

# HARD TIMES



## Britain beyond Brexit

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**Hard Times**

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**Editors of this Issue**

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**Please address any enquiries to**

Hard Times Magazine  
Prof Dr Dirk Wiemann  
Department of English and American Studies  
University of Potsdam  
Am Neuen Palais 10  
14469 Potsdam  
Germany

**or**

[hardtimesinfo@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:hardtimesinfo@uni-potsdam.de)

**Layout by**

Aileen Behrendt and Frank Wehrmann

**Image on front cover by**

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**Cover Design by**

Frank Wehrmann

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# Editorial

Georgia Christinidis, Jessica Fischer and Frauke Hofmeister

The title of this issue of *Hard Times* is deliberately ambiguous: “Britain beyond Brexit” can be interpreted both temporally, as an interest in the future after Brexit and, by extension, the history that led to the current situation, but also as a broadening of the scope of discussion, which is all too often exclusively dominated by the ongoing crises of Brexit and now Covid-19, thus losing track of other problems that may contribute to and, in turn, be exacerbated by these crises, such as the ongoing impact of austerity and privatisation. Both the temporal extension and the broadening of perspective potentially denoted by ‘beyond’ were important concerns for the editors of this issue; it turned out, however, that the process of producing the issue came to mimetically resemble the problem it was designed to address: many contributors wanted to write on Brexit and/or Covid-19, while it turned out to be more difficult to find contributors interested in addressing themselves primarily and systematically to the changes undergone by the NHS—even more so after Covid-19 hit. Despite the originally

unintended centrality of Brexit to these pages, the contributions clearly show that Brexit cannot be separated from many wider political questions that are currently at stake not only in Britain, but globally. There is a further respect in which this issue is, itself, symptomatic: there is no agreement, either among contributors, or even among the editorial team, regarding the likely causes, significance, implications, or effects of Brexit, and the relationship in which it stands with other political issues, both in the short and long term. It is therefore filled with multiple dissenting voices. It should be noted, furthermore, that due to difficulties partly related to the Covid-crisis, the contributions to this issue were not all completed at the same time, but at different points throughout the year 2020. Therefore, different vantage points compound the differences in (political) perspective.

The historicising approach of some of the contributions to this issue as well as the multiplicity of perspectives it contains is

evoked by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) on the issue's cover: the painting was, famously, bought by Walter Benjamin, who, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), interprets the figure as the angel of history, hurled backwards, by the storm of progress, into an unknown future while keeping its eyes fixed on the ruins of the past. Although it is not clear that it is the storm of progress that has caused the destruction, Benjamin's interpretation of the image is reminiscent of his, perhaps most well-known, dictum that "[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." The ambivalence inherent to Benjamin's theses is further heightened by familiarity with the other meanings he attributed to the painting during the twenty years that he possessed it, from its association with the Cabbalistic belief that new angels are constantly created, some of whom pass out of existence again almost immediately, their sole purpose of being the adoration of G\*d, if only for a single instant, to his playful invocation of the figure as 'guardian angel' of the fictitious 'University of Muri'. In the *Acta Muriensa*, Benjamin and his friend Gershom Scholem satirised contemporary academia. Scholem's poem addressed to the angel, "Gruß vom Angelus", ends with a stanza that rejects the possibility of determining the meaning of the image:

Ich bin ein unsymbolisch Ding

bedeute was ich bin

Du drehst umsonst den Zauberring

Ich habe keinen Sinn.

The 'sense' or 'meaning' of the current, multiple crises, of austerity, Brexit, and Covid-19 seems equally difficult to fix – other than, perhaps, in the future, with the benefit of hindsight, from the vantage point of the angel looking backwards, as it were.

The articles in this issue can be read as addressing themselves to three primary concerns: firstly, they undertake to embed the immediate issues into a broader perspective, which relativises their newness and investigates them in contexts that are easily forgotten in the fast-changing environment of the media. Thus, both Andrew Gamble and Logie Barrow, from different disciplinary and political perspectives, read Tory policy during the Brexit negotiations and the Covid-19 crisis as the latest manifestation of strategies, preoccupations, priorities that have long characterised the Conservative Party. At the same time, the imposition of neoliberalism since the 1970s and its intensification since the economic crisis of the late 2000s have exacerbated the effects of policies that are not, in themselves, novel. In thus contextualising and historicising Brexit, Gamble's and Barrow's accounts counterbalance the oft-propagated narrative that Brexit is a direct outcome of the primal xenophobia and racism of the working class. At the same time, we complement the academic discussion of Brexit, austerity and other issues with assessments by an activist (Felicity Dowling) as well as experiential accounts (M. G. Sanchez, Annegret Landgraf and Jennifer Riedel) that provide a counterpoint to the greater abstractions of academic discourse, lest it be forgotten that people's lives are, in many

ways and senses, at stake - albeit opinions on what the best ways to ameliorate their situation may differ.

Secondly, we give room to voices that go beyond some of the ‘orthodoxies’ that have established themselves as part of the discourse both of pro-EU commentators in Britain and that of German observers of British politics. Thus, Sebastian Berg takes issue with many of the criticisms levelled against Corbynism and provides an overall positive assessment of what, he argues, is not an era named after a leader of the Labour Party but a “force in British politics” that continues to take effect as a counterweight to the neoliberal hegemony. Philip Whyman, in turn, makes a case for Brexit from the perspective of a left-wing economist and a founding signatory of the network “The Full Brexit”.

Thirdly, our contributors remind us of the impact of current political developments beyond England as well as beyond Britain, namely in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Here, the conditions of crisis make visible and exacerbate conflicts of interest that pre-existed the current challenges, but that may come to a head in their aftermath. While Annegret Landgraf and Jennifer Riedel draw our attention to the impact of austerity measures on Scottish schools, Klaus Stolz shows how Brexit has revealed the still largely unitary character of the British state and argues that Scotland will sooner or later leave the United Kingdom. The future of Northern Ireland’s place within the state seems equally at stake, as Hofmeister’s account of the developments north of the re-emerging Irish border reminds us. Elena Schmitz

shares her thoughts as “A European in Wales, in times of Brexit”, and some of her observations are echoed in M.G. Sanchez’s autobiographical contribution set in the North of England.

What emerges clearly from this issue of *Hard Times* is that the problems that beset the contemporary conjuncture are closely linked to an entire series of broader political questions, such as the appropriate level of government (local, national, or transnational), the future of the nation state and devolution, the relationship between neoliberal and neoconservative tendencies in contemporary politics, the ongoing impact of austerity and privatisation, the role played by ideology and the media in influencing political developments on the one hand, and the impact of individual personalities like those of Johnson and Corbyn on the other. Although answering such far-reaching questions transcends the scope of a single issue of a magazine, insisting upon their significance in the context of the current crises may, we hope, help to avoid the temptation of well-worn narratives and easy answers.

The issue’s editors would like to thank Sebastian Berg for his help with recruiting contributors, and the editorial team in Potsdam for agreeing to a speedy publication at one of the most stressful times of the academic year.

*Georgia Christinidis (Rostock)*

*Jessica Fischer (Friedrichshafen)*

*Frauke Hofmeister (Leipzig)*

# New Directions:

## Boris Johnson and English Conservatism

Andrew Gamble

*Andrew Gamble (Sheffield) places Johnson's Conservative Party in the tradition of pragmatic One Nation Conservatism. Due to the contradictory nature of its commitments, the party cannot possibly deliver on all its promises, and Gamble predicts "a lot of pork barrel politics" to come. Ultimately, however, he suggests that the commitment to Global Britain, associated with a neoliberal agenda, will trump other political interests.*

The Conservatives under Boris Johnson won a substantial victory in the December 2019 General Election, finishing with a majority of more than eighty seats. This ended a decade of hung parliaments, small majorities and coalition government. Although the Conservative party had been in office since 2010 the Johnson Government flush with electoral success presented itself in the few heady weeks before the Covid emergency struck as a new Government with a radical new agenda, as though some other party had been in Government for the previous ten years. The central promise the Conservatives made in the election campaign

was that it would get Brexit done, but Brexit meant different things to different parts of its coalition, as it had done during the Referendum. It meant both *Global Britain* and *Britain First*. Should Britain become Singapore on Thames, a global free market trader, or turn inwards and build walls to protect itself? During the election the Conservatives played up the *Britain First* theme, successfully targeting 'Red Wall' seats in the North of England, many of them traditional working class Labour strongholds. These new voters were promised that a new Conservative Government would invest heavily in these neglected left behind areas to level them up with London and the South East. To his new red base Johnson promised state intervention, and state spending and immigration control to look after them. To his blue base in the South of England Johnson promised tax cuts and deregulation, the next stage of the Thatcherite revolution in setting the people free. Is this a new Conservative party in the making, or just the old Conservative party in new clothes?



The Conservative party is Britain's oldest and most successful political party. It has been the party of the Land but also the party of the City; the party of little England and the party of Empire; the party of protectionism and the party of the free market; the 'nasty' party and the party of gay marriage; the party of Europe and now the party of Brexit. The list of its many mutations is a long one. Conservatives dreaded the coming of universal suffrage but after it arrived they have governed either alone or in coalition for two thirds of the time. That required drawing at least half their support from working-class voters. Boris Johnson's pursuit of working class votes is not new. It is a condition of Conservative success.

Opponents have often wondered why this party of property and privilege has been so successful and so long-lived, compared to many other parties of the European Centre Right. Part of the answer lies in the ability of the party to reinvent itself, never allowing itself to get stuck in a ditch defending the indefensible, and always striving to be pragmatic and flexible. This has meant giving priority to statecraft and the pursuit of power rather than to ideology. As Anthony Trollope remarked about the nineteenth century Tory party (he might have been writing about Boris Johnson): "No reform, no innovation ... no revolution stinks so foully in the nostrils of an English Tory as to be absolutely irreconcilable to him. When taken in the refreshing waters of office any such pill can be swallowed."

The classic Tory One Nation formula for government was set out by Benjamin

Disraeli when he said at Crystal Palace in 1872 that the three great objects of the Conservative party were to maintain the institutions of the country, to uphold the Empire of England, and to elevate the condition of the people. How best to do this and build an electoral coalition sufficient to keep the Conservatives in government has always preoccupied Conservative leaders.

As soon as he became Leader Boris Johnson sought an early general election. His decisive victory secured his leadership and crushed his opponents, particularly those in his own party. His dream of governing for a decade needed a big majority to have any chance of success. The last time the Conservatives won such a majority was in 1987, the third of Margaret Thatcher's emphatic wins. Since 2010 the Conservatives have fought three elections, but only won an outright majority once, in 2015, and then a small one. Johnson needed to win big, and is happiest when taking risks and creating chaos, reshaping the Conservative party and British politics as he does so.

Johnson's aim in the 2019 election of persuading Leave voters in northern working class Labour seats to vote Conservative was not a new strategy. It is what the Conservatives have always had to do. Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May both pursued it. The Conservatives built their dominance around the pillars of Union, Empire, the Rule of Law, Property and Welfare. Conservatives were traditionally the party of the Establishment, the Crown, the Aristocracy, the Armed Services and the Police, the Law, the Church, the public schools, and Oxford and Cambridge. They supported the Empire and

the Union, protectionism against free trade, the gradual improvement of welfare services, and state intervention when necessary to protect citizens from hardship.

This tradition of pragmatic One Nation Conservatism was associated with Baldwin and Chamberlain in the 1930s, and then with Churchill, Eden and Macmillan in the 1950s, with increasing moves towards economic liberalism. Edward Heath tried to continue it but his government suffered a spectacular shipwreck, and in the ensuing chaos Margaret Thatcher seized the leadership in 1975. She was responsible for another hugely significant reinvention of the Conservatives as the party of the free market, ending its interventionist and collectivist Chamberlainite tradition.

Thatcher's legacy has been mixed for the Conservative party. She transformed its electoral and governing fortunes, allowing the Conservatives to win four elections and rule for eighteen years. She broke Labour's post-war settlement which most Conservatives had come to accept and many of its institutional bases, and set the UK political economy on a new path. But the way she governed ultimately undermined many of the pillars which had supported Conservatism for so long and paved the way for Labour's longest ever period in government under Tony Blair. Her social background and her gender made Thatcher an outsider in the party and even when Prime Minister, she still thought of herself as an outsider fighting against the Government and the Establishment. This populist (and very unConservative) pose of being anti-Establishment and for the people

against the 'elites' is one which Brexiters including Johnson have tried to copy, not very convincingly. It is hard to be taken seriously as an outsider when you have been educated at Eton.

In forging her new electoral coalition Thatcher lost an older one. The Conservative and Unionist party used to be able to claim that it represented all parts of the country. They won a majority of the seats and 50 per cent of the vote in Scotland in 1955. They had a significant presence in all the big industrial cities, and for a long time dominated the politics of Birmingham and Liverpool. But all that went. Conservative support collapsed in Scotland (in 1997 they failed to win a single seat) and also in northern cities. Thatcher bequeathed a party which had become predominantly an English party, its vote disproportionately concentrated in the South and South-East and no longer a mass membership party. The 160,000 members that remain are disproportionately elderly, white and middle class, unrepresentative either of Conservative voters or of the wider electorate, and are not being replaced by the recruitment of sufficient younger voters.

Since Thatcher was ousted members have often been out of step with the party leadership, particularly on Europe. Under John Major two thirds of the parliamentary party were pro-Europe, one third was anti-Europe. In the constituencies it was the other way round. Iain Duncan Smith defeated Ken Clarke for the leadership in 2001 because of Clarke's pro-European views. Boris Johnson always calculated that so long as he could get to

the membership stage of the leadership ballot his anti-EU credentials honed over many years would carry him to victory. The membership has also had an increasing hand in deciding the shape of the parliamentary party by selecting anti-EU candidates.

This was one front in the civil war which has raged in the party over Europe going back six decades, but which became particularly virulent in the 1990s at the time of the passage of the Maastricht Treaty, and again under David Cameron and Theresa May. The election of 2019 was the final act in reshaping the Conservative party as an English nationalist Brexit party. The pro-European strand which used to dominate the party lost the civil war, and many of them stepped down as MPs. Some have joined other parties. The job was completed by the reshuffle Johnson announced after the election, in particular the ousting of Sajid Javid as Chancellor. Hardly any one of any significance is left in Cabinet who voted Remain in 2016, and the numbers of pro-European Conservatives in the parliamentary party is much smaller.

This great schism, which had on one side John Major, Michael Heseltine, Ken Clarke, Amber Rudd and Philip Hammond, and on the other Norman Tebbit, Iain Duncan Smith, John Redwood, Jacob Rees-Mogg, and Priti Patel had finally become unbridgeable. John Major when he was Prime Minister withdrew the whip from nine of the Maastricht rebels because they were making his task of governing impossible. Theresa May never did the same for the hardline anti-EU faction in the Conservative party, the ERG, who refused

to pass her withdrawal agreement, mainly because of her dread of splitting the party. Boris Johnson had no such scruples. Two months after becoming Leader he expelled 21 MPs, including two former chancellors for voting against his Government. Johnson signalled that he was happy for a formal split to take place, and that only those in favour of a hard Brexit were welcome in the party and to serve in his Cabinet.

Europe is the third great major schism in the history of the modern Conservative party over Britain's place in the world. The first was in 1846 when Robert Peel repealed the Corn Laws with the support of opposition MPs. Two thirds of his own MPs voted against him. The Conservative party lost the battle on free trade and did not form a majority government for almost thirty years. A second great schism took place at the start of the twentieth century over free trade and tariff reform. The Conservatives became the party of Tariff Reform, seeking to transform the far-flung British Empire into a cohesive economic bloc to rival the continental empires and customs unions of Germany and the United States. Conservative MPs who did not support reform were purged by their constituencies. Winston Churchill crossed the floor and joined the Liberals. By 1910 there were very few supporters of free trade and liberal imperialism left in the Conservative Party.

In the 1960s with the end of Empire approaching the Conservative party pivoted to become the party of Europe. Harold Macmillan saw the pooling of sovereignty in Europe and the economic and political cooperation it made

possible as the new framework which would give Britain influence, security and prosperity. But the decision was always contested, and the opposition never entirely went away even after Britain joined the Community in 1973, and after the 1975 Referendum confirmed that decision with a 2:1 majority. Under Thatcher the leadership became divided over the desirability of further integration. Thatcher herself was an architect of one of the most far-reaching acts of integration, the single market, but she baulked at the further stages of integration which were planned, especially the idea of a social Europe.

