



BY PAUL MASON

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To defeat an insurgent far-right, Labour must resist Brexit with all its force

The left must fight for the softest possible form of exit and then unleash a counter-attack in the form of a second referendum.



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“This is the worst night of my life”, wrote Twitter user Mark C, after MPs took control of the Brexit process on Monday. “I feel like everything I held dear, as a citizen in a democratic country, has been crushed. My vote crushed, even though it won. My morale crushed. My belief in who I am crushed.”

To which I say, rejoice. For Mark C is a Ukip member and self-described “Tommy Robinson supporter”, and has Tommy’s mug emblazoned on his Twitter masthead. Some of his mates are not happy either. The alt-right Twitterersphere are now, variously, predicting civil war, threatening to withhold council tax, to occupy parliament and to never vote again. The trouble is scheduled to kick off at 4pm this Friday outside Westminster.

While the press is mesmerised by parliament, the real action of this week is going on inside the brains and social networks of Britain’s emergent fascist movement. It is still possible that, through the venality of the DUP, the careerism of Boris Johnson and the cowardice of a few Labour MPs, Theresa May will get the Withdrawal Agreement through. But what is clear already to Britain’s far right is that Brexit as a project of xenophobia and white supremacy is over.

The best they’ll get is what their own parliamentary avatars describe as a “vassal state”. At worst they’re staying in Europe, albeit after a second referendum in which they get, once again, to pump racist lies into our civil society.

As a result, though many variables remain in play from the Brexit crisis, one thing is already clear. There is no avoiding the culture war. It is here.

When Conservative MP Suella Braverman insulted the Remain camp using the anti-Semitic “cultural Marxism” trope, she was immediately defended by voices as varied as Leave.EU and the *Spectator* editor Fraser Nelson. But this is only the start. Boris Johnson has already railed against the “deep state”. And this is just the tip of a whole iceberg of far-right paranoia that is about to be unleashed.

This year, next year and probably for the rest of our lives, the left and the liberal centre will be tasked with facing down and defeating a movement of racists, misogynists and xenophobes fuelled by the betrayal myth that’s being born this week. Unfortunately, the frontlines of that battle will be in the poorest towns and suburbs of England. It won’t, for the most part, be those who were on the People’s Vote march last Saturday who have to fight it. It will be the one institution that represents progress, tolerance and democracy in these towns – and that is the Labour Party.

But it, too, is beset by cultural warfare. As it dawned on the closet economic nationalists of the old Trotskyist and Stalinist left that May would not deliver Brexit, and that it would be impossible to simply “get back to the issues we care about”, a whole new alliance of Lexiteers emerged, given the nod by members of Jeremy Corbyn’s shadow cabinet.

There is a perfectly good argument for a left-wing exit from Europe: to regain sovereign space for the actions of radical left government against a superstate with neoliberalism written into its constitution.

The problem is, first, the Withdrawal Agreement is not that: it is a shabby compromise whereby Britain actually cedes sovereignty to the EU in return for a temporary customs union. As John McDonnell’s former economic advisor James Meadway [recently wrote](#) in the NS, the detail of the Withdrawal Agreement allows the EU to pull Britain’s access to European financial markets at will, and would be a powerful tool of statecraft for the EU’s neoliberal centre against an incoming Corbyn government.

Secondly, and more importantly, this Brexit – the actually existing crisis we are living through – is a project entirely designed and implemented by a racist, xenophobic wing of British neoliberalism, linked to a global alliance whose project is to smash the multilateral system.

The logical thing for the left to do is to mitigate its impact by fighting for the softest possible form of exit, and to unleash a counter-attack in the form of a second referendum – only this time, as Labour MP Clive Lewis said on Saturday’s Left Bloc protest, it should be “revolt and transform”.

But there is a different logic driving parts of the British left, and it is not mere economic nationalism – self-defeating though that is. At a meeting of the Full Brexit campaign in London this week, alongside left-wing economists Larry Elliott, Costas Lapavistas and Grace Blakeley – the RMT activist Eddie Dempsey delivered an extraordinary tirade against the 80 per cent of Labour members who want to Remain, and the million people who marched on Saturday.

If there is one thing people who go on the Tommy Robinson marches have in common, Dempsey told the audience, “it’s that they hate the liberal left – and they are right to hate them, they are correct.” When called out by a fellow Labour member who works for Another Europe is Possible, Dempsey replied that his critic was “flush with money from Soros”.

This goes a lot further than the 1970s-style economic nationalism of the *Morning Star* and the RMT union, of which Dempsey is a member. The entire argument – that the “working class” has been robbed of a voice in their own movement by liberals – echoes precisely the drivel against political correctness, “luvvies” and “citizens of nowhere” that is pumped out daily by papers like the *Sun* and the *Daily Express*.

