DEMOCRACY IN THE UK
Realignment on the right?

Alan Finlayson and Lea Ypi

The fall of Theresa May has ushered in a new phase in the UK's never-ending Brexit crisis. Energy is once again behind a hard-Brexit right led by Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson. Two members of *Renewal*'s Editorial Board explore this new political moment, and the fresh challenges it poses for the left.

'Labour has assimilated Brexit within a crude class analysis'

Alan Finlayson: In 1957, Stuart Hall remarked that 'the disorderly thrust of political events disturbs the symmetry of political analysis'.[1] Living through our present moment I feel the truth of this statement daily. There's so much going on it's hard to line it all up neatly and 'explain' it.

There's an economic crisis: austerity, intensifying inequality and the running down of the public realm; the ongoing effects of 'globalisation' and technological change. There's a political crisis: within the main parties and Parliament but also nationally, where the split between regions and between rural and urban seats is such that we don't have 'national' political parties anymore. There's a deeper crisis of legitimacy and consent: people think that Westminster lacks the will and capacity to address the situation, which is why the Hansard Society recently found

54 per cent wanting 'a strong leader who is willing to break the rules'.[2] Finally, there is a crisis at the ideological/cultural level – the things that sustain the political 'imagined community' (attachments to shared myths of nation, belief that there is a 'social contract' which others will honour) are no longer effective. The nature of news and opinion media consumption in digital culture is now such that there often aren't the shared premises for a meaningful political dispute even to take place.

I start with these very general remarks because I want to make clear the scale of the mistake being made by 'Remainerists' who mistake Brexit for surface noise. Thinking of Brexit as an unfortunate mistake caused by David Cameron and aided by cynical media, they think it can be put right by invoking the law against politics, or by getting 'the facts' out there more effectively. That's a huge underestimation of the crisis. The results of the EU election showed what a miscalculation it is. But the Labour leadership isn't in a much better place. It has, I think, assimilated Brexit within a crude class analysis, and then done what Labour leaderships always do: reduce political tactics to 'triangulation'. The result of the Peterborough byelection, where Labour retained the seat with a few hundred votes more than the Brexit Party, might be thought to confirm that strategy. Good organisation and intense effort led to an outcome which should be celebrated. But I fear it will encourage the party to think (yet again) that if everyone follows the line and joins in with the singing, then 'one more heave' will be sufficient.

The heart of the problem is that they all still think that 'Brexit means Brexit'. It has never meant that. In actual Brexit discourse 'the EU' is a name for experiences of the various crises I described above. It stands for any and all of the technocrats (national as well international) who have forced their vision of the future on us, without our consent. Brexit, then, is the name of an act of heroic refusal of that future. That name has brought together people animated by all kinds of general and specific resentments: about jobs, immigration, religion, the countryside, small businesses, moral values and so on. It's a form of Powellism but with a wider social base, a political infrastructure, a more effectively articulated chain of grievances – and the internet. It's not going to go away of its own accord.

The Conservative Party is not going to elect a leader who will distinguish themselves from that politics. It's a politics most of its members share, especially now that its more obviously fascist advocates have been side-lined in UKIP. We are seeing a realignment on the right as the Tories work out how to articulate the form of English cultural/identity politics that has been birthed by the Brexit Party, while continuing to act in the interests of rich people who don't care about those things. They have the chance, being in government, to make institutional and

policy changes to sustain that alliance. I think we will see them try to do that, although the contradictions of Brexit will hamper them. The issue for the left, as always, is whether Labour tries to do everything itself or, instead, accepts a role as leader of a coalition that necessarily includes the SNP: a problem given the dangers of seeming anti-English. Ultimately, however, a 'progressive alliance' can't only be about political parties in elections – it's about a much broader coalition of organisations, interests and forces. It's a question not just of whether or not Labour can be part of that and lead it, but also of the extent to which the party is willing to be led by social forces that it does not control.

'Britain is no exception to the growing polarisation of opinion around Europe'

Lea Ypi: I think there is at least one plausible sense in which 'Brexit means Brexit'. It is that, for all of Labour's wishes to, first, defend the very plausible assumption that 'Remain' and 'Leave' are not authentic political cleavages, and, second, to 'bring the country together', it is not clear that this is also what 'the country' believes or wants. In this sense, Britain is no exception to the growing polarisation of opinion around Europe (or more specifically the European Union) and all that it stands for.