This ignited the civil war which Johnson has now brought to an end and which has transformed the Conservative party. As Iain Duncan Smith, a former Leader of the party has argued, the Tory party is now the Brexit party. There is no room for Remainers in its ranks. Long vilified by the Conservative press as traitors and wreckers, it was time for them to depart. *Daily Telegraph* columnists have been repeatedly calling for a purge, but many MPs left without waiting for it. Johnson won the Referendum and then the leadership by siding firmly with the Brexiter in the party, and has reshaped the Cabinet and the parliamentary party accordingly. At the 2019 election the party shed part of its base among moderate Conservative Remain voters, but replaced them with Labour working class Leave voters.

Johnson and many of those around him claim to be great defenders of the Union, but his strategy has been all about England where 85 per cent of the UK population live. In practice he treats the Union as dispensable.

The Conservative recovery in Remain-voting Scotland under Ruth Davidson has gone into reverse and Davidson herself has departed. A recent opinion poll found that 70 per cent of Scots thought Nicola Sturgeon was handling the Covid emergency well, but only 40 per cent of Scots thought that of Johnson. The withdrawal agreement Johnson signed with the EU was achieved by betraying the Conservatives' DUP allies in Northern Ireland. In 1912 the Conservatives changed their name to the Conservative and Unionist Party. Under Johnson they have become the Conservative and Brexit party, a party of English nationalism. After securing a large majority based on English constituencies in 2019 Johnson no longer needed DUP support.

The two strands of Johnson's agenda on which he was elected seem to point in different directions. The first is the pledge to make Britain *Global Britain* once more, freed from the shackles of the EU, the next stage of the Thatcherite revolution. The second is *Britain First*, the pledge to level up and rebalance the economy, shrinking the inequalities which emerged so starkly as a consequence of the *Global Britain* policies pursued by the Thatcher Government in the 1980s. It seeks to consolidate Conservative support in the seats won in Labour's Red Wall.

The *Global Britain* agenda implies radical divergence from the EU. Johnson's view is that the UK must not be a passive rule taker, so cannot belong to either the single market or the customs union. It must have the freedom to pursue trade deals with non-EU states, signalling

the end of frictionless trade with the EU, creating a difficult period of adjustment and possibly no trade deal at all. There will be winners and losers and in the short term the economy will be smaller than it would otherwise have been. But in the longer run he expects the economy will be larger and more dynamic because looser regulation and lower taxes particularly in new emerging sectors will stimulate higher rates of economic growth.

No trade agreement means no deal and an economic shock. But its severity may well be concealed by the greater economic dislocation caused by Covid. The effect is still likely to be the disruption of many supply chains and a radical restructuring of the British economy. Those sectors of the UK economy which are highly dependent on trade with the EU will go under, shrink or be forced to diversify into other markets. The Government then expects new sectors such as AI to emerge. Such an economic shock is what supporters of a No-Deal Brexit have always wanted, believing that as in 1979 what the British economy requires is the breakup of the economic model which has become entrenched. Although the Government may ultimately balk at inflicting still further economic damage after Covid, their strategy for *Global Britain* seems to require it. Brexit is not Brexit unless there is radical change in the EU/UK relationship. *Global Britain* is conceived by Johnson as the antithesis of EU membership.

Because of the Covid emergency the vision for a more competitive and open *Global Britain* is being launched in the worst possible circumstances. It also clashes with the

Government's vision for *Britain First*, which aims to level up opportunities and resources for all citizens, particularly in those towns and regions outside the big cities which have suffered cumulative disadvantage in the last forty years. These are unlikely to be the cutting edge of *Global Britain*. What they want is not more globalisation but less. They want economic security, infrastructure investment, better public services, and much less immigration. *Global Britain* embraces free trade, a minimal state, and a capitalism which is more dynamic, open, cosmopolitan and inegalitarian. Johnson it seems is even willing to give British citizenship to three million residents of Hong Kong in pursuit of this. *Britain First* by contrast embraces protectionism, an interventionist state, tight borders and a capitalism which is more risk-averse, closed, communitarian and egalitarian.

The Johnson Government cannot deliver both free trade *and* protection, lower taxation *and* better public services, higher economic growth *and* a big reduction in immigration. Showing itself more protectionist in some areas and more free trade in others it will look for compromises which work politically. There will be a lot of pork barrel politics in this new era. New bus services and reopened train lines will mushroom in northern constituencies which voted Conservative, along with new initiatives on skills and new subsidies for regional investment, bypassing existing Treasury rules. But the government will also know that its Blue Wall supporters in the South and in the shires are expecting cuts in income tax, capital gains tax and inheritance tax, and it

will be under pressure to deliver those as well.

The decisions it makes in the next few years will reflect the trade-off between its *Global Britain* priorities and its *Britain First* priorities, and how those play with the different elements of its parliamentary and electoral coalition. Boris Johnson's main characteristic as a political leader is wanting to have his cake and to eat it at the same time, and he will try to avoid as long as possible a choice between these two priorities. But ultimately when he needs to, the lure of *Global Britain* is likely to prove the stronger.

# Corbynism, Hegemony, and Us

Sebastian Berg

*Sebastian Berg (Bochum) assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Corbynism, and its ongoing impact within and beyond the Labour Party. Viewed as a broader political shift, Corbynism has broadened the scope of what is regarded as sayable and doable in British politics, by challenging austerity politics and speaking out in support of refugees. While German critics of Corbynism frequently highlight Corbyn's reluctance to oppose Brexit and the allegations of antisemitism that plagued the Labour Party during his leadership, Berg contextualises both as symptomatic of disagreements over the likely impact of Brexit and over the definition of antisemitism that are yet to be resolved even after the end of Corbyn's leadership.*

If the term Corbynism refers to the era of an elected leader of the Labour Party, it is over now. Many seem to say, it is exactly that, and that for Labour and Britain, Corbynism has meant five wasted years. The dominant verdict by academic and media pundits on Corbyn's

leadership usually boils down to the following: he was not fit for the job. He oscillated, they claim, between too laid-back a style of leading the party (when it came to dealing with antisemitism in its ranks) and control freakery (when reacting to internal criticism of himself and his allies). These allies, according to this view, formed a hard-left clique that hijacked Labour's broad church and almost succeeded in transforming it into a narrow-minded sect. They managed to install in the party a blend of Trotskyist entryism, Stalinist democratic centralism, and post-1968 libertarian identity politics. The model for this ideological and strategic amalgam was the aborted attempt of the New Labour Left (not to be confused with New Labour) around Tony Benn to create internal democracy in the party and socialist democracy in the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Labour's 2019 election manifesto, according to Corbyn's critics, was an indiscriminate ragbag of material promises no one in the electorate had really asked for and that only a few people supported. Furthermore, critics condemned Corbyn's

handling of Brexit: he should have campaigned for a reversal of the 2016 referendum result since it was a ‘populist’ aberration, those of the ‘Love Corbyn, Hate Brexit’ wing of the party said. He should have embraced it wholeheartedly as the expression of working-class opinion, disagreed many of those who took a more traditional workerist position. Some approving sounds are made – even by critics – when they point to the revitalisation of the vastly expanded party that came with Corbyn’s leadership campaign. The relatively strong result in the 2017 election is also occasionally found worthy of applause. This predominantly negative story of Corbynism is popularised not only by the capital-and-small-c-conservative media that dominate published opinion in Britain, but also by the *BBC*, the *Independent* and the *Guardian*. Maybe this is the reason why this view has become hegemonic also among German professional observers of things British – most of us belong to the German section of the International of *Guardian* readers, and many though not all of us identify with some sort of pro-EU, anti-authoritarian, reformist, liberal (centre-)left.

## Achievements

We all know and tirelessly try to teach that hegemonic interpretations are not necessarily correct. I think Corbynism is a case in point and contend that, if it is seen as a broader political shift rather than the era of a party leader, it constituted and still constitutes a force in British politics that has positively altered what it is possible to say and to do in the

field of institutional politics. With a discursive offensive similar to the one dubbed a “great moving right show” by Stuart Hall to explain the strength and success of Thatcherism as a new political project in the late 1970s, Corbynism has dramatically changed the programmatic frames of political debate. To some extent, it has achieved a moving left show. I hesitate to call it a ‘great moving left show’ because some observers, such as the veteran left-wing political scientist Colin Leys, have complained about the rather moderate social democratic core of the Corbynists’ anti-austerity stance (2018: 358-9). Still, the programme managed to challenge the unquestioned acceptance of austerity policies that were political common sense until 2015. Before that date, the only way to deal with the nationalised debt of the banking crisis supposedly was to reduce government spending, especially in the social services. In the years of the Conservative-Liberal coalition government this was sold as a national rescue package to which everyone had to contribute: “We are all in this together”, as David Cameron famously put it. The Labour Party under Ed Miliband did not radically criticise this approach but argued for a more socially just variety of it. It was only with Corbyn’s campaign for the party leadership that a fundamental critique of the politics of competitive austerity found its way into a British mainstream party. This challenge caused a revitalisation of British political debate, which became visible in the 2017 election campaign. John Trickett and Ian Lavery point out that “[i]t is sometimes hard to recall, in retrospect, the excitement which the manifesto release produced. It changed the landscape of



that election.” (2020) Indeed, I remember the atmosphere of open and almost enthusiastic debate in Britain days before the 2017 election – people talked politics wherever I went. On the day after the election, Neil Faulkner, author of *A Marxist History of the World: From Neanderthals to Neoliberals* and keynote speaker at a conference I attended at the time, called the result of the election the rebirth of reformism in Britain. It was exactly that: the Conservatives’ weak performance in the 2017 election (called by Theresa May to increase her majority in the House of Commons) showed the popular support for Labour’s recent anti-austerity position. Even the *Daily Telegraph* commented on the minority government’s 2018 budget:

*What’s more, if Mrs May’s drubbing at the polls was indeed a vote against “austerity”, the Government must cut its cloth accordingly, judged at this stage to be some kind of middle course between the “spend, spend, spend” recklessness of Jeremy Corbyn on the one hand and the penny pinching meanness of George Osborne on the other – a balancing act between the still-pressing need for fiscal discipline and the perceived electoral demand for more spending on public services.* (Warner 2018)

Philip Hammond, then chancellor of the Exchequer, purportedly admitted that with an Osborne-budget, one could not win against Corbyn. George Osborne himself, Hammond’s predecessor, commenting from the off, warned that the Conservatives should not try to “out-Corbyn Corbyn” (BBC News 2018). Thus, in terms of budget debates, Corbynism clearly set the agenda. Hence, it makes a lot of sense to claim that Corbynism posed the strongest challenge to neoliberalism within mainstream

politics since the latter’s rise to hegemony under Thatcher. Corbynism stands as a parallel to a development in the USA, recently acknowledged by Joe Biden, who admitted that his competitor Bernie Sanders has been most influential in recent years: he formed political discourse and helped create a movement for social justice in the USA, even if he failed to win the Democrats’ presidential candidacy again.

In addition to challenging neoliberalism, Labour has also become more courageous in its position on immigration. Corbyn refused to speak of refugees and migrants as problems and threats, and the 2017 election manifesto had a strong internationalist plank (even though there was some retreat from this position later). This was a remarkable shift in a party which for a long time had been afraid of showing signs of ‘softness’ on immigration. Furthermore, the party took a new approach to the urgent issue of climate change. Labour was centrally behind the declaration of ‘climate emergency’ by parliament in 2019. Its last election manifesto sketched out ambitious plans for a Green New Deal. For all these reasons, it would be far too early to declare Corbynism dead, leaving no political legacy, being irrelevant for the future of the Labour Party. What is going to happen under Keir Starmer is unclear and perhaps does not look very promising at the moment – but the party has changed since 2015 and it has managed to substantially alter the terms of political debate and policy making. If Boris Johnson really turns out to be a ‘red Tory’, as some claim, this will be a (perverse?) sign of Corbynism’s success, just like New Labour was a legacy of Thatcher.

## Problems

This does not mean that there were no problems, that Corbyn and the people around him made no mistakes, or that there is no need to analyse Labour's failures to win a general election in either 2017 or 2019. Many things went wrong. As was to be expected within a rapidly growing party in which the traditional centres of power (the parliamentary party and the party bureaucracy) fought a bitter struggle with the new ones (the leader and a massively expanded and outspoken membership who demanded to be heard and involved in the policy making process), experiments with intra-party democracy did not always go smoothly. In a recent edition of the left-wing magazine *Red Pepper*, members of *Momentum*, the intra-party movement originally formed to support Corbyn's leadership bid, self-critically took issue with their own occasional failures when it came to taking democratic procedures seriously (Nwogbo 2020). Anecdotal evidence gained in occasional conversations with activists over the last couple of years testifies to at times intimidating behaviour at party meetings by *Momentum* members. The new forces in the party were not automatically good. Concerning the old forces, a controversial inquiry has been set up within the party to analyse the allegations of a leaked internal report. It claims that people in the party bureaucracy attempted to sabotage the 2017 election campaign, to concentrate financial and personal resources on safe seats held by MPs on the party's right, and to obliterate internal inquiries into allegations of antisemitism. At the time of writing (late August

2020), some of the people accused in the report are threatening libel cases against the party.

For obvious reasons, German critics of Corbynism tended to focus on two issues: the handling of Brexit and allegations of antisemitism. With Brexit, the party faced an irresolvable dilemma: most of its MPs and grassroots activists agreed on the benefits of continuing EU membership and the need to do as much as possible to avoid the worst Brexit scenarios (even if many of them agreed on nothing else). Corbyn's allies in his showdowns with the parliamentary party before 2017, the mostly Europhile grassroots members, suddenly found themselves on the side of the majority of anti-Corbyn MPs in disagreeing with their leader on Brexit in 2018 and 2019. Labour's electorate, however, was split on the issue. Backing Brexit would have cost votes in one of Labour's strongholds, London. Campaigning for a second referendum after a negotiated deal alienated the other heartland, the Northern English 'red wall' constituencies. I am not sure whether there was a solution to this problem, but lack of clarity obviously was not one. Challenging austerity and arguing that the fundamental line of division was not between Leavers and Remainers but between the many and the few did not suffice in 2019 – even though the situation was further exacerbated by the Brexit Party's strategic decision not to nominate candidates in the 'red wall' constituencies, thereby effectively supporting the Tories. It is an interesting question to what extent the effectiveness of doorstep canvassing, representing a central pillar of Labour's strong

performance in 2017, was influenced by the Brexit issue: grassroots activists are crucial to this type of campaigning – does it affect their enthusiasm and credibility in canvassing if they disagree on a fundamental question with the candidate they campaign for?

In Germany, commenting on antisemitism is always dangerous. I totally agree with everyone who states that several of Ken Livingstone's comments were unacceptable. To claim that Hitler backed Zionism was not only historically incorrect but also irrelevant – Hitler backed vegetarianism; still there were and are good reasons for being a vegetarian. The Labour Party, it should be noted, did react to Livingstone's statements and threatened disciplinary action. Livingstone left the party. (May I draw attention to the fact, without drawing facile comparisons between very different statements, that the Conservative Party did nothing in the case of a former foreign secretary and current prime minister who claimed women wearing a Burka looked like letter boxes and should expect to be asked to unveil during his constituency surgeries?) More seriously, the Labour Party was criticised heavily for only adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism in a modified form rather than wholesale. However, this definition is highly controversial and considered to be work in progress by many scholars and activists.<sup>1</sup> It was suggested that it conformed with the MacPherson Report's recommendation to consider as racism anything that is perceived by a victim of racism as racist. In MacPherson's context of investigating

the relationship of BAME people and the police after the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence, this recommendation makes sense: it allows relatively powerless people to name cases of potential structural racism in a powerful institution – cases that otherwise would be ignored. The proposal becomes problematic once the empowerment to call something racist is extended to a government and to institutions. Should it be accepted unconditionally that something constitutes racism or antisemitism just because an institution claims that it does? Should the police have the right to define as 'policist' any criticism of its behaviour? (Again, two comparisons that, like all comparisons, have their problems: if the Turkish government claimed that any criticism of its dealing with the Kurdish population of Turkey constituted a case of Islamophobia, would this be accepted uncritically by Turkey's NATO allies? If the People's Republic of China claimed that condemning their recent moves against democracy in Hong Kong was an illegitimate mingling with their internal affairs – would this be unconditionally accepted by the British commentariat?). Of course, accusations did not only come from the Israeli government but from within the party: it was a distinctive feature of the antisemitism issue that obviously a link existed between people's support of, or opposition to, Corbyn and their position towards the Israeli government, the Palestinians, British political activity in the Middle East, etc. It fed into a longstanding dispute between Atlanticists and anti-Imperialists, between realists and idealists (in the language of international relations research), or between hawks and doves in the

Labour Party. Confronted with personal threats spreading through the social media, both sides completely lost trust in each other. The Corbyn-critical *Jewish Labour Movement* was utterly disgusted by what they considered as the party leadership's lack of understanding of current antisemitism (antisemitism's key feature being the refusal to accept the Israeli state's very right to exist) and by their lack of support for party members who became victims of antisemitic smears. The Corbyn-supporting *Jewish Voice for Labour* was equally annoyed with what they saw as the *Jewish Labour Movement's* hawkish Atlanticism, anti-Corbynism, and lack of compassion with the Palestinians. The situation was not helped by the media using this difficult debate as ammunition in their campaign to destabilise the party leadership. (It should be mentioned that several of the newspapers firing away at Labour's antisemitism had had no problems with othering Corbyn's predecessor Ed Miliband as a Jew, and the son of a Jewish Marxist who had come to Britain as an immigrant.)

