must recognize that 'the elite' does not – in their eyes – constitute only bankers, politicians and European bureaucrats but also the metropolitan, middle class, educated, progressive sections of society who voted overwhelmingly for Remain. Those who for years have implicitly or explicitly denigrated the working class as racist, homophobic and sexist. Who, along with politicians, have ignored their concerns. According to this narrative, such behaviour must change. Working class

concerns must not be laughed at or patronisingly thrown aside – but taken very seriously. This would entail the construction of a progressive, long-term migration policy and a radical economic offer to devastated post-industrial communities, with a firm commitment to listening to the economically marginalised and habitually ignored.

Racism and economics

As is usually the case, both of these narratives are partial, simplistic and not as opposed as they first appear. While immigration was the largest motivating factor for Leave supporters, to simply equate concerns over immigration with outright racism and xenophobia is misguided. The working class en masse aren't irreparably racist. Aside from the fact that large swathes of the working class are BME or migrants themselves, concerns over immigration are so often intertwined with economics.

The refrain on the doorstep, again and again, was 'I'm not racist, but I just don't think we have enough jobs, homes and school places to go around'. Here we see the decades of anti-migrant propaganda take effect. 'Immigrants' are painted as the cause of economic insecurity because the status quo cannot blame capitalism. Immigration is the scapegoat at which they relentlessly hammer away. The implications of this are important. If you tackle the underlying issues, the consequences will disappear. If you solve the economics, then anti-immigrant sentiment will fade.

However, we must recognise that some anti-immigrant sentiment is driven by racism rather than economics. Indeed, this is true of every strata of society and not just the working class. Farage and his inner UKIP circle – let us not forget his ominous, terrifying, and blatantly false statement that victory was achieved 'without a bullet being fired' – must be described as proto-fascist. The catalogue of attacks, intimidation and verbal abuse that has emerged after the referendum is xenophobic, racist and disgusting. The groups who openly perform Nazi salutes on the streets of Dover are fascists on British soil.

But we must realise that these groups represent a minority – a minority that is distinct from the majority of the working class, whose anti-immigrant sentiment is fuelled by economics rather than racism. To tar these two groups with the same brush would be to re-affirm the urban, middle class, educated ignorance of working class concerns. It would be to prolong the culture of disregard that allowed the far right such a victory in the first place.

A radical offer

Recognising this distinction, our strategy becomes two fold. First, the Labour Party must flesh out an economic offer to the northern, marginalised, post-industrial regions that overwhelmingly voted Leave. This offer must be radical. It must come soon. It must differentiate a left Labour opposition from the rest of the metropolitan elite.

At the same time, we must assert the importance of migrant and refugee rights. We must extol the benefits and value of immigration without relent. We must build a counter-narrative that connects economic marginalisation with austerity, the rich and global capitalism instead of immigration. We must mobilise against fascist marches and racist attacks.

On these issues, we cannot compromise. Concern over immigration is prevalent amongst the working class. But the root of this concern is economic. If a radical manifesto is put in place, anti-immigration sentiment will begin to fall away. And shorn of a wider anti-immigrant sentiment, the racist and fascist elements would be left isolated, outnumbered and vulnerable.

These concurrent strategies allow parliamentary and extraparliamentary forces to complement each other. While a left Labour opposition should be outlining radical economic policies and holding a firm line on immigration, anti-fascist, direct action and socialist groups should be mobilising heavily and regularly on the streets. Thankfully, the latter has already begun to happen, with a pro-migrant demonstration on the day of the result.

Corbyn, McDonnell and the Labour leadership – once they see the other side of this unwinnable coup – need to play their part. To form a progressive majority they have to unite two distinct constituencies: the young, metropolitan, university educated and the marginalised, small town, working class. The former they've largely secured – although keeping a firm, progressive line on social issues while also introducing rent caps would be key to enthusing them – while the latter have the potential to drift towards UKIP or abstention. This is where redistributive, socialist policies can trump the base xenophobia and racism stoked by Farage and the press. If Corbyn is going to build a progressive majority in Britain, the adoption of a radical economic policy must be his next move.

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P.S.

* <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/building-a-progressive-majority-left-strategy-after-the-brexite-vote/>