Other European countries may not be facing the question of 'remain' and 'leave' with the same sense of urgency and drama, but they are similarly divided with regard to how progressives should respond to a contemporary crisis that is partly of their own making. In the European parliamentary elections of May 2019, the centre-right European People's Party group and the centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats lost their usual combined majority, thanks to the rise of greens and the far right. The emergence of the Brexit Party is therefore no exception to a pattern that we have also observed elsewhere. It's a sign of how far Brexit has 'Europeanised' British politics, pushing it into a broader pattern of fragmentation and polarisation.

To call the Brexit Party a 'party' is to dignify it with a name and tradition that it neither has nor wants. The Brexit Party is like no other traditional party: it has no members, no programme, no coherence of message, no life beyond its existence as a digital platform. The contribution of members is captured more by content-sharing on social media than by democratic deliberation among equals. It is a registered company with a hierarchical structure tightly controlled from the top: 'the virtual carbon copy' of the Italian Five Star movement, as Arron Banks recently declared.[3] Like the Five Star movement, it nurses hostility to mainstream

politicians, applauds direct democracy and claims to be beyond left and right. And, like the Five Star movement, its base of supporters includes both moderate fascists and supposed revolutionary communists.

But while the Brexit Party can be seen as part of a European trend of consolidation of digital forms of activism that present a challenge to more traditional ways of political mobilising, its continuing success cannot be guaranteed merely by supporting political innovation and denouncing the failure of traditional politics. Its innovations cannot take a 'moderate', compromising form, or they will face electoral annihilation. The fate of Change UK, as compared to that of the Brexit Party, is interesting here. On the surface they presented themselves as structurally similar: they were fresh political forces, based on digital platforms, campaigning to change the system and to involve ordinary people in doing so. But the content of the message ultimately matters more than the form of delivery.

This anti-centrist trend has parallels in other European countries too. In France and Italy, anti-European, anti-austerity and anti-bureaucratic sentiments have been successfully mobilised by *Rassemblement National* and *Lega Nord* respectively. The latter has seen its electoral share increase compared to that of the Five Star movement – though Salvini's methods of engaging with the public and the use of digital platforms have actually been remarkably similar to those of Beppe Grillo. In all cases, these new forms of mobilisation have been deployed to defend a right-wing yet pan-European vision promising a return to sovereignty and the recovery of national control over vital political decisions, coupled with some of the most hostile anti-immigrant campaigns of the last few years.

It is right to say that Brexit has become the catch-all term that successfully captures many different things at once: resistance to rule by policy rather than politics, anger with austerity, the desire to take back control, the illusion that immigration restrictions will solve the problem, and so on. Yet I am not sure Labour's predicament is different from that of other parties of the European left and I am also not sure what capacity Labour has to radically alter this state of affairs. Perhaps what is interesting here is a broader dilemma: the dilemma of any social-democratic parliamentary force that seeks to present itself as sufficiently responsible to govern the whole country, while remaining true to the radical message that inspires social protest in class-divided societies. If there is triangulation here it is not just for strategic reasons. It stems from the very real dilemma of principle: how can the same agent that appeals to 'the many not the few' also rule in the name of 'everyone'?

'These are not times for triangulation. There are too many angles'

Alan Finlayson: You are certainly right to put all of this in a wider European political context. A key challenge for political analysis is to identify what about the situation in the UK is universal, what is particular, and what is a particular expression of something universal. It is sometimes too easy (for me at any rate) to slip into British exceptionalism and to focus too much on 'the peculiarities of the English'.

I want to pick up on your reference to the 'plausible assumption that "Remain" and "Leave" are not authentic political cleavages'. Political communities can be divided up in all sorts of ways; there are many potential cleavages and lots more with no potential at all. What is decisive is political action: the discourses and organisations that establish a particular cleavage as dominant. I think that Leave, at present, is successfully linking together, or articulating, a number of grievances into a viable expression of a wider sense of cleavage – including, as you put it, 'resistance to rule by policy rather than politics, anger with austerity, the desire to take back control'. There was a moment, in the summer of 2016, when Remainers might have been able to constitute the ground of an alternative division: they could have accepted the result of the referendum and sought to contain the Brexit question within the framework of a conflict between a planned break and a chaotic 'no deal' solution. But Remainers didn't do that. Dazed, and not used to losing, they absented themselves from the argument about what Brexit would mean.

The running was instead made by the ERG, Leave.EU, the Brexitist press and an army of online activists: they were able to further 'globalise' their battle for Brexit, articulating it across societal 'levels', and making it about interests *and* identities, economy *and* culture, political institutions *and* democratic practice.

One consequence of this is that the UK experience of the post-2008 crisis – its own particular form of rejection of professionalised politics and the technocratic state – has become inextricably entwined with a Brexitist cultural politics organised around a myth of Englishness. This is expressed as regional opposition to metropolitan London. Connecting Brexit to wider issues and to aspects of the deeper political culture of the country has made it, I think, into an effective – and in that sense a 'real' – cleavage. Remainerism has so far been no match for this.