## Lessons

To me there seem to be important lessons to be learned from Corbynism: Any project that is seen as a threat to the current distribution of power in society has to be aware of the strength of resistance it will provoke. Some politicians felt threatened by Corbyn's announcement to do politics differently and to democratise decision-making in the party. Some corporations felt threatened by announcements

of the rise of taxes, the redistribution of wealth, and the renationalisation of parts of the economy. Neither were squeamish in their reactions. Labour's internal investigations will hopefully reveal to what extent these forces of resistance have exerted influence within the party itself.

The vast majority of the media tend to collude with attempts to delegitimise and scandalise such a threat. This does not mean that they produce fake news, but that they define objectivity primarily from the perspective of watchdogs of the status quo of a capitalist democracy. The BBC's news agenda (with the BBC still being the most widely-trusted source of political information in Britain) is disproportionately influenced by the right-wing national press. This is one of the results of a recent investigation by the Media Reform Coalition at London's Goldsmiths College (2019: 2). Even Andy Burnham, one of Corbyn's former competitors in the 2015 leadership contest, pointed out that hostile media coverage on Corbyn by far exceeded what is common while dealing with a leader of the opposition. This has also been meticulously analysed by media scholars Bart Cammaerts and colleagues in a large quantitative and qualitative media content analysis project (2016). They concluded that in Corbyn's case, the media had mutated from watchdogs to "attackdogs".

Hence, for us, there is a need to base our political judgments on more than the most easily available sources of information (like the free-of-charge *Guardian* and *BBC* websites). If, as academics/intellectuals, we

can do something meaningful, it is to unmask hidden power structures behind, and agendas of, institutions and public as well as published discourse. And if we still believe that there is a world to win, we should criticise not only racism, antisemitism, nationalism, etc., but also those who relentlessly try to persuade us that there are no alternatives to the Germanies, Britains, or EUs we are currently living in. Corbynism has shown that there are.

### A Note on Corbyn's suspension

The above text was completed before the suspension of Corbyn's party membership as a response to his claim that, for political reasons, the EHRC's report on antisemitism in the party was dramatically overstated. Since then, within the party and among its Jewish members as well as among Jewish Corbyn supporters and opponents, disagreements are as strong as before if not stronger. While the *Jewish Labour Movement* welcomed the decision taken by the party's disciplinary unit (most likely in agreement with Keir Starmer), other groups, such as *Jewish Voice for Labour* and *Jewdas*, condemned it. I would like to point to three 'Jewish' voices in defence of Corbyn. First, veteran socialist feminist and member of Corbyn's Islington constituency party, Lynne Segal, pointed out that the report by the EHRC explicitly stated that, in accordance with Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights, it needs to be possible for Labour members to "express their opinions on internal Party matters, such as the scale of antisemitism

within the Party, based on their own experience and within the law" (2020: 26). She claims this right to apply to Corbyn too, even though she admits his comments directly after the report's publication were a mistake (2020). Second, in a reaction to Corbyn's suspension, *Jewdas* sent an open letter to Keir Starmer, demanding the suspension of several MPs and a member of the House of Lords for antisemitic statements. These included backing the erection of a statue for a suffragist who had expressed sympathies for the NSDAP, references to "a bit of a run on silver shekels" in connection to a list of people to be elevated to the House of Lords, a Jewish businessman being called "the puppet master to the entire Conservative cabinet", and the characterisation of antisemitism as "a racism that punches up" (Cohen 2020). The party leadership did not react (Instead, it suspended the party membership of others who criticized Corbyn's suspension). Third, already some time ago, writer, poet and journalist Eleanor Penny claimed in the journal *Red Pepper*:

*Jewish people disagree. (It's kind of our thing – critical engagement with scripture is one of the hallmarks of Jewish practise.) We disagree about Israel. We disagree about capitalism. We disagree about Corbyn. We disagree about how to pronounce those ring-shaped bread rolls. Those disagreements are not a reason to summarily turf out one group of Jewish people because they happen to disagree with you. Those disagreements should not be used as an opportunity for right-wing pundits to come crashing in and accuse left-wing Jewish people of race-treachery. (Penny 2018)*

Jewish people disagree about antisemitism in the Labour Party too.

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- 1 Legal scholars see several problems with this definition because of, for example, vague formulations and gaps in what it covers. One of the problems, essential for understanding voices in the Labour Party sceptical of adopting the definition completely, is a certain imprecision in some of its passages referring to the state of Israel. The definition itself suggests that “criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.” However, antisemitism does mean, according to examples added to clarify the definition, “[d]enying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavor” or “[a]pplying double standards by requiring of it [Israel] a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation” (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance). This leaves open the question how, and who is, to decide on the boundaries between legitimate criticism and denial of the right to self-determination. This might be a minute detail when dealing with antisemitism in Britain, but it should be acknowledged that debates about the legitimacy of the ‘Boycott, Disinvestment, Sanctions’ Campaign and Corbyn’s dialogue with Palestinian groups including Hamas have been central parts of the controversy for some time. For a detailed analysis of the IHRA’s working definition, issued by an institution usually not suspected of condoning antisemitism, the German Rosa Luxemburg Foundation,

# “Taking back Control”:

## Whose, and Back to When?

Logie Barrow

*Logie Barrow (Bremen) interprets the Conservative Party's approach to Brexit as a response to the traumatic loss of control suffered by the party during the 1940s-1970s. In the longer term, the Conservative Party has often attained and held onto power by promoting class-integrative myths, such as national greatness. Thus, Brexit may be seen as an attempt to contain class struggle by promising an enlarged 'national cake' to be shared in by all, at the cost of external others. Barrow argues that the Tories' have been cushioned from the impact of their often misguided economic policies by Britain's economic power, but that the country's radically altered position in a globalised world makes this strategy more difficult to pull off. In the full version of this article, published separately in our new, 'The Long Read' format, Logie Barrow further shows that the Conservatives' handling of the Covid-19 crisis may be seen as symptomatic of the party's neoliberal agenda, which includes privatisation, overcentralisation, and elitism, and as an opportunity to conceal the economic impact of Brexit behind the impact of the pandemic.*

From around 1700, Britain's political culture (unwritten constitution; self-image as moderate; other features so familiar to 1<sup>st</sup>-year students), often hard-fought but never destroyed, has been cushioned in economic success.

To indulge in reductionism: over generations, the Tories have helped British capitalism as demagogues and enforcers. But, had too much of the economic content of their demagoguery become reality, it would have harmed overall profitability and stability. Such has repeatedly been the paradox since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Now, for the first time, political triumph is knocking on the economic door. The main reasons for this are sometimes centuries old. But let's begin with decades.

Interpret Brexit as part of a decades-long Tory endeavour to regain control of the British nation, after the post-1940 decades of factory-floor 'anarchy' climaxed traumatically in industrial and broader insubordination during



1967-74. I investigate, firstly, the shaping of much current debate by old Tory slogans and ideas and, secondly, why those remain so effective. Here I argue Britain has, off and on since 1846, been economically cushioned from the full effect of Tory policies over trade, partly because those policies were never fully applied and salutary lessons never materialised. Over generations, repeated failure or near-failure of Tory trade-agitations has left room for functionalist theories to flourish: ‘above party’, a ruling class can more or less accurately and profitably define its interests.

How rare exceptions may be is unclear. But currently we have a pretty clear one: some sort of Hard Brexit (leaving the EU with no agreement) seems increasingly probable on 31<sup>st</sup> December.2020, though not yet (2.8.2020) certain. Let most capitalists and pro-capitalists, not least *Financial Times* journalists, be as sane as you wish; politically they are as defeated as anyone else. Their occasional compliments to Labour (though not to Corbyn) during the late-2019 Election-campaign measure their desperation. Let us, as much as we like, see the EU as ‘merely’ the world’s third-largest trading-bloc, squeezed between its American and Chinese rivals, while politically dominated by Germany and hence doctrinally cramped by ordoliberalism (for a definition, see below). Even so, a desirable alternative to that is surely not an archaic and territorially rickety state of a mere 66-million inhabitants, leading some ‘free-trade’ crusade against all three blocs. So far, recruits for that crusade have been rare: trade-agreements number less than twenty,

mostly with mini-states, plus a few middling ones such as Switzerland, South Korea or South Africa, with Turkey allegedly pending. Japan was added during September: a big fish but no big partner. Whether we see any Brexit as bringing catastrophe or mere medium-term hiccoughs and other indelicacies, its apparent imminence suggests how easily a dominant faction can hasten economic sado-masochism by debauching electoral majorities on irrelevancies. In Britain, the main irrelevance has, since 1940 at the latest, been nostalgia.

That presupposes believing you have lots to be nostalgic about. So Brexit depends on an imperialist whitewash of the bases of past success. If you romanticise these, you may obscure how unrepeatable they are. Revulsion aside (the point here is not to cheer for the immersion of one individual slaver’s statue in Bristol Harbour), 21<sup>st</sup>-century Brexitanians can overestimate their room for manoeuvre the more easily, the more they forget the lasting benefits to English/British investors in piracy followed, from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, by super-exploitation of generations of slaves and of early industrial workers. So, what is Hard Brexit based on? Near the end, we will hear Boris Johnson interpreting his December 2019 Election-triumph by indeed gesticulating back more than three centuries. Thereby he showed himself, not only morally obtuse, but also a bit madder than anyone fantasising, say, that the Chinese Admiral Zheng He (d. 1435) had had successors, one of whom had ‘discovered’, say, Bristol near the start of the Wars of the Roses (1455) or more profitably ‘discovered’ Lisbon after colliding

with Portuguese ships busy 'discovering' down the West African coast. However crassly, Johnson was hankering after the half-millennium that, into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had seen 'white' empires enjoying the world-historical initiative. Was he aware how absurdly out-of-date he had become during his lifetime? Presumably not: why else would he have invited so many top diplomats to Greenwich on 3<sup>rd</sup> February to hear him indulge his historical fantasies and slavery-free myopia?

**A**t the time of writing, all countries are grappling with Covid-19, plus its economic effects. But only today's dominant faction of Tories could so much as threaten to add a Hard Brexit to that mixture. We can imagine ways that threat might dissolve. But, till it does, we must proceed on the assumption it will be realised. Even now, predictions seem premature as to how Johnson and his ministers would administer it to the electorate: few if any Brexiteers can be so saintly as never to have dreamt of hiding Brexit's effects behind Covid's. True, that may currently seem as easy as hiding a mouse behind an elephant. But the mouse may have grown mightily by January 2021.

**W**e will see below how the ineptitude of Johnson and his ministers supplied the elephant with growth hormones. Brexit was also perhaps relevant to some of the government's idiocies over Covid-19. Proportionately to population, these helped make Britain the most Covid-hit country in Europe, if we omit Putin's much-censored Russia. They are bound to reverberate for years. In sum, we will see some effects of Brexit on Britain's struggle with Covid, whereas Covid's effects on Brexit are

still speculative. Admittedly everyone, masked or not, is now choking on air with dangerously high speculation-content.

### **Regaining Control: The Roots of Brexit Rhetoric**

**T**o summarise our opening trauma: from 1971, Edward Heath's Tory government legislated to tame the Do-It-Yourself militancy that had flourished during three decades of full employment. Repeatedly, those laws boomeranged. In February 1972 and with coal-stocks thinned by a miners' strike, much of Birmingham's labour movement had marched to the gates of a coal-depot at Saltley (also called Nechells), and forced their closure. At the end of July came the release of five unofficially striking dockers' leaders from Pentonville prison, after similarly widespread solidarity-strikes. In 1974, another miners' strike – almost national, though still unofficial – persuaded Heath to decree a working week of three days. He then called an election as to "Who Rules?" – and narrowly lost. Rather as the French and Russian revolutions had been the defining nightmares of much ruling-class politics in most countries during subsequent generations, the years 1972-4 function similarly in Britain.

**T**he 2019 Election saw some children and grandchildren of post-war Britain's 'insubordinates' voting Tory if only for the sake of "getting Brexit done." But who is "taking back control"? So far, the sole candidates are Tories, disproportionately ruling-class ones made nonchalant by centuries of imperial luck, but still uneasily aware that the post-war decades

had cost them much control.

Today's Brexit rhetoric is self-escalating: by now, if you support some 'Soft' Brexit, you may rank among the traitors. What fuels that rhetoric? One component is neoliberalism. Like many successful 'isms', this has many versions.<sup>1</sup> But they all boil down to: 'private enterprise = good; public services = bad.' Its worldwide influence has been growing since the 1970s, not least in Britain. Of course, in 2008-10 when states bailed out the international banking system, most neolibs applauded *that* public servicing. On Britain's relation to the E.E.C./E.U., they have taken a range of stances. Here, though, we must follow the extremists: increasingly disruptive from the 1990s; dominant with Boris Johnson from 2018, where we meet an unusual hollowness about aims, i.e. about the point of 'brexiting' at all. Commentators have wrongly personalised the uproar of 2016-19. The point was not the poker-faced Theresa "Maybot" *versus* the Incredible Boris Hulk, but rather that both were gorging the electorate on tautologies. May's "Brexit means Brexit" was duly succeeded by Johnson's "Get Brexit Done". Suspicion of abstraction is part of the Anglo-British self-image. Yet seldom has concreteness been so lacking. This vacuum remains more than a negotiating poker-ploy. So far, it has been filled mainly with counterfactual waffle.

Overall, Johnson may have assumed Britain could manoeuvre between Hsi's China and Trump's America. But he has antagonised Hsi. His reasons are only officially about political principle, given that he resumed arms-deliveries to Saudi Arabia during the same

days as he antagonised the Beijing regime over Hua Wei and Hong Kong. As for Trump, those who rely on him tend to finish like bullfrogs hitching a ride on an amnesiac alligator. And even were some less monomaniac candidate to win the White House, the price of negotiating a trade-agreement with America's agrochemical, pharma and private health lobbyists is sure to include trashing Johnson's paeans to the National Health Service, which the Tories have anyway been stealthily privatising throughout the 2010s.

In detail, too, vacuity often reigns. Not only for EU negotiators does it seem to make dealings with Johnson's team 'shambolic'. Even on the central issue of Northern Ireland, Johnson needs to reconcile some contradictory promises of his own: by 7<sup>th</sup> July, his International Trade minister turned out to be deadlocked with Brexit minister Michael Gove. In the *Guardian's* summary: "Johnson's border plans risked smuggling, damage to the UK's international reputation and could face a legal challenge from the World Trade Organisation. " (O'Carroll 9.7.2020) WTO rules would govern trade with a Hard-Brexited UK – unless Brexitania were to exit from even that, as one or two Tories hint. Can all this be blamed merely on the personalities of so many ministers – even of Johnson plus his PR-genius, Dominic Cummings – or is some longer-term hollowness at work? (The Cummings dimension should not be overdone: despite his arrogance and weirdness, he is not the first Downing Street PR-adviser to enjoy a pivotal role: remember Alasdair Campbell?).<sup>2</sup>

This is where our decades call up centuries. Tory intellectuals – from Benjamin Disraeli (flourishing from the 1840s to 1881) to Enoch Powell (fl. 1950s to '70s) to Jacob Rees-Mogg (for him, see below) have viewed their function as being to peddle myths that are 'good' in the sense of class-integrative, the better to fight 'bad' ones that are not (ranging from any kind of socialism to ... unforgettably revealing gaffes such as those we'll hear from Mogg and an acolyte of his). Britain is now Brexitania because more and more Tories, reacting to that 1972-4 climax of class trauma, adopted Brexit as a 'good' myth and handed it on to eager successors.

