

The Likely Triumph of Populism in the UK

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Brexit has been the defining issue of politics in Britain for years and is the pretext for the General Election set for December 12. It has become deeply divisive. According to a recent opinion poll, over 80% of those in favour of Brexit would accept social violence as the price to pay to obtain their objective, and over 50% of those in favour of remaining in the European Union would do so. In an earlier poll this year, over 50% of people said they would support a strong leader prepared to break democratic rules.

These are dangerous signals. Already one Member of Parliament has been killed by a fanatic because she favoured Remain. The Conservatives, in government since 2010, who have imposed a harsh agenda of austerity, have forced a premature Election on the slogan of 'Get Brexit Done!' They are on course for victory. A recent poll of Conservative Party members found that 60% were willing to accept '*serious damage*' to the economy if they could obtain Brexit. They are likely to have their wish, since most economists believe Brexit will cause a steep decline in living standards.

However, there is a deeper story. This is an election that has more to do with class than any in Britain since 1945. But it is class-based in a profoundly new way. For the Conservatives have shifted from being a traditional conservative party, favouring gradual reforms and a broadly middle-class agenda, to a radical populist party.

In other countries where inequalities and economic insecurity have grown as in Britain, new populist parties have emerged in recent years, such as Vox in Spain and the League in Italy. But in Britain this has not happened – although there is now a Brexit Party – simply because the Conservatives have moved to occupy that space.

Earlier this year, they forced out their leader, Theresa May, and in her place the party's small ageing membership chose an upper-class pro-Brexitteer, Boris Johnson, who automatically became Prime Minister. Since then, he has forced out many of the party's moderates. *The Economist*, a pro-business reputable magazine, has likened what has happened to the Conservatives becoming the party of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, promoting 'the general will'.

To understand what has happened, one must go back to Margaret Thatcher who in the 1980s launched neo-liberalism, an agenda for creating free markets and privatisation. That began with financial liberalisation, which has made the economy increasingly dependent on finance. In the 1970s, the financial sector equalled 100% of national income. Today, it is over 300%. This has created a British version of the so-called Dutch disease, whereby de-industrialisation has been accelerated, leaving more and more people in low-wage service jobs, and living standards in the north of England, in particular, lagging well behind those in London, where finance is concentrated.

Thatcher and her followers also set out to dismantle all institutions of social solidarity. This vastly strengthened the power of finance and capital. As a result, ironically, neoliberalism has evolved into an unfree market economy best described as rentier capitalism, defined as a system in which more and more of the income and wealth flow to the owners of property – financial, physical and so-called intellectual property.

This can be illustrated by another telling statistic. In the 1970s, private wealth was worth about 300% of GDP; today, it is worth 700%. About 60% of all wealth is inherited, more than used to be the case, and wealth inequality is much greater than income inequality, even though the latter is also very high by international standards.

This is where the new class structure comes into the picture and why the election is ultimately about class. Globally, and in Britain particularly, a new plutocracy of billionaires thriving on property income has emerged, many supporting a right-wing politics and keen to resist anything close to socialism. They have acquired most of the media and have funded the Conservatives and the Brexit campaign. They want to preserve the structured inequalities that characterise Britain today.

But the plutocrats need two factors to preserve their model. They need enough of the electorate to support a system that is actually not in their interest and they need politicians capable of conveying a populist agenda that will preserve that system. Here is where the second aspect of class has crystallised. The combination of rentier capitalism, the ongoing technological revolution and the pursuit of flexible labour markets has produced a new mass working class, the precariat.

The old industrial proletariat largely voted for Labour, today's main opposition party, and for social democracy, as they have done elsewhere. But many workers have drifted into the precariat – insecure, with no prospect of social mobility, losing social and economic rights. It is the relatively uneducated part of the precariat that could decide the outcome of the General Election. They are what I have called the Atavists, those who feel they have lost what they or people like them had in the past.

The Atavists have fallen out of the old working class or who had parents who were in it or who come from working-class communities. They listen to populist rhetoric because it is easy to comprehend and a convenient way of absolving themselves of responsibility for their predicament. Even though economists could show that their insecurity and stagnant incomes are due to austerity and rentier capitalism, they accept a populist alternative explanation, that their predicament is due to alien forces. They are the foot-soldiers for Brexit, for law-and-order, for xenophobia and for punishing perceived 'scroungers' dependent on benefits.

This leads to the second ingredient wanted by the plutocracy, a party with a leader capable of articulating a populist politics that would draw the Atavists away from any progressive redistributive agenda.

The ideal populist sought by the plutocracy and libertarians is someone who either believes in their model or who can lie about it convincingly enough to appeal to the Atavists and to the elite gaining from rentier capitalism. The supreme art of the populist is the ability to blame

outsiders for the insecurity and inequalities that actually have nothing to do with them. They may have found their ideal in Boris Johnson. As is well known, when he was a journalist, he was dismissed by *The Times* for making up stories when he was their Brussels correspondent.

Johnson has made it clear he sees the Election as a clash between '*the people and parliament*', openly deriding MPs who favour Remain as resisting the will of the people and claiming they are prepared to 'surrender' to Brussels. Donald Trump is an effusive admirer of Johnson, and plans to come to London just before the General Election, dining for the second time with the Queen and no doubt giving Johnson his support. They are kindred spirits.

Johnson has appointed right-wing supporters to senior positions, who have intensified the divisive rhetoric. The Conservative Leader of the House of Commons described the Governor of the Bank of England as '*an enemy of Brexit*' after he warned of the likely economic consequences of Brexit based on research by Bank officials. Johnson has appointed as a personal adviser a journalist who wrote a cover story for the right-wing tabloid *Daily Mail* describing judges who had ruled that Parliament should decide on Brexit '*enemies of the people*'. Calling people doing their public duty 'enemies' invites violent reactions. Many MPs have received death threats and now have 24-hour police protection.

When Johnson was criticised in the House of Commons for using aggressive language about MPs holding back the 'will of the people' over Brexit and 'surrendering' to Brussels, one MP reminded him that such aggressive posturing had led to the assassination of her fellow MP, who had been a prominent Remain advocate. He replied with one word, '*Humbug!*' – slang for nonsense. The fact is that the killer had shouted that the MP was a 'traitor' as he shot and then stabbed her to death.

The Conservatives will probably win the General Election with less than 40% of the vote. The proportion of the electorate that will vote may be low, because of the weather and because many students will be away from their university towns as the election has been called for out-of-term. That will suit the Conservatives. Meanwhile, those most angry about Brexit and the elderly, who tend to be more conservative, will be the most likely to vote. The atavists in the precariat could prove the decisive group.

Tragically, critical issues have been marginalised by the Conservatives and the predominantly right-wing media. Most revealingly, in a scheduled TV debate on climate change between the leaders of all political parties, Boris Johnson refused to participate, no doubt calculating that it would draw attention to a weak record by the Conservatives, in which they have given more subsidies to fossil fuels than any other EU country, and expose their lack of strategy for combating global warming. Epitomising the disdain for what is the greatest long-term issue in every country, Johnson has hired expensive foreign consultants to run the election campaign whose last job was helping the right-wing Liberals in Australia, who have dismissed climate-change, to surprise victory in the Australian General Election earlier this year.

There is a final irony. A recent opinion poll found that about one third of the electorate had a favourable view of Boris Johnson, but only one fifth thought he was honest. Yet this is the man who will be elected Prime Minister on December 12. Worrying times.