With that in mind I want to come back to triangulation. You are right about the dilemma faced by all European social-democratic parties (which has broken some

of them). But I was thinking of something more specific: the New Labour strategy of using polling to identify policies and positions best able to catch the median voter. The electoral success of that strategy was linked to the context of which it was a part – one in which Labour was ahead of the game technologically, and where the combination of a centralised politics and a centralised media (with personnel moving between the two) made for a powerful force.

That context has changed. For one thing, people are wise to polling, and they don't trust politicians who look too much the professional part. For another, as you note, there is intense polarisation. That's part of a much wider and deeper frag-mentation of electorates, evident all over Europe, but one that is, importantly, multidimensional. That is to say, it's not only to do with people occupying ever-more fine-grained positions along a left-right axis; it's also about the fact that the core themes and demands around which people build their understanding of politics are very different from each other, and have the potential to be located in lots of places along the left-right divide. For example, there is opposition to environmentalist policy on the trade union left and the libertarian right, support for it on the radical left and amongst some on the far right; enthusiasm for immigration crosses the left and the right, as does opposition to it – and so on for certain kinds of democratisation, regional autonomy, localism, nationalism.

My point is that these are not times for triangulation. There are too many angles. I understand that, of course, the Labour Party exists to win elections and that it may therefore make sense to focus effort on keeping various blocs of voters on board, in order to win governmental power and lead from there. If *fortuna* smiles it may be able to do that. But I think that what Leave and the Brexit Party show is that – as American far-right figures such as Steve Bannon keep insisting but which the 'Cultural Marxists' already knew – 'politics is downstream from culture'. That is to say, before election day there is a lot of 'ideological' work to be done, connecting interests and identities, and that involves organisations and action beyond Parliamentary politics as well as within it. I think that the Labour Treasury team has a lot of the policies needed for a politics which brings together a large coali-tion. But the political strategy necessary to support all this requires Labour to adjust its self-conception: to see itself as one part of something larger – a coalition of political, economic and above all cultural forces that can come together to create a new political consensus.

And that gets me to a third thing – and to what I think is in fact most fundamen-tal. As you say: 'The Brexit Party is like no other traditional party … no life beyond its existence as a digital platform' and a direct imitation of Five Star. My (anxious) question would be: is this an anomaly or an avant-garde? Are these new 'parties'

the aberration or is it the 'traditional' parties that are now out of joint with the times? Then again, Five Star and the Brexit Party are not such a big break from their predecessors. The 'traditional' parties had already recreated themselves some time ago as top-down, brand-led consumer organisations, with the role of members reduced to subscribing and cheerleading. The 'platform parties' simply extend this logic but also adapt it to social media culture; giving their members content to share with friends and family is giving them *more* to do than was common in the 'catch-all' and 'cartel' parties of the *fin-de-siècle*.

Beyond parties, digital, participatory and shareable media are affecting politics at the foundations. I've been trying for years to popularise the term 'people swarms'. It hasn't caught on but I am still trying (!). I mean it to refer to the way in which twenty-first-century participatory politics takes unpredictable forms as people suddenly 'swarm' around a cause or problem, and then just as rapidly dissipate or move on to another. I think that was happening before digital media took hold but they have facilitated it. Sometimes it takes relatively superficial forms (such as 'Bring back our girls'), but something like #MeToo has had far reaching reverbera-tions. But it's not only a question of hashtags. I'd include the upsurge of concern about plastics after Blue Planet, the demonstrations catalysed around Tommy Robinson, and also Extinction Rebellion. Sometimes this kind of activity is very short-lived but nevertheless has effects in the moment; some of it never matters at all; some of it matters for ongoing ideological/ideational battles.

The thing is, this kind of activity doesn't need to win a majority to have an effect; the swarm itself has power to influence slower-moving institutions (and a larger but dispersed population). I think the Brexit Party might be seen in that way. It's a manifestation of a looser form of political organisation, well-funded, with an established and rhetorically capable branded leader, a lot of active content-creating supporters online and so on. It can mobilise 'the swarm' in ways that connect to the formal political process; it can intervene into political disputes at the national or (most effectively) factional level; and it can coordinate entryism into the Conservative Party and so on.

I think there are some very hard political theory questions about what could or should happen to the institutions of democratic politics in such a context, and how to connect technoculture to the effective coordination of responses to real problems. But from the political tactical side I think that it may be time to accept that this is how it is now. The left version of the swarm is mostly focused on sectarian contestation and, as I said, focused on 'one more heave'. It is not always alert to the scale of the danger it faces.