They added it to two elements from their party's long-term ideology. The first inflects neoliberalism in terms of a Tory ideal at least as old as Disraeli: making Britain a 'property-owning democracy'. In 1967 – and this is why I date the climax of wartime insubordination as starting in that year – the Tory head of the Greater London Council, Horace Cutler, provoked a huge though unevenly militant movement of Council tenants by raising their rents. As sweetener, he reconfigured that Disraelian rhetoric as a right to buy your Council flat. This made him a practical pioneer of neoliberalism before the word. Only during the mid-1970s was Margaret Thatcher, Heath's successor as Tory leader, to follow him in theory and, in Downing Street from 1979, to start putting that theory into practice. During the 1980s, she added shares in industries she was privatising. Many initial purchasers were humble: "Tell Sid", one series

of advertisements for those shares shouted from bus-shelters in at least working-class areas. True, market-fluctuations and other inequities will long ago have gutted most of the gains humble purchasers made. But, at whatever speed that gutting occurred, every original purchase privatised and shrank the state's economic role: neoliberalism's central aim.

More immediately for some, it sweetened Thatcher's smashing of the most disruptive of working-class organisations. Whether her victory over the National Union of Miners (1984-5) was closer-run than that over General Galtieri in the Falklands/Malvinas during 1982, the two triumphs helped make her premiership the longest for generations: 1979-90. But her ideology of individualist self-reliance was the more 'positive' aspect of her opposition to every form of collectivism, not least to trades unions.

One Anglophone wisecrack associated with the 2008-9 crash was "never let a serious crisis go to waste." Whatever its origins, Tories such as David Cameron's finance minister ('Chancellor of the Exchequer' from 2010 to '16) George Osborne certainly followed it. Osborne's 'austerity' starved almost any public initiative, from social care to libraries to youth clubs to police and prisons to (as we will see) the National Health Service (NHS) – and left two brand-new aircraft carriers minus planes able to land on them and minus the intended radar. (Putin was heard to giggle.) Even worse, Brexiteers' euphoria at the 2016 referendum-result encouraged what I have identified as their prioritising of ideological purity over economic

prosperity – to the point of seeing crisis as even worthwhile: out of the chaos there would emerge a ‘Singapore-on-Thames’, freed from the E.U.’s (I would say, watery) ‘social dimension’ and from E.U. financial controls. As often, our ‘Singaporean’ Tories have been aided by the British constitution: something critically defined in 1978 by John Griffith, one of the few left-wing professors then remaining at the London School of Economics, as “no more and no less than what happens.” (Griffith 1979, cf. also Gee and C. McCorkindale) Since the 2016 referendum, May and Johnson have exploited that flexibility, perhaps to destruction, by basing so much on tautological (logically circular) abstractions about Brexit.

Not that the dominant version of neoliberalism within the E.U., i.e. German ‘Ordoliberalism’ or budget balancing, is always more benign than versions dominant in Brexitania: remember Greece...Italy...Spain? Nor were the EU’s vaccinal preparations for a pandemic beyond criticism (Boffey 25.5.2020; Galbraith and Azmanova 23.6.2020). But in practice, the two forms of neoliberalism usually overlapped. Symbolically, both Osborne and Friedrich Merz went from government to roles at the world’s most influential hedge fund, Black Rock. Nevertheless, at least in core territories, the E.U. has so far enforced social rollbacks less speedily than Osborne did in Britain. Even more vital during decades of unprecedentedly global capitalism: any kind of internationalism-from-below may have more chances via E.U. terrain than via Brexitania’s disintegrating archipelago.

For the latter, the BBC has quietly launched a new synonym, “the four nations”, for today’s United Kingdom. Does this designation force everyone to see Northern Irish Unionists, i.e. Protestants, as a ‘nation’ alongside England, Scotland and Wales? (If so, that could re-invigorate a nest of hornets that scratched a few of Britain’s far-leftists off and on from the 1970s: one third of the residents of the Six Counties are Catholic and see themselves as Irish). Either way, the BBC’s phrase somehow rings late-Hapsburgian nowadays.

The second element of Toryism’s long-term ideology – unease or anger at any trading-constellation Britain currently finds itself in and soon perhaps even the WTO – also takes us back to the history of the party. Prominent or not, many Tories (and their ‘Liberal Unionist’ recruits such as Joseph Chamberlain) emphasised trade-questions from the late 1890s. Why seek out such risky terrain? Answer: because you concentrate minds on how to enlarge the national cake. Thereby, you upstage ‘mere sordid squabbles’ about how to divide and distribute it: again ‘good’ myths in preference to ‘bad’. And individually, you may even rise to become the next cake-chef.

Unless you are fixated on your own imperial past, you know that any trade agreement presupposes independent partners, i.e. people from outside your own brain. Nowadays, few if any big ones are likely to be as easily bullied as before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Either you are top nation, as Britain during the centuries that ended in January 1942 (with Singapore’s fall to the Japanese): subordinating almost any country

to your industrialisation, outgunning rival Euro-Atlantic slave-systems, repeatedly screwing Ireland and India, winning two wars against China to confer the blessings of Free Trade in opium etc., grabbing Egypt as hinterland to the Suez Canal, swallowing most of Southern Africa for minerals – the list is notoriously longer. Or else the top nation tolerates you. Once the U.S. had helped frustrate Britain's 1956 attempt to reconquer Egypt (the so-called Suez affair), Britain's rhetoric on its 'special relationship' with its strongest ex-colonies was a transparent figleaf for dependence on them, even for 'independent' nuclear rocket-systems. And yet that naked junior Emperor proclaimed his foreign policy as blessed with three foci: Atlantic, Commonwealth and European. We will hear Johnson's Greenwich gesticulations as an attempt to obscure the European with – nostalgic posturings.

Here he was in a Tory political tradition but, this time, with the economic stakes far more actual. From the late 1890s to the 1930s and again after 1945, our Tory trade-reformers were repeatedly slapdash in their relation to reality.

First, slogans such as 'Empire Free Trade' or 'Tariff Reform' presupposed enthusiasm or at least acquiescence from the 'White Dominions' (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and, from 1910, 'White' South Africa). But that was far from automatic. Worse, trade-agitations threw firms, industries and even regions within the U.K. against each other. And indeed 'Tariff Reform' and similar slogans set the Tory party itself in uproar and compounded

its landslide defeat during 1905-6 (till the 1918 General Election, constituencies did not vote simultaneously). Interwar, the same slogans cost votes during the General Elections of 1923 and '9, and a bye-election during 1930 (Paddington South, where a Tory lost to an Empire Free Trader, backed by the owners of the *Daily Mail* and *Express*, and leaving Tory premier Stanley Baldwin contemplating resignation). True, the 1932 Ottawa Agreement — to keep tariffs between the Dominions lower than those with anywhere else — satisfied many Tariff Reformers, perhaps most. But others continued agitating through much of the decade. (Baldwin had recently compared tariff-reforming newspaper-owners to "harlots", for seeking "power without responsibility").

Second, within the very different situation of the 1950s, Tories tried to prevent or to stunt convergence between France, Italy, West Germany, and the Benelux countries. When 'Europe' politely ignored them, they felt slighted. But they retained a fear far older than the Spanish Armada (1588) of anything like a European super-power. Picking the best enemies to fear is part of statecraft. The more the Tories can blame evil Europeans for the economic effect of Brexit and the less they can play them off against each other, the more easily will they revive a 'good' myth older than the United Kingdom.

Of course, the Tories' were neither alone in their Euroscepticism, nor have all Tories been Eurosceptics. On trade policy, Tories remained the prime post-war movers – after Suez, increasingly *towards* Western Europe and

soon the E.E.C. Indeed, when Heath's treaty for entering the E.E.C. came to the Commons for ratification (1972), 291 Tory M.P.s supported it with a mere 39 voting against. Even today, some Tories are Remainers, in internal or external exile from their party. Additionally, from the early 1990s, many of those Tories who labelled themselves 'Eurosceptic' had a line similar nowadays to that of Orbán and Co.: against 'widening' or 'deepening' the E.U., though not for leaving it.

**B**ut Labour, too, could assist in its own ways. Of course, during the nine decades before the advent of Tony Blair as leader in 1994, the Labour spectrum was broader than that of Europe's Social Democrats. But most of Labour's policies, whether on racism or imperialism or foreign policy, seldom more than tinkered with Tory architecture. (The main exceptions were sympathy for 'white labour' in South Africa and, consistently or not, distaste for Fascism,). What about Hugh Gaitskell, using his speech as Party leader at the 1962 annual conference to warn that joining the E.E.C. would end "a thousand years of history"? By then, Gaitskell was resoundingly no friend of comrades to the left of him, but when Harold Wilson's government held a referendum in 1975 on whether to remain in the E.E.C. (supported on the day by 67% of those voting), most leftwingers argued for leaving. A special Party conference had voted two-to-one for that, with one-third of Wilson's ministers among the majority. (He himself stayed neutral, more convincingly than Corbyn was able to, over four decades later). During the actual campaign,

leftwingers such as Barbara Castle (very rare among Labour MPs for campaigning against mass-torture in Kenya) even shared a platform with Powell, the Tory M.P. whose April 1968 "Rivers of Blood" polemic against non-white immigrants was still endearing him to many a working-class voter. (This was Powell's most successful 'good' myth, unlike his late-1940s proposal to reconquer India). During 1973 and again during 1974's two close-run General Elections, he had cast himself out from Tory ranks by declaring for Labour as the likelier of the two main parties to call that referendum. Some labour movement leftists, in their very different world, feared that Community as an extension of NATO, i.e. as a cover for 'West German revanchism' and/or for America's Cold Warriors. They therefore saw its very capitalist prosperity as making membership even more dangerous than exclusion. Many other labour activists we can see as reformist 'third worldies': euphoric about formal decolonisation and about the British Commonwealth, now that Apartheid South Africa had been pushed out. Many assumed working-class electors would somehow feel queasy about sharing institutions with Continentals. No wonder Labour remained officially for withdrawal from 'Europe' till 1989.

**B**ut the years around 1990 saw Labour and Conservatives exchanging their respective internal balance of stances on Europe. Thatcher began gravitating back towards Euroscepticism, in reaction to Labour leaders' enthusiasm for what was coming to be known as the E.U.'s 'Social Chapter': she saw that as a threat to her constructing a neoliberal Britain. True, in the

short term she got too far ahead of her party here. That was one factor that ended her premiership. (The other was massive popular rage against her poll tax, not least in Scotland where it had been trialled). But in the long, those of her ideologues who had previously, as she, applauded Heath's negotiation of Britain's entry to the then E.E.C. in 1973, soon joined those who had disliked it all along. From around 1990, those advocating Britain's disentanglement from almost anything European (except, of course, from NATO which they saw as tethering any European habit of wandering off into neutrality) agitated as abstractly as we have noted, and no less repetitively. But their very repetitiveness, decade after decade, reverberated. By autumn 2019, “five or six” members of a focus-group “in the back room of a drab hotel in Bury”, Lancashire, (Payne 23.12.2019) could present Johnson with his election-mantra, “Get Brexit Done”. Seldom have mantras been so hollow but, repeated *ad nauseam* in response to questions on anything, it worked: boring promises to end boredom were the main factor triggering a landslide.

**T**he Tory party has long been the main venue for neoliberals and Eurosceptics to sing ever more manic duets. One precondition was that Tories and Labour exchanged their predominant positions. By 1998 with Blair enjoying a big Commons majority, no more than 3% of Labour M.P.s supported withdrawal. The majority now saw the E.U. as hopeful terrain for furthering social justice – precisely the perception we have seen turning Thatcher against it, a decade earlier. The E.U.'s ‘Social Chapter’ might be weak; Gerhard Schröder's

euphoria over “my friend Tony”'s “Third Way” might signal further dilution of social commitment in both their countries. But even the softest social reformism strengthened optimism, partly because all sides had grown accustomed to reform benefiting from a half-century of economic growth. Blairites therefore embraced Thatcher's ‘Big Bang’ of deregulation in the City of London. During Labour's mid-1990s ‘prawn cocktail offensive’ in the City, a leading Blairite, Peter Mandelson, famously described Blair's New Labour project as “intensely relaxed about people becoming filthy rich.” And even New Labour's love of capitalism contrasted with memories of Thatcher: not merely her degradation of unions, hence of working conditions, but also her gutting of many traditional industries, not least coal.

### **Imperial luck strengthens the impact of ideology**

**H**ere, Brexiteers are stuck in their own “economic farrago of leaving the world's largest free-trade area in the name of more free trade.”<sup>3</sup> That whole farrago is ideological and, as I have more than hinted, ultimately irrational. The escalating duet of Brexiteering with much neoliberalism may nauseate even some neoliberals. But neoliberalism remains a useful politico-economic tool in many countries. So neoliberalisation can bulldoze on, even while individuals try to jump out of the cab. Similarly, as noted, with Tory definitions of ‘Brexit’.

**B**ut the incoherencies of Brexit underline a basic question: how can truth-content stay so secondary for so long? One precondition



is: not to collide too painfully with reality. My first argument has been about the importance of old slogans for Tory answers to the mass insubordination that had climaxed during 1967-74. My second, from here, is about generations of non-collision. My third will be about Covid-19 that has, so far, deepened the political solipsism so long endemic among Brexitanians, notably their rulers.

Britain's unusually long-lasting trading advantages are perhaps one reason why Tories have exhibited a greater yen for such agitations and risks: for so long, economic reality offered so much room for political careerism. Between, very roughly, 1700 and the 1870s, Britain had continued as, let's say, the Silicon Valley of an increasingly worldwide economy: not merely the furthest-flung Empire ever, but also planetary capitalism's chief technological motor, hence rule-setter. Centuries of economic invulnerability (even against Napoleon's Continental System, despite major social unrest) allowed, as we will now see, repeated political irresponsibility over questions of trade.

Here, some 19th-century basics are inescapable, however many historians may deride these as 'potted history'.

With the end of a quarter-century of war against revolutionary France (often a continuation of trade-wars against its absolutist predecessor), Tory landowners insisted on restoring protection for agriculture. The year 1842 saw a general strike (the world's first) that overlapped very much with 'physical force' Chartists (for the People's Charter for one-

*man-one-vote*). After a repressive spasm against strike-leaders, Liberals and Tories competed in conciliating working-class opinion. The Liberals were evolving from Whigs, the other landowner-dominated party. ('Whig' versus 'Tory' had originated from long-half-forgotten polarisations around the 1688 'Glorious Revolution'). They now appealed increasingly to supporters of the free market. Liberal manufacturers and others attracted many 'moral force' Chartists into alliance with an Anti-Corn Law League for free trade in food. In 1846, Tory premier Sir Robert Peel gave in. His reluctant act of realism was speeded by famine in Ireland – though, as a convert to Free Trade, he did nothing to stop that island continuing as a net exporter of food. He turned out to have sprained his party's landed-protectionist backbone, disabling it from office for two decades. Not that there were sobs of working-class pity for landed aristocrats (though, as a novelist, the young Disraeli would have loved to unite aristocrats and workers against manufacturers). Rather, there was nothing to pity aristocrats for: British landowners were not 'due' to suffer from intercontinental food imports till the shipping revolution of the 1880s. The triumph of 'free trade in food' chanced soon after the start of the 19th century's longest boom, burying 'physical force' Chartist warnings that cheaper food would merely encourage employers to cut wages. So the 1840s polarisations over trade were to bring no negative lessons on the risks of changing a country's trade-policies.

