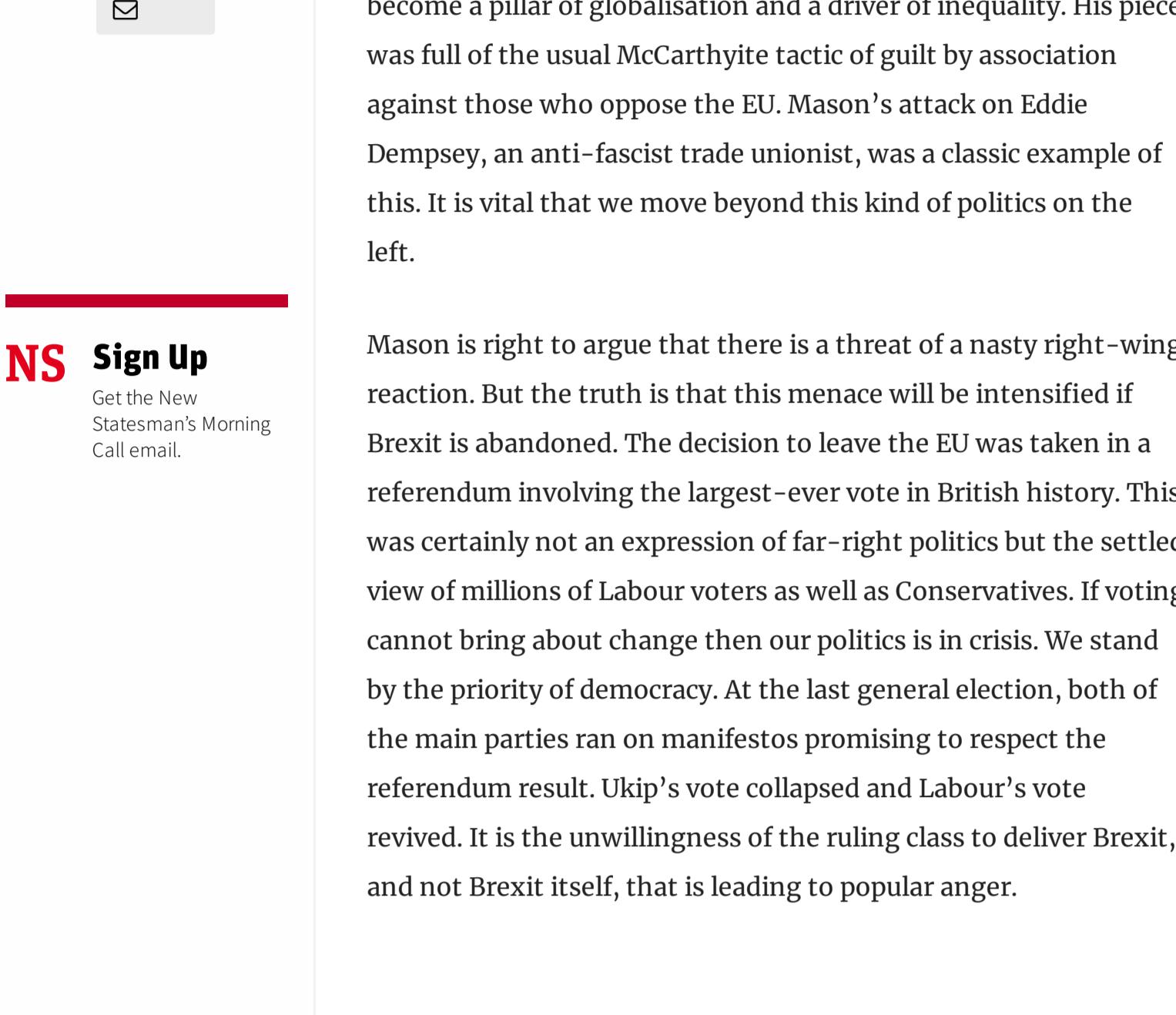




BREXIT 4 APRIL 2019

To defeat the far right, the left must embrace a socialist and internationalist Brexit

The EU enshrines Thatcherism in one continent — the belief it can be reformed from within is deluded.



The European Commission headquarters at the Berlaymont Building in Brussels.

GETTY IMAGES



Paul Mason has made an important contribution to the debate on the left about Brexit. It is an important contribution because Mason is the left's most militant supporter of the EU: an anti-democratic, capitalist organisation which has become a pillar of globalisation and a driver of inequality. His piece was full of the usual McCarthyite tactic of guilt by association against those who oppose the EU. Mason's attack on Eddie Dempsey, an anti-fascist trade unionist, was a classic example of this. It is vital that we move beyond this kind of politics on the left.

Mason is right to argue that there is a threat of a nasty right-wing reaction. But the truth is that this menace will be intensified if Brexit is abandoned. The decision to leave the EU was taken in a referendum involving the largest-ever vote in British history. This was certainly not an expression of far-right politics but the settled view of millions of Labour voters as well as Conservatives. If voting cannot bring about change then our politics is in crisis. We stand by the priority of democracy. At the last general election, both of the main parties ran on manifestos promising to respect the referendum result. Ukip's vote collapsed and Labour's vote revived. It is the unwillingness of the ruling class to deliver Brexit, and not Brexit itself, that is leading to popular anger.