'Remain is divided at the very fundamental level of articulating what democracy is about'

Lea Ypi: I agree with Alan that the Leave campaign has been very successful in finding support for a Brexitist cultural politics focused on the nativist myth of Englishness and other divisions typically associated with it: cosmopolitans versus communitarians, metropolitan elites versus regional working classes, young versus old and so on. But it seems to me that nativism, and the hostility to cosmopolitan liberal elites, who are held partly responsible for the crisis of 2008 and the politics of austerity that followed it, is on the rise everywhere in the EU, even where it does not take the form of advocating exit from the EU. Indeed, the British experience and Brexit negotiation process seem to have taught Le Pen and Salvini that it is wiser to advocate their nativist vision and seek to undermine the EU from within, than to campaign for exit right away.

I also agree that Remain has been so far unable to offer anything equivalent to the Leave campaign and that these are no times for the politics of triangulation. But I see triangulation as the unintended consequence of what is currently going on in the Labour Party – the result of objective difficulties in keeping together the different souls of the Remain campaign, rather than an intentional product of clumsy attempts to guide decisions following polls. After all, Labour did not seem too troubled by the polls in the most recent general election: it showed great determination in putting forward a bold electoral manifesto, despite the hostility of most of the mainstream media and predictions that it would be wiped out.

In a way, what Alan describes about the Brexit Party speaks to my thesis that Remain and Leave are not authentic political cleavages. As I see it, and as Alan agrees, the Leave campaign has succeeded in articulating broader grievances in society precisely by persuading its supporters that what they are taking a stand on is not just the issue of leaving or remaining in the EU (since then the terms of the deal would matter considerably more than they seem to), but concerns defending 'democracy' come what may. But the reason it seems to have succeeded is that it did not face the challenge of saying what democracy is supposed to be in the future, how democracy and capitalism come together, how to think about reform and revolution, or how to rethink democracy to face the challenges of the twenty-first century. The project of the Brexit Party is a project of retrieval – retrieval of imperial grandeur in its right-wing version, and of the golden age of popular sovereignty in the left-wing one. But in either case its supporters do not need to say much more beyond pointing to the past and saying: 'that is what we need to go back to'. Yet that kind of response is only available in a politics of nostalgia, and

is in any case not available to a more critical left, a left that wants to be future-oriented but that also remains reflexive about its own history, its own past struggles and about the cost of its successes. As I see it, the reason the Remain campaign has spectacularly failed in performing something similar to the Brexit Party is that it is inherently divided. It is divided at the very fundamental level of articulating what democracy is about and how the EU relates to it; it is divided both in its diagnosis of the problems and in the solutions it offers. Leavers may disagree on how they interpret the requirements of national self-determination but they don't disagree that national self-determination is a desirable political ideal. The Remain camp, on the other hand, is divided between those who believe unreservedly in the EU and its benefits, and more reluctant remainers-and-reformers (or revolutionaries), who see it only as a lesser evil compared to the probable result of abandoning the entire EU project.

Something like this dilemma, I think, characterises the European left more widely. Given the rise of the right and the crisis of the centre, the left has no choice but to unite and search for a common way forward. But the search for the alternative is complicated by the fact that this broader united left front has to contain two entirely different ways of relating to the contemporary predicament. The first is an institutionalist left that continues to believe in the rational management of capitalism through enlightened policies and improved institutions. The second is a more protest-oriented left that has always been more sceptical of the focus on governance at the expense of vision and movement-based politics. To build a broad basis of support, they need to spend less time trying to undermine each other and more effort trying to learn from each other's mistakes, and from their own.

The institutional left needs to abandon the dogma of compromise at all costs and learn to be militant again. The protest left needs to learn how to turn the criticism of capitalist institutions into a constructive set of proposals: proposals that do not simply rehash old formulas but are able to speak to the challenges of the twenty-first century, offer a renewed vision of democracy beyond the nation state, and find a popular base that can mobilise behind them. This is no easy task, but the start can only be the cessation of mutual hostilities.