Coincidentally, though, the 1880s also highlighted the one-sidedness of Free

Trade with countries like Germany or the U.S.A. that had industrialised behind tariff-walls, and whose industries were now – oh, what blasphemy! – often more advanced than Britain’s. So, while the 1840s’ mobilisations with their dire effect on the Tory Party now merited a mere line or two in school history-textbooks, the time seemed ripe for trade-agitation in another, this time Tory, direction. If Britain was no longer the Workshop of the World, surely it could remain the workshop of its Empire, with the White Dominions concentrating on primary exports to the Motherland.

Trouble was, those Dominions were growing restive at such a role. So again, the agitations from the 1890s to the 1930s for Empire Free Trade brought no negative economic lessons either: this time, not because they succeeded during a lucky juncture (as the Liberals’ 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws), but because their success was at best partial (Ottawa 1932, as noted). So, to almost any voter between roughly 1960 and 2019, yarns from the 1840s to 1930s could again be left to the same school textbooks. Patriotically grumbling about Britain’s trading relations was one way of proving how Tory you were. Those grumblings’ relationship to reality might be incomplete. But, as we have seen,, British realities allowed far more than average room for manoeuvre between economic facts and political waffle ,because, as a *Financial Times* prophet called Simon Kuper (brought up in South Africa and then Uganda) diagnosed during September 2019, “many of today’s Britons ... have forgotten that history can hurt.” (Kuper 19.9.2019)

## **The Future I: Brexit**

We will see how long his present tense survives: coming months may reveal who is “getting ... done” most by Johnson’s Election-triumph of 12th December 2019. Even were ‘Singapore-on-Thames’ a coherent aim, Singapores on almost any other Brexitanian river are surely sci-fi – except, of course, in the sense of further de-regulation of labour-conditions. Conceivably, ‘Singapore’ may also denote ‘technological sovereignty” where Britain leads some merry band of countries against the planetary cybocracies of America and China after loudly rejecting the nearest and weakest of the three candidates, the EU. Yet that version too is a dream: in the commentator Paul Mason’s words, Britain “is not even in the game.” Plausibly, he instances the “abysmal collapse of its home-grown Covid-19 track-and-trace app [...] followed by the revelation that [the government] had invested in unproven satellite technology” (Mason 30.6.20). We are perhaps becoming accustomed to fantasy-based policies.

How is “history” about to “hurt”? How deeply will even Tory brains judder when reality hits them? Does Johnson dream of disengaging from the Hard Brexiteers who helped him into Downing Street? There seem precious few signs of that; but nobody seems sure whether he has ever been capable of average honesty, even to himself nor, as we will see near the end, whether he prizes coherence at all. Maybe the December (in practice, autumnal) 2020 deadline he has announced for ending his E.U. negotiations is no mere poker-ploy.

Maybe it is a promise to Brexiteers to crash out, come what may. Many of his Hard ones are full-throttle Neolibs who believe in a salutary crisis, allowing them to deregulate class-relations back to the 1930's or earlier. We may agree with Paul Mason that the "whole point of Brexit was to deregulate the labour market and reduce social protections and environmental standards, while scapegoating 'migrants' and 'Europe' for everything that went wrong." But he assumes too easily that Johnson and Co. will recognise the pandemic and its economic trauma as barring such endeavours (Mason 6.4.2020). We will also see how far they can divert blame from themselves for Britain suffering Europe's highest death-toll: the first week in July brought a sign that Johnson is seeking one plausible target already (Walker, Proctor and Syal 6.7.2020).

**T** rue, on winning the December 2019 Election, he did warn his party not to take for granted those working-class voters who had switched from Labour. Yet how he hopes to retain them is anybody's guess: till 3<sup>rd</sup> February (see below), the sole 'good' myths hinted at were xenophobia – this time against E.U. immigrants —, but no indications of what, beyond that,, may promote class integration after Brexit is 'done'. With regard to xenophobia, Johnson's record of wolf-whistling against veiled Muslim women and dark-skinned children bodes ill. But what his offer of British residency to three million Hong Kong residents (1<sup>st</sup> July 2020) suggests, is anybody's guess — perhaps his, too. Analogous to Johnsonian opportunism, newspaper-owners know sales rise with the unexpected: most London-based newspapers

have sometimes swiftly swung between EU-immigrants-as-spongers-on-welfare and EU-immigrants-as-saviour-of-whole-sectors-of-our-economy (if we exclude the consistently xenophobic *Express* papers).<sup>4</sup> So far, top Tories have used racist remarks to claim terrain: as if to a building-site where planning permission is still pending. When Powell ventured further with that 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech, Heath instantly sacked him from the shadow cabinet. Johnson currently has Muslims and Hindus in his cabinet. But Powell had been responding to a wave of 'black' immigration. So anti-Chinese racism can perhaps await revival till 'too many' of Johnson's three million begin testing his honesty.

**G** estures, whether racist or not, may clash with economics. Already, employers in a very wide range of sectors from care-homes to hotels and restaurants have reacted with horror to the government's proposal for an immigration-system that excludes the low-paid. So far, the sole official reply (from Home Secretary Priti Patel) has come strangely from Tory lips: you bosses should raise wages. As Tories have seldom been conspicuous for hiking minimum wages, we can assume her reaction was at best unreflected. So the intention is for British workers to be forced to take more of the worst and least secure jobs, whether or not at wage rates slightly higher than those that, say, Poles or Slovaks have had to accept. As, say, for meat-factories and seasonal agriculture, the dynamics of British hostels and production lines are at least as Covid-friendly as German or ... Singaporean. For Patel to push British

workers into these is, in the negative sense, a ‘Singaporean’ prospect. Indeed it is already more than a prospect: some of the British students and others who have volunteered for seasonal farm-work (perhaps responding patriotically to Johnson’s appeal to “Pick for Britain”)<sup>5</sup> are reporting grimly on hours and wages worse than promised, on abusive foremen one or two of whom, mafia-like, demand percentages, and on accommodation without running water.<sup>6</sup> The list feels familiar from *Grapes of Wrath* to ... 2020 Germany.

Medically more directly dangerous, men aged between 20 and 40 are thought to be one major vector within Leicester’s late-June increase in Covid-19 cases. Extreme exploitation in “garment factories and food processing plants” has long been notorious. The at least local word for them, “sweatshops”,<sup>7</sup> was more widely current in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. Workers speak furtively of being told to continue coming into crowded workplaces despite suffering symptoms, and not to tell colleagues about a positive test-result. And on that front too, Patel has criticised those Leicester employers.<sup>8</sup> Again, is she enunciating something like a principle or merely wolf-whistling?

That keyword of Brexit jargon, ‘sovereignty’, is more than rhetoric: it already informs policy. It was behind government plans to separate Brexitania from Europe’s air-safety authority, to howls of incredulous horror from the industries affected. So far, the horror-struck, whether employers or current and potential employees, seem not to recognise themselves as victims of the salutary shock that at least some

government ministers aim to hit them with. Near the end of February 2020, Mason noted how “the debate over Brexit [had] simply transmuted [from economics] into a debate over sovereignty and immigration” (Mason 24.2.2020). Correct. But, let sovereignty and immigration be the angriest of bulldogs, economics can tug them harshly back on even the longest lead – until perhaps that lead snaps, with results even less predictable.

Worse, in some contexts, the Europeans themselves have used Brexit dogma to disable the basics, not merely of capitalist economics but even of post-1945 defence policy. In 2018, Brexit’s likelihood triggered Britain’s exclusion from the EU’s Galileo programme. This is a system of “twenty-four satellites to provide both an openly available navigation service as well as a highly encrypted positioning platform [...] for public service authorities or the military.” The government promised to replace this with something purely British. That project is now plagued by delays and cost overruns. In March 2020, one unnamed “space industry executive” identified the “problems” as being that the programme had been “launched in the political environment of Brexit, but there has been no discussion among stakeholders about what the requirement is.” A *Financial Times* report summarises the likeliest solution as being to “use openly available signals from US or European satellites to deliver the positioning, while a smaller subset of British satellites would refine and encrypt the data.” That sounds like dependence plus a recipe for occasional blackmail and mutual spying. Meanwhile, one

“industry figure” is left lamenting how “the UK lacks the expertise to judge the industry proposals so everything is taking much longer” (Hollinger and Pickard 1.3.2020). Anyone seeking to disperse dismay among UK firms is reduced to hoping Galileo will obsolesce faster than expected. By then the, as ever, uniquely inventive Brits will of course be ready to bestow the next generation of electronics on a grateful world market.

This seems like fording a stream while overlooking how many stepping-stones have been washed away. In our 21<sup>st</sup>-century world of large trading-blocks, we may suspect that this most rhetorical of British governments still expects “proud” centuries of Imperial luck to protect it somehow from the realities of Hard Brexit.

### Author’s Note

This essay takes into account developments up to 31 October 2020. Mysourcing is overwhelmingly from the *Guardian*, with the *Financial Times* among occasional exceptions. This stems, not merely from the *Guardian*’s audacious decision to avoid imposing any pay-wall, but also from its consistent commitment to investigative journalism. My own disagreements with that daily are miles from Brexit or Covid-19. The *FT* is now the sole London daily available on the European mainland, where Covid-19 happens to find me. For over six decades, I have regarded it as easily “the best capitalist newspaper.”

### Editor’s Note

This forms part of a longer study that is being published separately on the Website of *Hard Times Magazine* in our new category, ‘The Long Read’. You can access the full version of the article here:

<https://hard-times-magazine.org/index.php/Hardtimes/catalog/category/thelongread>

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- 1 For two entries into the field: Mirowski (2013), Mirowski and Plehwe (2009); Swarts (2013) on Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. Mirowski’s *Science Mart: Privatising American Science* (2011) had listed at least eleven cumulative criteria of neoliberalism. By now, we can perhaps imagine him wanting to add a few more: his target is mobile.
  - 2 I owe this point to Jimmy Grealey.
  - 3 Anthony Barnett’s blogged phrase of mid-March 2019. For an apotheosis of that “farrago”, see Johnson’s speech near the end of this paper.
  - 4 Morrison 27.9.2019. That the paper also carries the name of the editor, Dr Roch Dunin-Wasowicz, is presumably no claim of joint authorship.
  - 5 [www.express.co.uk/News/UK](http://www.express.co.uk/News/UK) dates this appeal (or this report on it) as 27.3.2020.

- 6 BBC Radio 4, 18.7.2020, 06.45 approx.,  
*Farming Today*. That gender dimensions go  
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- 7 I owe this point to one very ex-local, the  
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- 8 Bland and Campbell 30.6.2020. That  
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# **“The EU maintains that it supports subsidiarity, yet there was little of that on show”**

## **Questions to Philip B. Whyman on British Politics and the British Economy beyond Brexit**

Sebastian Berg

*Philip B. Whyman is an economist at the University of Central Lancashire. He was one of the founding signatories of the network The Full Brexit, which has argued and campaigned for Brexit from a left or centre-left perspective. Those active in the network “agree, first, that the left’s proper role is to be the architect of a better, more democratic future and, second, that a clean break with the EU is needed to realise that potential” (<https://www.thefullbrexit.com/about>). His arguments, based primarily on a post-Keynesian perspective, deserve thorough reflection – especially in Germany, where any propagation of Brexit has been routinely tarnished as being irrational and populist even by a large section of the left. Whyman was interviewed by Sebastian Berg (Bochum).*

**Since you are an economist, my first question is about the British economy. How, do you think, EU membership has influenced the British economy over the last couple of decades?**

**E**U membership has had a number of effects on the UK. In terms of trade, the evidence would suggest that the UK has increased its trade with the EU over the period of its 47 years of membership, which has created a positive economic impact for the UK. Not so welcome is the very large trade deficit that the UK has run up with EU countries over this period, which has a dampening effect on UK growth prospects. Harmonised EU regulations make it easier (and hence less costly) to trade in certain commodities and services, but rules relating to competition and the single market constrain government policy aiming to use a more active form of industrial or procurement policy to try to enhance the UK productive base and thereby reduce this trade deficit. Membership of the customs union also means that the UK cannot



negotiate bespoke trade deals with the ROTW [rest of the world; SB], but it has the advantage accrued from EU-negotiated agreements. The inclusion of the '4 freedoms' as an integral part of the single market has led to large inflows of migrant labour, which has had mixed effects – favourable for businesses who benefit from more moderated wages and access to a larger pool of skilled labour without the need (and cost) of training, but less favourable to those whose wages would have been higher without such large scale migration and for those seeking to access public services (education, health, housing). So there have been a range of economic effects – some positive, some negative. What is noticeable, however, is that the UK tends to benefit less than the average EU member state from the positive effects, because it is less integrated with the rest of the EU.

**What are your main criticisms of the EU – are they economic, political, or both?**

**A**s an economist, it is the economic arguments which are most significant for me, but I also share a number of the political critiques of the EU.

In terms of economics, my view is that the balance of evidence suggests that the UK would be better off outside the EU. Whatever negative trade effects occur, between the UK and the EU (partly depending on the results of the current negotiations), there will be some offsetting boost to trade with the ROTW and freedom from EU regulations (unless this option is negotiated away) should provide economic benefit to the UK economy. However, the largest benefit is

likely to arise from the greater flexibility for UK economic policy – assuming governments make the most of this option. It is also my opinion that the UK's current budget rebate and opt out from the single currency would have come under increasing pressure over time, should we have remained a full member, and my analysis (compiled over the past two decades) is that the single currency, as currently constituted, is based upon a deeply flawed design and it has a deflationary bias at its heart, making it harder for the Eurozone economies to grow and achieve full employment.

In terms of political arguments, my view is that the EU contains a democratic deficit at its heart, because its design is not fully adapted to federalist or intergovernmental principles. There is also a question regarding the appropriate level where governance should occur. Is it the local community, or regions, or the nation state or the EU supra-national level? The EU maintains that it supports subsidiarity, yet there was little of that on show when the troika dealt with Greece during the recent Eurozone crisis and there has been little on show during the current COVID-19 crisis. If the appropriate level for governance is the nation state, then membership of the EU constrains national sovereignty, whilst EU regulations limit the potential scope for national democratic expression – you can't vote for something that is against EU rules, as they take precedence, so EU membership inevitably limits national democratic self-expression. You can argue that this is traded-off against other benefits, but then it is a question of what an individual prioritises.

**I remember a time (the time of Jacques Delors) when many people on the British Left thought the EU might to some extent protect them against the worst excesses of a hard-right British government. Now, confronted with another hard-right government, do you think this argument does not make sense anymore – or has it never made sense at all?**

**I**t never made a lot of sense. Good people, like John Edmonds (then General Secretary of the GMB trade union), who passionately believed in the advantages of running an economy to achieve full employment, accepted the propositions made by Delors that the EU would be a bulwark against the worst ravages of globalisation and a social Europe would temper the worst distributional aspects of the single currency. Yet, thirty years later, the EU still does not have full employment, whilst Social Europe is little more than window dressing for the deflationary single currency approach. Enlargement always meant that the creation of a truly social Social Europe would be difficult to achieve, but the Lisbon Treaty made it clear that this was only on the agenda in so far as it could assist the creation of global competitiveness. Cutting rather than extending social welfare. Hardly the original intent. Moreover, Euro-Keynesianism, if it was ever really taken seriously by the EU leadership, didn't survive Delors.

**I**t is tempting for those on the UK Left to look to the continent when right-wing governments strip away employment and social protection at home. But the countries they so admire – often the Scandinavian nations – have

themselves witnessed a gradual retraction in the welfare state and loss of full employment, due in large part to the logic of the dominant (neo-liberal) EU orthodoxy. How would you comment on the allegation that Brexit potentially leads to a weakening of human rights standards in Britain and to a strengthening of ethnic nationalism?

**I** am an economist, so this is not really within my area of specialism.

All I can say is that I have not seen any convincing evidence that Brexit will necessarily lead to either of these two conclusions, any more than I have seen convincing evidence that EU membership has proven to be an effective bulwark against rising nationalism in certain current EU member states that I am sure we could all mention. Any political philosophy can be twisted to unwelcome ends if given the opportunity. It is the task of progressive democrats to try & ensure that this does not occur.