It relies, as I’ve argued here before, on a definition of the British working class as white, manual, unskilled, culturally dispossessed and possessing citizenship of this country. In fact 44 per cent of people in work are managers, professionals or “associate professionals” like nurses; when it comes to education 47 per cent have a degree or above. Just 10 per cent of the workforce are in manufacturing. Of the 32 million people employed, nearly four million are from ethnic minorities, while two million are EU nationals without a vote.

Once you understand that this is the real working class, and that the one Dempsey is talking about is an ideological construct of the far right, the next thing he said was even more shocking. He claimed there are “too many in the Labour Party who have made a calculation, that there’s a certain section at the top end of the working class, in alliance with people – they calculate – from ethnic minorities, and the liberals: that’s enough to get them into power” – and that they can disregard “all the working class people that have been driven away by the neoliberals”.

I actually don’t know anybody in the Labour Party who thinks this. But since 2011, when social media began to attract a generation of young people to radical politics, I’ve argued that the only future for social democracy is, indeed, to represent the networked, educated, culturally diverse and globally-connected workforce of Britain. Anti-capitalism will be the work of a conscious, enlightened agent of history, not the dumb, blind one celebrated in Leninist textbooks.

Classes are not formed by the hiring patterns of the bourgeoisie but by the political projects they set out to achieve at work, and in society. Among many people in small town, former industrial communities, there is a cultural antipathy towards learning, openness and self-improvement that is completely at odds with the values of the men and women who built the miners’ halls and co-ops and union-funded night schools in the 20th century.

The main attribute of this reactionary culture is fatalism, just as it is among the poor whites in the US who support Trump. That is the result of defeat, not class consciousness. It is the result of reading a thousand scare stories in the tabloids targeting Muslims, grooming gangs, luvvies, refugees and, yes, George Soros.

The way to overcome it is, as our grandparents did, draw a line through every working class community, inviting all decent people to stand on the same side as us: the progressive, internationalist, anti-racist group – and to fight the reactionary section of the working class, which has existed as the British Brothers’ League, Mosley’s British Union of Fascists, the NF, the BNP, and now Ukip, for political hegemony.

The immediate way to do this is to defeat a no-deal Brexit. Hard Brexit is the shiny object dangled in front of gullible people to distract them from the fact that their wages are low, their high streets gutted, and their life prospects grim. Even a soft Brexit will be seen by people like Marc C as a betrayal. They will emerge from it angry but utterly demoralised, which gives our side the time to unleash what’s been missing until Corbyn took over: a narrative of hope and an army of people to take it to the doorsteps of Britain.

A progressive party, proud of its ability to represent ethnic minorities, women, LGBT people and to defend refugees, cannot make political concessions to the ideology that is driving Brexit, the closed Facebook groups and 4chan bulletin boards: of misogyny, replacement theories and rampant conspiracies. We can reopen the maternity wards, fill the schools with extra teachers and ancillaries, send their kids to university for free and pour money into a Green New Deal that will create millions of skilled jobs.

As to the actual middle class, the upper professional strata of southern England who were of course there in large numbers on the People’s Vote demo, we need to recognise what the Lexiteers want to ignore. Their political representation is pitiful: the Lexiteers Chuka Umuna and Vince Cable to rely on, if they’re Scottish, the right of the SNP.

Though I despise Tony Blair, and want a radical economic programme to end neoliberalism, the main enemy is the far right. It’s besting to see people whose bookshelves groan with Marxist classics, and who can recite the names of battles in the Spanish Civil War, ignore this. The two standout anti-fascist governments in Europe in the 1930s were the French and Spanish Popular Fronts, elected within months of each other in 1936 after the left recognised that having liberal ministers in power was better than being in a concentration camp.

When the political balance of forces changes, our strategy has to change. My strategy now is to solidify the real British working class around a project to shatter the far right and win back what we can of the voters who have been mesmerised by a project of Thatcherism in One Country. We need to convince the liberal managerial class to side with our anti-fascist struggle or, at the very least, not stand in our way.

I am convinced, despite their back-handedness over voting and whipping, that the Labour leadership also wants this: that’s why the *Morning Star*, the RMT and so-called Red London group are so angry right now.

But if the Labour leadership falters, what Saturday’s demo shows is that there is a talented new generation of MPs and activists who will take the struggle for a radical, internationalist and green Labour project to the next stage. While the Lexiteers were sulking at home on Twitter, Labour’s true radical left was out on the streets, where it should be, showing leadership and making history.

Paul Mason is a *New Statesman* contributing writer, author and film-maker. As economics editor at *Newsnight*, then *Channel 4 News*, he covered the global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and the Gaza war. His latest book is *Clear Bright Future: A radical defence of the human being*.



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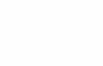
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