As I see it, the triangulation that Alan mentions is characteristic of the predicament of the European left everywhere, and is the result of the difficulties in finding common ground for the reasons I mentioned. The two souls of the European left, the reformist and the revolutionary one, now coexist in the Labour Party, and are, for better or worse, sceptical of each other. They also coexist in the Remain campaign and lead to different attitudes to the EU. For one part of the

Remain campaign, that which embodies the reformist left – or that inherits the legacy of the Third Way – the problems of the EU are almost always reducible to the problem of its critics, who fail to understand the nature of the institution or to grasp the benefits of the project, and who are depicted, as a result, as narrow-minded bigots unable to see the virtues of liberal cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, there is the part of the Remain constituency represented by a more critical left, for example the one associated with Another Europe is Possible, which is fully aware of the limitations of the EU and the need to radically reform its institutions but has chosen 'remain, reform and revolt' over the promise of reviving national democracy by the Leave campaign. In current circumstances this is a very hard sell: the EU cannot be in both a defensive and a renovating mode without undermining itself, perhaps fatally. Moreover, given the current composition of the Remain campaign, it is difficult to see where the critical mobilisation for remain and reform – still less 'revolt' – would come from. The bulk of Remainers seem to lack the history of militant activism that would make them credible campaigners for the kind of changes required to genuinely transform the EU.

I think that Alan makes an important point when he talks about the implications for the current state of contemporary politics of years of mediatisation of politics. This has had a train of negative consequences: shallow involvement, excessive attention to the personality of charismatic leaders, and a loss of intelligent deliberation within political parties. These consequences were already visible with the decline of mass democracy in the 1990s – well before the emergence of digital platforms. What is interesting now is to reflect on where we are at with the catch-all party in the age of digital activism. In some ways, the crisis of the centre is also a crisis of the catch-all party, and signals the appetite for radical transformative visions of social change – an appetite that so far only the right has been able to satisfy. At a very abstract level it is not clear why the left cannot use some of the same digital strategies to gather support for a very different kind of politics. I don't have a good answer to the question of whether digital activism is an exception or the new normal, but, as I see it, it may not matter in any case. Digital activism may well give the illusion of agency and control, for a time, but it won't be long before those who subscribe to the new parties realise that without fundamental changes in the structure of social, political and economic relations, activism (whether in the form of knocking doors or sharing content on Twitter) is worth very little. In the long run, an evolution in the forms of participation won't matter, so long as the content of the messages remains unaltered.

The only parties of the left that emerged more or less unscathed from the European election were Green parties. It is difficult to avoid the impression that they were reaping the benefits of the consciousness-raising campaigns of

Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future, and it is undeniable that digital activism played an important role here. The message of these mobilisations was one of profound challenge to the status quo: an appeal to fundamentally rethink the long-term sustainability of capitalism when faced with the claims of future generations. It is true that in places like Germany and Ireland, where they are now successful, Green parties share responsibility for some of the retrograde policies of the past two decades. Crucially, however, they did *not* abandon a discourse based on principles, or the commitment to a vision of social justice that is inherently transnational. This consistency meant that they were still able to appeal to voters, especially young voters, and to find some way of speaking a language that is fundamentally at odds with that of the right, yet similarly radical in its implications.

The challenge now is how to take this forward, in a way that connects the old left question of class to the new left question of generational survival. This is not impossible: climate change, like migration, does not affect everyone in the same way. Both are, at root, also class issues. This, of course, requires rethinking ideas of stratification and social class beyond national measurements and more along lines of structural oppression by both national and transnational institutions. The challenge of the left in taking forward the gains of climate activism is to reinvent itself as a force that is both institutional and revolutionary, and one for whom the feasibility of the Green New Deal is as important as the vision of transcending capitalism.

This is a challenge that I don't think any particular party or social movement can address on its own. It is a question of collective mobilisation, in the workplace, in the family, in social media. It is a question of building unity with parts of the left that have traditionally argued with each other. It requires rescuing Lenin and Gramsci from Steve Bannon, and rethinking intellectual hegemony for the digital age. But it also requires reviving the politics of protest, and developing further the economic, cultural and social critique of capitalism and the state that was interrupted with the triumph of neoliberalism circa 1989, adapting this to twenty-first century circumstances.

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Further reading

Alan Finlayson, 'Rethinking Political Communication', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol 90, Issue S1, 2019.

Lea Ypi, 'Can "Remain and Reform" ever be radical?', *The New Statesmen*, 31 May 2019: https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/brexit/2019/05/can-remain-and-reform-ever-be-radical.

Notes

1. Stuart Hall, 'The New Conservatism and the Old', in Sally Davison et al (eds), *Stuart Hall: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 2018.

2. The Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 16*, The Hansard Society, London 2019: https://assets.ctfassets.net/rdwvqctnt75b/7iQEHtrkIbLcrUkduGmo9b/cb429a657e97cad61e61853c05c8c4d1/Hansard-Society__Audit-of-Political-Engagement-16__2019-report.pdf.

3. Darren Loucaides, 'Building the Brexit Party', *Guardian*, 21 May 2019: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/21/brexit-party-nigel-farage-italy-digital-populists-five-star-movement.