**What do you think are the major dangers British people have to expect from the Johnson government?**

**Y**ou may be surprised to learn that I think the Johnson administration has made a good start. Less vacillation over Brexit has reduced uncertainty. The new Chancellor's first budget actually appeared to accept much of the case so recently made by the Labour Party in the General Election, namely that if any time had favourable conditions for government to borrow money (currently at low or even negative

interest rates) to invest in infrastructure to boost demand, create jobs and enhance future productive capacity, then it is now. The large scale (though temporary) nationalisations and socialisation of the labour market, undertaken during the current COVID-19 crisis – intended to build a bridge to enable the restarting of the economy – are also along the correct lines, though policy made in a hurry is apt to need tweaking to get it to work as intended. The government's negotiating stance – to reject regulatory harmonisation – is quite correct from my point of view. So, from an economic standpoint, so far so good!

Potential areas which may cause concern in the future are likely to stem from two things: (i) the distributional consequences of government choices, and (ii) whether social, employment and environmental policy turns out to be as enlightened as the current economic agenda may suggest. Will, for example, all of the UK benefit from future growth or will it be disproportionately concentrated in the South East? Will 'left behind areas' be transformed or left behind once again? Will economic and social inequality decline – will the UK really be 'in this together' – or will it rise as it did during the Thatcher era? Will 5 years (or more) of a Johnson administration leave the UK a more healed and self-confident place, with an economy transformed both in terms of stimulating new and productive sectors whilst ensuring a sustainable future? The current COVID-19 crisis reinforces these concerns, but also adds in the question of how the government disengages from its current levels of

support for the economy, and which parts of the population/economy will have to carry the cost for unprecedented levels of fiscal intervention in peacetime.

**You are based in Preston, Lancashire. Critics of Brexit have often argued that poor people in the old industrial regions like the North West will suffer most from leaving the EU. What will happen to people in Preston?**

Those critics might like to ask themselves why so many of these 'poor people' voted for Brexit in the first place.

What will happen to Prestonians will, like the rest of the UK, depend upon what deal the UK negotiates with the EU and what the government subsequently does with whatever additional economic policy flexibility it secures. The optimistic picture is where a free trade agreement allows the UK government to pursue an active industrial policy, which it uses to rebuild sections of the country's manufacturing base – not in old, declining industries, but in areas of market emergence such as renewables, battery technology, carbon storage, 'greening' the housing stock, etc. Since Preston still makes things (manufacturing), this will benefit our citizens more than the financial sector based in London. Rebalancing the economy, from a Prestonian point of view, would be a welcome change. If, on the other hand, the government accepts the EU's 'level playing field' demands, or it is not willing to grasp the potential inherent in greater economic autonomy, then these opportunities will be lost.

There are specific concerns, for Lancashire, relating to potential future trade barriers being erected and their impact on leading industries, such as aerospace, and the agri-food sector. A basic Free Trade Agreement should resolve the former, whereas disruptions for the latter are more difficult to resolve, due to the EU's very large tariff walls in the agri-food sector.

**May I ask you about your views on the last general election. Do you suspect that the Labour-supporting 'red wall' in the North of England has terminally crumbled or has this election just produced an exceptional result?**

Many people in the 'Red Wall' constituencies 'gifted' Johnson their vote to 'get Brexit done'. By the end of 2020, this should have been completed and we can take stock as we move forwards as an independent nation. If Labour maintains its backwards stance, bemoaning the fact that we have left the EU arguing for closer alignment with the EU, then the current government will have to make quite a mess of governing the country for those voters to return to the Labour fold. If, however, Labour is able to accept the reality of Brexit and focus upon how an independent UK can become more progressive, creating new and better jobs, and ensuring that wealth and life opportunities are spread more evenly across the whole of the country, then Labour will have much better electoral prospects. The current COVID-19 crisis is a good case in point. Taking Brexit out of the equation, the government is vulnerable to criticism that the decade of austerity has so enfeebled the public services that public services are under-prepared – i.e.

PFI leading to reductions in hospital beds, a shortage of NHS professionals capable of caring for those afflicted by the virus, privatised labs unable to cope with the demands for increased testing, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Similarly with Brexit, arguing that Labour could move the country forward to a new, more egalitarian, prosperous independent future would be popular; arguing that we go backwards would not.

**You are known for propagating a post-Keynesian approach to financial (and macro-economic) policy. How could such an approach look like in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain and does its implementation become easier with leaving the EU?**

It becomes a lot easier – that, in essence, is why I believe that, on balance, withdrawing from the EU will enable the UK to prosper in the future, assuming, of course, that suitable active policy measures are in fact undertaken.

A post-Keynesian economic approach would start off from a point where aggregate demand was managed to create conditions conducive to full employment. Economic policy would be broadened out from the current 'one club golfer' approach, where the use of interest rates by the Bank of England is focused upon an arbitrary inflation target and the rest of the economy is left to look after itself. Instead, government should make use of an active industrial and procurement policy, to grow key sectors of the economy. Greater concern would be taken to ensuring the fruits of future growth were shared more equally – whether through fiscal redistribution or the use of 'Preston Model'

approaches to procurement to boost local economies and strengthen local supply chains.<sup>2</sup>

This is only the starting point, but time and space precludes going into more detail. If anyone is interested in reading further about these ideas, you might be interested in having a look at my 2018 CIVITAS publication: *The Left Case for Britain: Active Government for an Independent UK*.

## Endnotes

- 1 PFIs (Private Finance Initiatives) are instruments by which private companies set up and manage public sector projects and services, which are then rented and paid for by the state and the public. PFIs have been widely used in Britain since the 1990s to invest in public services and infrastructure. Proponents argue that the private sector is more capable of providing services in a customer-friendly and efficient way, critics contend that, for the investing companies, profit comes before meeting the needs of those relying on the service.
- 2 The Preston Model is a city-council initiated attempt to reinvest the benefits of local growth in the local area. For this purpose, the city council has mandated a local thinktank to identify large 'anchor' institutions in Preston and conferred with them how to redirect their spending (partly) to local businesses and initiatives. This economic strategy is accompanied by consultation procedures such as monthly social forums to identify needs of local

communities and shape spending priorities on that basis. This relocalisation of economic and political decision-making seems to have positive effects – between 2010 and 2015, Preston had the second biggest improvement in the index of multiple deprivation of all UK cities and in 2018 it was declared the most improved city in the Good Growth for Cities index. For details see Preston City Council: The definitive guide to the 'Preston model' <https://www.preston.gov.uk/article/1791/The-definitive-guide-to-the-Preston-model->, and Hazel Sheffield: "The Preston model: UK takes lessons in recovery from rust-belt Cleveland", <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/apr/11/preston-cleveland-model-lessons-recovery-rust-belt>

# Past the Point of no Return:

## Scotland, Brexit and Independence

Klaus Stolz

*In his article, Klaus Stolz (Chemnitz) focuses on the Scots' decision in the Brexit referendum on June 23, 2016. For him, the result is not only representative of the relationship between Scotland and Europe, but also of the relationship between Scotland and the rest of Great Britain. That most Scots want to stay in the EU and thus deviate from the majority of the British is what he regards as part of a bigger domestic political division. Klaus Stolz does not consider Brexit as a cause, but as a possible catalyst for the disintegration of Great Britain.*

### Independence Day

On 23 June 2016, the day Nigel Farage and his fellow Brexiteers hailed as Britain's "independence day", the Scottish electorate rejected Brexit by a margin of 62 to 48. Unlike a (small) majority of citizens in England and Wales – and in line with the majority in Northern Ireland – Scots did not see leaving the European Union (EU) as the remedy for their political disillusionment. Instead, most Scots

still see the EU as part of the solution rather than the problem. In this short essay I will claim that Scotland's dissenting referendum vote is a reflection of a much deeper political divergence that has occurred between Scotland and the rest of the UK (especially England) over the last decades – a divergence that has little to do with the EU and much to do with the domestic arena and Scottish grievances against British democracy. Yet Scottish deviation over Brexit is not only a reflection of this divergence. The Brexit decision has, in turn, further accelerated this process. Thus, in retrospect, 23 June 2016 may well go down in history as the final straw that brought about the long-predicted break-up of Britain (Nairn 1977), and thus as a precursor of Scotland's rather than Britain's independence day.

### Emerging Divergence

In the immediate post-war times Scottish politics (unlike Welsh politics) were much in line with English politics. Table 1 shows the

**Table 1: General Election 1955 Results: England vs Scotland (% of vote)**

Party	England	Scotland	Deviation
Conservatives	50.4	50.7	0.3
Labour	46.8	46.7	0.1
Liberals	2.6	1.9	0.7
Others	0.2	1.3	1.1
Sum	100	100	2.2
			2.2: 2 = <b>1.1</b>

results of the British general election of 1955 in England and Scotland with hardly any disparity in terms of party-political support. The first major change to this situation came in the 1970s with the SNP's "oil-fired" electoral breakthrough. The subsequent debates about Scotland's constitutional status (finally ending in the abortive devolution referendum of 1979) coincided with Britain's accession to the European Community. At that time Scottish nationalism was distinctly anti-European, portraying the European Community as an additional layer of central government that removed Scotland even further from self-government. In the first European referendum in 1975 Scotland thus

exhibited the lowest levels of support for EC membership of all British nations. So much for essentialist notions of an inextricable link between Europe and Scottishness.

### Accelerating Divergence

An even more profound deviation of Scotland from mainstream British, or rather from English, politics, and a reversal of its position towards Europe occurred during the years of Thatcherism. Thatcher's neo-liberal agenda, her de-industrialisation, her privatization and austerity policies ran against the grain of much of Scotland's fundamental



**Table 2: General Election 2019 Results: England vs Scotland (% of vote)**

Party	England	Scotland	Deviation
<b>Conservatives</b>	47.2	25.1	22.1
<b>Labour</b>	33.9	18.6	15.3
<b>LibDems</b>	12.4	9.5	2.9
<b>SNP</b>	0	45.0	45-0
<b>Others</b>	6.5	1.8	4.7
<b>Sum</b>	100	100	90
			90: 2 = <b>45</b>

norms and values. Furthermore, her state centralization and attacks on local government and trade unions were perceived in Scotland as “an attack on Scotland itself” (McCrone 1992: 172) and thus as an explicit revocation of the historic compromise between Scottish society and the British state. As a result, Scotland rejected Thatcherism repeatedly and unequivocally at the ballot box, leaving the governing Conservatives in 1987 with just 24 per cent of the Scottish vote and only 10 Scottish MPs. Experiencing a complete impotence of their voice within the British system of government, Scots increasingly questioned the constitutional set-up. Westminster came to be seen as anachronistic and undemocratic.

### **The Europeanisation of the Scottish Question**

This new constitutional debate in Scotland was closely linked to and largely framed by the process of European integration. In contrast to the 1970s, though, the Scottish self-government movement now perceived Europe and the EC/EU as a potential ally in their opposition to the centralist forces at Westminster and Whitehall. Devolutionists mainly subscribed

to the “Europe of the Regions” vision, hoping that the ongoing Europeanisation process would automatically and perhaps inadvertently lead to regionalization within member states and thus to the establishment of a Scottish Parliament. The SNP, while remaining separatist, also changed tack with regard to Europe. At their 1989 party conference, they adopted a new slogan: Independence in Europe. This policy U-turn was informed by the role other small nations like Ireland and Denmark were able to play as independent members states. Furthermore, by framing the European Community as a new external support framework for an independent Scotland, the envisaged break-up of the British Union could be portrayed as far less radical and dangerous. “Independence in Europe” disburdened the independence vision from its isolationist connotations.

### **Devolution: Attempted Rescue of the Union**

Scotland’s subsequent path away from mainstream British politics, though, remained largely determined by domestic developments. It was an electoral calculus and an attempt to save the increasingly fragile United Kingdom from Scottish nationalism



rather than any Europeanisation that inspired New Labour's devolution policy. However, instead of killing nationalism in Scotland "stone dead" as then-Shadow Secretary for Scotland, George Robertson, had rather optimistically predicted, the establishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1999 created a new institutional arena that provided ideal conditions for Scottish nationalism to thrive. And so it did! Despite having created this new arena, the Labour Party in Scotland never really came to terms with the challenges devolution generated for devolved party organization and strategy. Helped by the introduction of a proportional representation electoral system for the Scottish Parliament (and later also for local government in Scotland), the SNP grew from being Labour's main competitor into the party of government (2007) and later (in 2011) into the first single-party-majority government in Scotland.

### **The 2014 Independence Referendum: Averted Break-Up**

The latest milestone on Scotland's route to political emancipation ironically was the abortive Independence Referendum in 2014. Initiated by the SNP government, the referendum campaign mobilized Scottish society like no other political event before. A plethora of grassroots campaign groups emerged on the Yes side and succeeded in substantially moving public opinion in favour of independence (from roughly 30 per cent in 2013 to 45 per cent at the referendum). While this result meant that the battle for independence was lost for the time being, the real impact of this campaign was only to be seen in the following years, in which the



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SNP, despite losing the referendum, quadrupled its membership and further extended its electoral dominance in Scotland from the Scottish arena to Westminster elections.

### **The Brexit Referendum: Deviating Scots**

Thus, when during the Brexit referendum campaign in 2016, Brexiteers from the Conservatives and the Labour Party canvassed British citizens to "take back control" and to restore British sovereignty, their message found little resonance in Scotland, where political debates had long been decoupled from Westminster and trust in the British system of government had been eroded for decades. Instead, the Brexit referendum campaign in Scotland was framed by an already existent constitutional debate in which political disillusionment with

**Table 3: General Election 2019 Results: Scotland**

Party	%	Change	Seats	Change
<b>SNP</b>	45.0	+ 8.1	48	+ 13
<b>Conservatives</b>	25.1	- 3.5	6	- 7
<b>Labour</b>	18.6	- 8.5	1	- 6
<b>LibDems</b>	9.5	+ 2.7	4	0

the Westminster system had left Europe to become the arena in which to envisage Scottish self-government. This debate was dominated by the governing party, the SNP, whose leadership appeared unequivocally pro-European, despite accommodating a substantial number of Euro-sceptics in the rank and files of the party. Labour and especially the Conservatives under Ruth Davidson also presented themselves much more pro-European than their counterparts south of the border. Scottish deviation from the British Brexit majority was thus hardly a surprise.

**Y**et Brexit is not only a blatant manifestation of the deep divisions between Scotland and England. The British decision to leave the European Union against the explicitly stated will of Scotland erodes this relationship even further, heavily endangering the integrity of the United Kingdom. There are at least two aspects that clearly point in that direction.

### **Brexit: the Restoration of Unitary Britain**

**F**irst of all, and perhaps most importantly, Brexit has openly revealed and finally confirmed the fundamentally unitary character of the United Kingdom. Without any clear-cut constitutional rules of how to involve the constituent nations of the UK in high-politics decision-making, the default mechanism is

always: England rules (if only by population numbers). This was to be seen in Cameron's offhand rejection of any notion of a national veto to Brexit, an idea introduced by Nicola Sturgeon in the run-up to the referendum. It has since been corroborated by the Westminster insistence that only the overall UK result holds any value and the complete neglect of the British government to engage with the deviant results in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Detailed propositions by the Scottish Government for Scotland to remain inside the EU or at least inside the Single European Market, while the rest of Britain would leave, have never been taken seriously, while Scottish government ministers and officials have never had any meaningful influence on the British Brexit negotiations.

**W**estminster's absolute sovereignty has recently been formally attested in the legal battle about the upcoming transfer of legislative competencies from the EU after Brexit. According to Westminster's EU Withdrawal Act 2018, European competencies, including those falling into the category of devolved matters, were to return to the UK level rather than to the devolved parliaments. Thus, for the very first time, the devolution process entails a loss of regional competencies rather than a further increase. What's more, though, a

**Table 4: EC/EU Referendums in UK constituent nations (pro EC/EU vote in %)**

<b>Nation</b>	<b>1975</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>Change</b>
<b>England</b>	68.7	46.6	- 22.1
<b>Scotland</b>	58.4	62.0	+ 3.6
<b>Wales</b>	64.8	47.5	- 17.3
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	52.1	55.8	+ 3.7

Scottish bill legislating to the contrary was scrapped by the Supreme Court. Despite the incorporation of the so-called Sewel Convention into section 28 (8) of the Scotland Act, stating that “Parliament of the United Kingdom will not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters without the consent of the Scottish Parliament”, the UK Government opted to legally enforce Westminster’s formal superiority over the Scottish Parliament. The idea that the Sewel convention would constitute a political, if not a legal, entrenchment of the Scottish Parliament has thus proved ill-founded. In fact, when the Westminster Parliament finally passed its legislation to take Britain out of the EU in January 2020 all three devolved parliaments withheld their consent. The final decision to leave the EU was thus taken against the explicit vote of the democratically elected representatives of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. This is a serious flaw in the Brexit process and one that might haunt the British state in years to come.