It is also true that the left has been unable to articulate and campaign around a democratic vision of national renewal. Part of the problem is that the Labour's Eurosceptic left, previously carried by Barbara Castle, Tony Benn, Michael Foot and Jeremy Corbyn, has been smothered by the responsibilities of leadership, while the party's Eurosceptic right, exemplified by Hugh Gaitskell, Denis Healey, Peter Shore and Ernest Bevin, was eclipsed by the progressive globalisation of the Third Way. The result has been an absence of leadership on the democratic and socialist possibilities of Brexit from within Labour, which has retreated to a denunciation of Labour-supporting Brexit voters as "xenophobes and racists". We stand by their vote and the socialist possibilities that it opens up through the restoration of democratic sovereignty.

Mason's argument is a self-fulfilling fallacy in that it surrenders the ground of democratic contestation over the meaning of Brexit and then denounces all who disagree with him as playing into the hands of fascism. Mason has adopted the Hillary Clinton tactic of reducing Brexit voters to a "basket of deplorable". That allows the space for the far right to claim their political affections.

Our second point is that wherever the social democratic left has adopted a pro-EU politics in Europe it has been decimated. In France it has all but disappeared, in Holland and Belgium it is now marginal, in Germany the Social Democratic Party trails the *Alternative für Deutschland* in the polls, and in Italy the combined forces of the great communist and socialist traditions could not garner half the votes of the Five Star Movement whose slogan was "go fuck yourself". The collective paralysis of the continental left, particularly its social democratic wing, is a cautionary tale of the cost of abandoning the possibilities of democratic change within the nation state. There are severe constraints on what can be achieved within the EU and working class voters know it.

The alternative to this story was briefly represented by Labour under Corbyn at the last general election, when the party pledged to "respect the result of the referendum" and proposed policies that were clearly contrary to the constraints of the Lisbon Treaty. This has subsequently been threatened by the drift towards Remain. Labour could have led a democratic, pro-Brexit campaign but has refused to do so. Again, the consequences of this inevitably favour the right.

The emerging consensus around Remain, led by Labour, is based on the Third Way notion that the primary objective of our politics is to preserve and protect the frictionless operations of capitalism. Capitalism, however, is a voraciously durable and robust economic system that does not require the tender care of constitutional protection. Democracy, in contrast, is the best means of resisting its domination and that is not possible within the constraints of the EU. It leads either to a depressed politics of disappointment or the rage of betrayal. Neither can be described as a "narrative of hope". It is more an empty promise that leads to disenchantment.

This relates to the third delusion of the pro-EU left; its refusal to acknowledge the impossibility of reforming the EU. They have built a position around "remain and reform" (Mason) or "revolt and transform" (Labour shadow minister Clive Lewis) that is clearly impossible within the structures of the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties.

The EU is based on treaty law and the ultimate authority of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in resolving disputes. The treaties are based on the priority of the "four freedoms" (of goods, people, services and capital) and the ECJ rules accordingly. Transforming these treaties in a socialist direction is effectively impossible. At least 15 socialist governments would need to be elected simultaneously even to initiate treaty change, and the requirement of "consensus" in any subsequent convention, and the unanimous ratification, permits a veto by any member state.

Syriza's experience in Greece is proof positive of the hopelessness of the "remain and reform" approach. Mason reported well on that event.

His argument that Thatcherism in one country is bad is obviously correct but he fails to see that Thatcherism in one continent is clearly worse. That is why we oppose the EU.

There is a profound distinction between globalisation and internationalism. The labour movement and the left generally would be wise to remember it. The EU is a globalising force that subordinates labour to capital and democracy to treaty law. We do not owe our labour rights or welfare state to the EU but to the political struggle of the labour movement over more than a century.

We are living through an interregnum, a period which Antonio Gramsci described as a time when "the old is dead and new cannot be born, when there is a fraternisation of opposites and all manner of morbid symptoms pertain". One of those morbid symptoms is the left's commitment to the single market, the customs union and the sovereignty of the ECJ; to the capitalist eternity of the EU. We urge instead a politics built around democracy, radical economic reforms and internationalism.

The way to defeat the far right is for the left to embrace an internationalist and democratic Brexit.

MOST POPULAR



British Army corporal tweets Angela Rayner will "perish" in Brexit "civil war"

BY HARRY LYK



The Machiavelli in Downing Street

BY HARRY LAMBERT



Patti Smith: "I'm an American artist and I feel guilty about everything"

BY KATE MOSSMAN



Boris Johnson knows exactly what he's doing when he talks about Jo Cox

BY STEPHEN BUSH



Why nuclear energy is key to net zero

By Tom Greatrex

NS Sign Up

Get the New Statesman's Morning Call email.

Call 020 7833 1300

or email signups@newstatesman.com

The Full Brexit is a pro-Leave group of academics including Maurice Glasman, Costas Lapavitsas, Mary Davis, Chris Bickerton, Wolfgang Streeck and Richard Tuck.

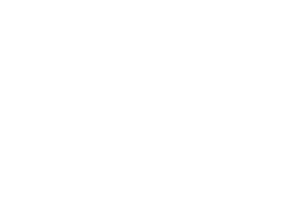
SUBSCRIBE

£1 per month

RELATED ARTICLES



Why small is beautiful as far as Jeremy Corbyn's relationship with the unions is concerned



BBC Politics Live thrives on controversy – but wants to pretend otherwise



Why the future of the Scottish Conservatives might be brighter than you think