### **Scotland’s Response: IndyRef2**

The second aspect that endangers the integrity of the United Kingdom is the issue of a second Independence Referendum (IndyRef2) that has been looming over Scotland ever since the Brexit referendum. Already on the first morning after the ballot, the Scottish First

Minister, Nicola Sturgeon herself had declared that after this result a second referendum “must be on the table”. The moral mandate for such a move springs from an assertion that is difficult to refute, namely that Brexit constitutes “a significant and material change in the circumstances in which Scotland voted against independence in 2014”. At that time, one of the key arguments was that only by remaining inside the UK would Scotland be allowed to remain part of the European Union. Given that it is now the UK that is about to drag Scotland out of the EU against its will, those who want to declare this vote null and void seem to have a strong point.

And indeed, in the Scottish independence movement there is no question whether this second referendum will happen. The debate is only about the timing. An early demand for a transfer of power to hold such a referendum (a so-called section 30 order) by the Scottish Government was rebuffed by Theresa May (“now is not the time”). Since then SNP activists and non-SNP grassroots groups have become increasingly impatient, while Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP leadership steer a rather cautious and legalistic course.



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### **The UK General Election 2019: Increasing Divergence**

The UK General Election in December 2019 and the subsequent formal exit from the EU at the end of January 2020 have hardened the opposing constitutional positions. In Scotland, the GE 2019 brought a tremendous victory for the SNP. Winning 48 of 59 Scottish seats, their anti-Brexit, pro-IndyRef2 stance was overwhelmingly confirmed by the Scottish electorate. By contrast, the Scottish Tories, who had almost exclusively campaigned on an anti-IndyRef2 ticket, lost more than half of their MPs, completely inverting their English result. Yet the most devastating defeat was suffered by the Labour Party. The party that had dominated

Scottish politics for decades was reduced to a single Scottish MP. Soul searching in the Scottish Labour Party has already begun as high-profile politicians have called for a more flexible stance on the constitutional issue. However, in order to survive in this post-devolution climate, Labour in Scotland will have to reinvent itself as a Scottish party severing its ties from its London headquarters.

### **Constitutional Standoff**

At the UK level, Boris Johnson's landslide victory of December 2019 established a strong Conservative majority government that had no problems passing its Brexit bill through Parliament. While solving the immediate Brexit crisis of late 2019, the election result reinforced

the constitutional impasse in Scotland. After the election, it took Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon only a couple of days to reiterate her formal request for a section 30 transfer of power (this time in an unlimited, open-ended form). The re-elected UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, however, made it very clear that he did not see any mandate for such a demand. This standoff is likely to continue for some time.

In this long endgame, Nicola Sturgeon is following a rather cautious approach that is informed by the firm belief in a constitutional course of action along with the conviction that a second failure would foreclose the road to independence for the time being. Thus, she will not budge to grassroots demands for non-cooperation with the UK Government, civil disobedience or even a Catalan-style non-official referendum. As opinion polls have so far indicated only minor gains for the independence camp, her rationale seem to be quite clear: keep the radicals in her own camp in check and let Johnson do the damage. The longer Johnson denies the Scottish people its perceived right to self-determination, the more voters will be convinced of the need to break off ties with the rest of the UK. While this part of her strategy may very well bear fruit, the real danger comes from increasing internal fissures. Sturgeon will need all her political talent to keep her troops happy.

For Johnson, Scotland is basically a distraction from his Brexit course. While some commentators expect him to call Sturgeon's bluff, the stakes for such a high-risk strategy seem too high, even for a chancer like him.

Being the optimist he is, he might instead simply hope that the high tide of Scottish nationalism will soon be over. In this context, the future of the Anglo-Scottish Union depends very much on the next year, that is, on the time before the next election to the Scottish Parliament in May 2021. This is the time during which we will see what kind of future relationship with the EU Johnson is willing and able to negotiate. It is also the time in which we will see whether he uses his comfortable majority to further transfer Britain into the European hub of global casino capitalism, or whether he really honours his campaign pledges of public spending and economic and social regeneration. The former would not only cost him dearly in the North of England, where traditional Labour voters have only reluctantly lent him their vote, it would also prove to be extremely unpopular in Scotland.

### **Scottish Parliament Election 2021: Decision Time**

All this will be setting the stage for the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2021. The more the SNP can fight this crucial election on detrimental Brexit effects and on Scotland being exposed to a hostile right-wing British government, the more it might be able to once more escape the voter backlash that usually awaits a party that has been in government for so long. Yet another majority for the SNP (or even a combined majority for the independence parties: SNP and Greens) would make the status quo almost untenable. Pressure will mount on Nicola Sturgeon to adopt a more radical strategy, while Johnson will find it increasingly difficult to defend his principled rejection of a second

Scottish referendum.

At this time, it is, of course, impossible to forecast the result of such a referendum. This is especially so because there are two opposing dynamics at work. First of all, the Brexit process has once and for all shown Scotland its subordinate role in the UK and has thus aggravated grievances and anger. Add some Brexit-induced economic hardship to this formula and the referendum result seems to be foregone. However, the stakes are much higher now compared to the last independence referendum in 2014, as there is no longer common EU membership to cushion the internal break-up. Quite to the contrary, leaving a post-Brexit UK in order to rejoin the EU (which is official SNP policy) would turn the English-Scottish border into an external frontier of the European Union. Whether a majority of Scottish voters is already prepared to make such a bold step remains to be seen.

### **Brexit: The Point of No Return**

Regardless of when a second independence referendum is called and irrespective of its outcome, with Brexit, Scotland seems to have passed a point of no return. Careful and sensitive territorial management by the British government (something that is not to be expected from Prime Minister Johnson) might postpone the final break-up of Britain for an unknown amount of time. Yet it is difficult to envisage any meaningful rapprochement that can substantially bridge the increasing Anglo-Scottish division and thus reverse Scotland's pathway out of the centuries-old Anglo-Scottish

Union.

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# Borders, Brexit and Beyond:

## Fragments on Northern Ireland

Frauke Hofmeister

*Frauke Hofmeister (Leipzig) takes a closer look at a peripheral region that suddenly took centre stage in Brexit negotiations: Northern Ireland. In revisiting political decision making within and/or concerning Northern Ireland over the past four years (also, but not only, regarding Brexit), she explores the ongoing significance of geographical, political and social boundaries in the region.*

On 31 January 2020, the Irish border closed its Twitter account: “it feels like I won the battle but the war was lost.” (cited in McClements 2020). For almost two years, an anonymous author had published satirical comments on the implications of the UK withdrawal from the European Union on the Irish land border. Brexit and Northern Ireland – whoever followed the news over the past years (and you couldn’t escape it) grasped that the border question had indeed been *the* major obstacle in the negotiations. If it hadn’t been for Northern Ireland, it seems, Brexit would have been “done” much earlier (and May might still be Prime Minister...). However, the spotlight

was mostly on Westminster, Brussels, or possibly Dublin. Reason enough to spend a few pages having a closer look at Northern Ireland itself and at what happened there over the past four years, both regarding Brexit and beyond. Of course, I can’t offer a holistic picture, but at least a few fragments highlighting that the geographical border between Ulster and the Republic of Ireland is not the only relevant boundary in Northern Ireland.

### **Before the referendum...**

What would be the impact of a UK withdrawal from the European Union on Northern Ireland – that smallest ‘nation’ (‘region’? ‘country’?) of the United Kingdom, which had been created in 1921 with the partition of Ireland, because a majority of the mostly Protestant population wished to remain part of the UK instead of becoming part of the new Irish Free State (later to become the Republic of Ireland)? What would Brexit mean for this peculiar place, which had seen a violent

civil war between a Protestant majority and a Catholic minority in the latter half of the twentieth century until the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 had achieved more or less peaceful stability, with an open border with the Republic of Ireland, a growing number of cross-border institutions, and an (albeit regularly suspended) power-sharing regional government in Belfast.

Although hard to believe from a hindsight perspective, the future of the Irish border and Northern Ireland's somewhat complicated constitutional situation featured only very late in the referendum debate and its media coverage – on both sides of the North Channel. Neither Vote Leave nor Britain Stronger in Europe campaign materials even alluded to these issues, and also other players neglected Northern Ireland (partly completely, as shown by leaflets like Better Off Out's "Are you British... or European?", where "British" obviously really means British and not "Ukanian" (in Tom Nairn's terms)).

Yes, there had been warnings, of course. Edward Stourton had explored "The Irish Question" in a half-an-hour BBC podcast as early as February 2016. The House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee had heard witnesses on issues they "believe[d] should be amongst the most relevant to the electors in Northern Ireland" (House of Commons 2016: 3) over February and March 2016 but only published their report on 26 May. Tellingly, "The Border and Cross-Border Issues" was only the last of three chapters, preceded (and pagewise clearly outnumbered) by chapters on "Trade and Commerce" and "Agriculture". And



Better Off Out (2016) - Has anyone seen Northern Ireland?

even though the campaign in Northern Ireland differed from the referendum campaigns in the other parts of the UK (cf. Doyle/Connolly 2017: 2), it seems that the majority of the media and the electorate did not take the imminent constitutional impact very serious. As Stephen Baker (2018: 94) put it in his analysis of Northern Ireland newspaper coverage:

*There was a time when a visit by a senior British official to Northern Ireland, especially in the midst of political turmoil and constitutional crisis, would have excited a great deal of public comment. Not so during the EU referendum campaign of 2016, when no less that [sic] one British Prime Minister, two ex-Prime Ministers, a Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Mayor of London and Nigel Farage visited the region to little acclaim and less fuss.*



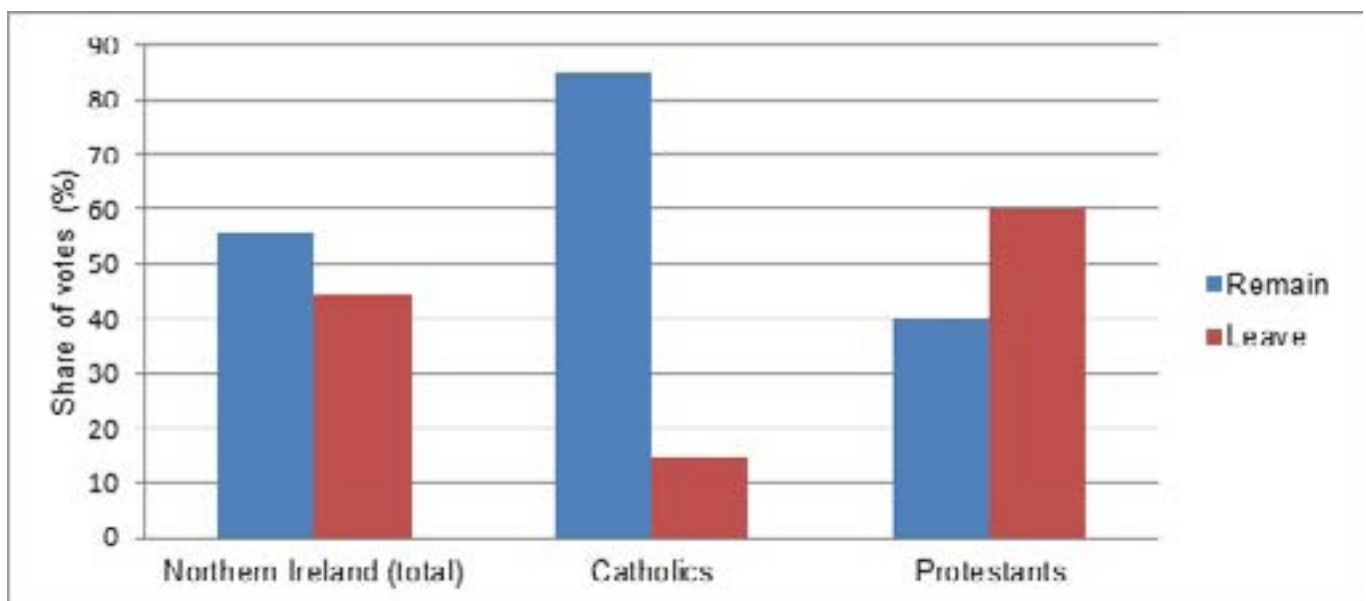
Well, why should there have been more “fuss” considering that the Northern Ireland Secretary Theresa Villiers had insisted in April 2016 that “the land border with Ireland can remain as free-flowing after a Brexit vote as it is today” (ctd. in Cunningham 2016)? Think of Tony Blair and John Major what you like, but at least they took the border (or “no-border”) issue seriously, when they appeared together at Ulster University in Derry to stress constitutional impacts of a Leave-Vote in June 2016.

In any case, for much of the campaign period, other matters had preoccupied Northern Irish media (and the public) – first and foremost the assembly elections on 5 May. But when it comes to party stances on the referendum, it is worth noting that support for either side was not aligned to the usual nationalist-unionist divide: the only major party campaigning for Leave was the DUP under Arlene Foster, while the second most important unionist party, the UUP, supported Remain alongside Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the Alliance Party and the Greens (for more information on party stances see

McCann/Hainsworth 2017). And indeed, the *Belfast Telegraph*, the major regional newspaper with a unionist tradition (although read by parts of the Catholic population as well) also argued clearly for Remain on 22 June 2016: “Europe is deeply flawed, but we’d be lost without it”, they wrote, and then drew up a long list of projects supported by EU funding and other economic benefits. Yet by suggesting that economic (dis)advantages were all that was at stake, the problem of the land border specific to the Northern Irish context was neglected once more.

### The referendum results

It was also in the *Belfast Telegraph* that Fionola Meredith summed up the referendum results in the following terms: “It’s not all about us” (Meredith 2016). Indeed, while 55.6 % of voters in Northern Ireland had cast their vote for Remain, the ‘Northern Ireland issue’ seems to have hardly played a role for voters across mainland Britain. However, having a closer look at the results suggests that the clear Remain majority was mainly due to the – unsurprisingly



EU referendum results in Northern Ireland (based on Garry 2018)



Road sign close to the border. Photo © Eric Jones (cc-by-sa/2.0)

– overwhelming support of the Catholic and/or nationalist population: 85% of those who identify as Catholic (compared to only 40 % of Protestants) and 88% describing themselves as (Irish) nationalist (compared to 37% identifying as unionists) voted to stay in the EU (cf. Garry 2018). Although the more diverse voting behaviour of Protestants/unionists has also been explained by ‘left behind’-factors (ibid.), the results made clear that Northern Ireland is far from being a united society, about 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement. And this was to become even more obvious in the following years.

### ... after...

Of course, the referendum result sparked a number of instantaneous reactions both from politicians (Brexiteer Arlene Foster’s

suitability as a representative for EU-favouring Northern Ireland was questioned by several people from the Remain camp, and Sinn Féin quickly called for a border poll under the arrangements of the Good Friday Agreement) and from the general public. The signs close to the border protesting against an “EU frontier in Ireland” were surely among the most visible symbols of the significance of the result for pro-Remain Northern Ireland.

However, for quite some time, nothing much happened, apart from a general run on Irish passports by Northern Irish citizens (a move which had been advised even by Ian Paisley!).

Indeed, as politicians in Westminster tried to figure out what Brexit actually meant, life went on in Belfast almost as usual. The power-

sharing Executive collapsed in early 2017 – something which had happened several times before and was thus not really uncommon. This time, it was caused by the so-called Cash for Ash scandal – a totally failed renewable energies incentive scheme overseen by Arlene Foster, who had by then become First Minister. Various disputes over language policies, abortion and civil rights loomed in the background of this breakdown. I find it remarkable that, at least on the surface, the failure of government had nothing to do with pending constitutional issues. However, the clear pro-Brexit stance of Arlene Foster and her DUP certainly did not encourage Sinn Féin to find a different way out of the situation. The results of the March 2017 snap election triggered by Martin McGuinness's resignation were certainly noteworthy: the size of the assembly had been reduced, but the losses were almost exclusively experienced by the DUP and the UUP, which resulted in a near par between unionist (40) and nationalist (39) assembly members (cf. Russell 2017). Dramatic as they were, the changes could still not pave the way for a new power-sharing Executive, as the DUP and Sinn Féin would still have had to co-operate. Therefore, direct rule from Westminster was to remain re-installed for close to three years.

These were the years that saw Northern Ireland move to the centre of political attention in Europe. Prime Minister Theresa May's profound miscalculation of the political climate prior to the snap General Election in June 2017 resulted in unprecedented power at Westminster for the DUP and party leader

Arlene Foster. As the Conservative minority government now suddenly depended on the 10 DUP MPs, it became truly impossible to integrate the wide range of stakeholders' priorities in Brexit negotiations. Leaving the Single Market and customs union while adhering to the Good Friday Agreement *and* keeping Northern Ireland wholeheartedly within the Union? Very tricky indeed!

The sudden centrality of the 'national issue' has never been visualised better than on @BorderIrish's Twitter account on 8 February 2018: "There's me at the Brexit negotiations," says the border – and we see a photo of a very real elephant in the room with the negotiators. The DUP would hear nothing of a Northern-Ireland-only 'backstop' – and who could really blame them, given their and their voters' stance on the constitutional issue? And we all know what happened to Theresa May's 'divorce deal' agreed in November 2018, which included a UK-wide backstop, possibly preventing the whole of the UK from ever leaving the customs union – an obvious no-go for Brexit hardliners. It took repeated objections in Parliament, several Brexit postponements, a new Prime Minister, even more objections in Parliament and finally a General Election to untie that knot – whether you like the result or not.

Oh yes, the General Election of 2019. In the light of Labour's crushing defeat and the Tory landslide elsewhere in the UK, the results in Northern Ireland seem all the more unusual: for the first time, nationalist parties won more seats than unionist ones. Although it still received the most votes, the DUP lost

Party	Seats	+/-	Share of Votes (%)	+/- (%) (vs. 2017)
DUP	8	-2	30.6	- 5.4
Sinn Féin	7	0	22.8	- 6.7
Alliance Party	1	+ 1	16.8	+ 8.8
SDLP	2	+ 2	14.9	+ 3.1
UUP	0	0	11.7	+ 1.4
Others	0	- 1	3.3	- 1.3

Table 1: Results of the General Election 2019 in Northern Ireland (based on UK Parliament 2020)

two seats in Westminster. Independent unionist MP Sylvia Hernon had retired, the SDLP won two seats and the Alliance Party one. What is more, the changes in vote share were much more drastic: both Sinn Féin and the DUP lost significant numbers (- 6.7% and - 5.4% respectively), while the Alliance Party gained + 8.8% (doubling their result from the previous elections), and the SDLP received 3.1% more than in 2017.

Explanations for these results range from “changed times and changing attitudes” and Alliance’s “clear Remain message” (McClements 2019) to a mere punishment of the DUP and Sinn Féin for their failure to restore the workings of the Northern Irish Assembly for almost three years. Indeed – as in most elections before – Northern Irish issues seem to have played a major role in voting decisions. Reason enough to have a look at what had been going on there beyond Brexit.

### ... and beyond.

When the DUP signed the Confidence and Supply Agreement with the Conservatives after the 2017 General Election, they thereby not only halted the changes to

the pensions envisaged in the Tory manifesto, which would have introduced UK-wide means-testing for receiving winter fuel allowance. The agreement also brought an extra £1 billion of funding to Northern Ireland. This money was indeed badly needed within the region. (Of course, such increased funding for health, infrastructure and education was also urgently required elsewhere in the UK, but, needless to say, budgets in Scotland or Wales were not augmented.) As one of the UK’s most disadvantaged regions, Northern Ireland had previously suffered even more under austerity measures than many other parts of the country (cf. BBC 2014). The largest share of the extra funding was to be invested in infrastructure, but money was also to go into the health and education systems, mostly to “address immediate pressures”, and these immediate pressures certainly abounded.

Regarding the health system, various actors have long warned that the Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland (HSC) service is on the brink of collapse (even in pre-Corona times). For instance, waiting times both for emergency care and for planned hospital services significantly exceed those in other





Unison campaign poster

parts of the UK (and I doubt those count as a satisfactory point of reference...). The HSC's underperformance has been attributed to a number of factors: not only lack of funding, but also the absence of a stable government or the extremely centralised structure of the HSC have been made responsible (see for instance Dayan/Heenan 2019). And indeed, the nurses' strike last winter certainly played a role in putting pressure on the two main parties to eventually re-establish the devolved government: it was the first time in British history that the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) voted to go on strike. Workers organised in the RCN and other health worker unions took industrial action in late 2019 and early 2020 to finally achieve a significant pay rise and better staffing in Northern Ireland.

Since 2014, Northern Irish health workers had been paid even less than their colleagues in other parts of the UK, due to the devolved government's spending decisions under austerity pressures (cf. BBC 2019). Although severe protests had driven Westminster to guarantee increased funding for Northern Irish health workers in 2017, this agreement had not been put into practice, due to the lack of a devolved executive. Now, strike days in December and early January (and possibly the results in the GE – see above) had put enough pressure on the main parties to get the power-sharing government restored on 11 January 2020, after almost three years. The new Health Secretary Robin Swann immediately took up talks with the unions, and in February, an agreement was finally reached – just in time before the Corona crisis, you might think. It is clear, however, that even the provisions now taken – pay parity and “safe staffing levels” – will not remedy all problems of the Northern Irish health system.

As for education in Northern Ireland, the picture is not much brighter. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) announced in 2019 that NI had experienced the highest cut in public spending on education within the UK: “Northern Ireland has seen an 11% cut in real-terms school spending per pupil since 2009“, compared to 8% in England, 6% in Wales 2% in Scotland (cf. Meredith 2019). The money secured in the Conservative-DUP agreement in 2017 could thus only ease some cuts, but did not lead to any substantial improvement. Again, the absence of an Assembly and Executive did not help. The issue was even deemed so urgent

by central government that the Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee conducted an enquiry themselves in 2018. The results included the unsurprising discovery that Northern Irish schools required more funding, not least since the rise in pupils, and especially the increasing number of SEND pupils, had not been met by a rise in school budgets. Also, as with health workers, teachers' wages had not kept up with those in other parts of the UK. Many schools are understaffed, class sizes are growing. Unsurprisingly, classroom assistants had been the first ones to be sacked (cf. House of Commons 2019).

The Committee's report also highlighted the "complicated structure of education" (ibid: 3) in Northern Ireland, that is, the many different types of schools that exist alongside each other. There are (mainly Protestant) Controlled schools, Catholic Maintained schools, a small number of Integrated schools, Irish medium schools, Grammar schools, Special Schools, and a small number of fee-paying independent schools. In many parts of the region, parallel structures exist. This concerns both selective and non-selective schools (grammar schools are much more common in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK), but also, or even principally, schools reflecting the continuing denominational segregation of Northern Irish society. Within this frame, Philipp Hammond's announcement of significant investment in shared and integrated education in Northern Ireland of November 2018 can (and must) surely be read as an attempt to save money once again. Nevertheless, the promotion of integrated

education indeed seems a reasonable decision for other reasons. The first integrated schools had been started by parents' initiatives in the 1980s in order to break community barriers, at first privately funded. Today, there are still only 60-70 integrated schools, now state-funded, most of them offering primary education. Only 7% of pupils attend such a school, but numbers are growing slowly. However, research has shown that "integrated education in Northern Ireland impacts positively on identity, outgroup attitudes, forgiveness and reconciliation" (McGlynn et al. 2004: 147). In 2019, the Integrated School movement even received a Nobel peace prize nomination (cf. Ward 2019). A systematic promotion of these educational institutions might indeed help to build the *Alternative Ulster* the Stiff Little Fingers called for way back in 1981 – but it seems a long way to go.

Nevertheless, some borders *are* being removed – if not necessarily by the Northern Irish themselves. Two of the by-products of direct rule were the legalisation of same-sex marriages and the decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland. This goes back to two amendments to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill put forward by two – praised and criticised – Labour MPs and passed by Westminster in July 2019. The Northern Ireland Assembly could have barred the regulations taking effect by passing different legislation in Belfast, but the attempt of unionist parties to call the Assembly back into session on 21 October 2019 was prevented by the other parties. Therefore,

the deadline passed, and the regulations came into effect on 13 January 2020.

### What next?

More than 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement, visible and invisible boundaries still permeate Northern Ireland. The electoral results (both in the EU referendum and in regional and general elections since then), the still mostly segregated education system, or the continuing existence of ‘peace walls’ (at least until 2023) do not suggest a cohesive society. The circumstances surrounding the tragic killing of journalist Lyra McKee in 2019 were a miserable reminder of this. The sociocultural segregation is criss-crossed with socioeconomic differences; especially many rural areas of Northern Ireland are extremely deprived. Many of these issues are of course specific to Northern Ireland, but the people’s options will depend to a large degree on decisions which will once again be taken elsewhere in the months to come. Will the invisible border become visible once again? What would happen if the North Channel became such a border (as could be the result of Johnson’s renegotiated agreement)? No bridge, tunnel, or – in Tom Peck’s (2020) words – “strawberry blancmange” between Scotland and Northern Ireland would fix it all. Most likely, it would not solve the problem, but just cost a huge amount of money – money which is badly needed elsewhere, in Northern Ireland and beyond. @BorderIrish’s twitter account may be out of use now. The various borders within and around Northern Ireland are not.

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# A Bitter Spring

Felicity Dowling

*Felicity Dowling, one of the principal speakers for Left Unity, delineates the impact of Covid-19 upon communities already suffering from the effects of years of austerity, and apprehends more hardship to follow a, possibly hard, Brexit.*

The weather has been beautiful in spring 2020 here in England. For those children with happy homes it has been a grand extended holiday from school. For those with gardens or access to beautiful outdoor spaces it has been a rare chance to enjoy the spring. Road traffic was low, few planes were flying, air quality improved, and the birds were singing loudly. Very many parents and children have enjoyed the lockdown time together, enjoyed the lack of rush and pressure. Other families have struggled for food, for access to the internet, for the money to pay the rent. School students have had time to follow their own interests in music, art, and keeping fit, in computer games or boxset series. Most people young and old have carefully observed the lockdown.

Little else has been good. Deaths from Coronavirus are dreadful. 43,726 people are dead (Worldometer 2020) and many more seriously ill. New cases are reported every day. Though the numbers have come down from the peak of the crisis, new infections have only very

recently dipped below the numbers at the onset of the lockdown.

The emotional weight of these deaths is too raw to process. It will weigh with us for a century.

Many who live alone and have been in lockdown have been intensely lonely, especially if they have not had access to the internet.

It has been the elders who have been hardest hit by this virus, with pensioners 34 times more likely to die of the illness. The virus is more dangerous to older people but the UK government failed to protect residents in Old People's Care Homes even allowing hospitals to discharge patients with the disease to Old People's Homes where there was no protective equipment, no effective isolation (Booth 2020).

Men have died far more than women. Those who have been working in occupations that directly deal with other people are far more

likely to die than those from professional classes:

*The major group with the highest rate of death involving COVID-19 was Elementary workers with 21.4 deaths per 100,000 males (225 deaths). The occupations in this group include those performing mostly routine tasks, such as construction workers and cleaners. The major group with the next highest rate was Caring, leisure and other service occupations (17.9 deaths per 100,000 males, or 72 deaths), which include occupations such as nursing assistants, care workers and ambulance drivers. (ONS 2020: 3)*

*Operation Cygnus in 2016 made plans for such a pandemic but these plans were not implemented. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was not available, and this lack of PPE has caused deaths amongst doctors and nurses. Nor were there enough ventilators. For each shortage, the Government made grand announcements, and gave huge contracts to private companies but failed grotesquely to deliver lifesaving equipment for many weeks. Still in May, there were problems with sufficient high-quality masks in hospitals.*

*Our NHS staff and staff in the care homes have worked magnificently and far too many have died and become ill. Many of those who have died are Black or Asian or ethnic minority (BAME). The Country came out each Thursday at 8pm to clap the NHS staff. The debt we owe our health and social care workers cannot be repaid. We must avoid a second surge if only to protect the health care workers. I could have written a whole article just on what the health workers did but somehow it is still too sensitive a subject. We honour them.*

*Coronavirus Testing in the UK is still not functioning well. Many care staff were not able to get tests and if they got them, the results took too long. “Test, Trace, Isolate, and Support”, the model used by the WHO and by other countries, is still not working. Contract after contract has been given in an uncoordinated fashion to companies to be involved in testing but it does not add up to an effective system. Far poorer countries have done much better in dealing with this virus.*

*Rather than learn from China’s experience of the virus, or learn from Spain or Italy, Johnson downplayed the virus, boasting of shaking hands with Coronavirus patients, and fatally delayed lockdown. Johnson himself became very ill from the virus, and his chief adviser Dominic Cummings claims to also have had it. His “experts” talked of developing herd immunity, letting the majority of the people get the virus. It is widely reported that Cummings (Boris Johnson’s Rasputin) said in March “...herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad.” It was only when modellers showed that half a million people would die that the government changed tactics. Then a senior scientist said, “at the end of the crisis we will have done well if 20,000 die”. The real death toll is twice that now or even three times that if the Financial Times statistics are proven correct.*

*China, the USA, Brazil, Spain and Italy also have had appalling deaths rates, and we mourn them too. Many of the UK deaths were avoidable, and deep anger burns from this.*

*Before the virus hit the UK was already in the midst of multiple crises. Poverty, and*

especially child poverty, misogyny, homelessness, poor housing, restricted rights at work, a new rigid school curriculum, high numbers of exclusions from school, “county lines” drug gangs and child sexual exploitation.

**T***he Coronavirus closed UK Schools to most pupils on 18<sup>th</sup> March.* Millions of parents are working from home; many more are still working out in the community – some doing essential work and some forced by their employers and by Government to work in non-essential industries, most notably in Construction.

**S**ince the outbreak, two children have died of the virus in the UK. This pattern of children resisting the virus is international, with children being remarkably resistant to the virus.

**C**hildren’s experience of this lockdown has depended on family circumstances. Some will have enjoyed it, some been bored. Children of key workers have still been able to go to school though school in the lockdown is not like normal school at all. Some teachers have sent online work for their pupils at home. However, if you do not have your own laptop and Wi-Fi connection, you cannot access the lessons sent by the teachers. If mother and three children are all trying to work online, the Wi-Fi often will not cope. Good schools sent home printed materials for those who cannot access the online work but returning printed materials risk passing on the virus. The government promised laptops for all who needed them but many of these laptops have not arrived (cf. Ferguson/Savage 2020). These laptops matter. Some children have been

back to school since Monday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, but most children will not return until September and then it might be part time schooling. School buildings are not easily redesigned for social distancing, nor for high standards of hygiene.

**B**ritain is a profoundly unequal society (Equality Trust 2019). There are many very rich people in the UK. In London, rich and poor live cheek by jowl, but lead very different lives. Poverty though is rife in the UK. Phillip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights reported:

***A**lthough the United Kingdom is the world’s fifth largest economy, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty, and 1.5 million of them experienced destitution in 2017. Policies of austerity introduced in 2010 continue largely unabated, despite the tragic social consequences. Close to 40 per cent of children are predicted to be living in poverty by 2021. Food banks have proliferated; homelessness and rough sleeping have increased greatly; tens of thousands of poor families must live in accommodation far from their schools, jobs and community networks; life expectancy is falling for certain groups; and the legal aid system has been decimated.*

**T***he social safety net has been badly damaged by drastic cuts to local authorities’ budgets, which have eliminated many social services, reduced policing services, closed libraries in record numbers, shrunk community and youth centres and sold off public spaces and buildings. The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with*

*a harsh and uncaring ethos. A booming economy, high employment and a budget surplus have not reversed austerity, a policy pursued more as an ideological than an economic agenda. (ctd. in Bristol Poverty Institute 2019)*

*Since the banking crisis of 2008 working people's wages have slumped, showing the worst loss amongst leading economies. Other factors have made the loss of income starker still. Welfare benefits such as unemployment pay have also been cut. Universal Credit, the system to support those who lose their jobs, who cannot work because of health reasons or whose wage is too low to exist, is fearfully hard to apply for and takes many weeks to arrive. Many people believe that Universal Credit is designed to frighten people into taking any job at any wage. UK employment statistics include people who have worked one hour per week as being employed rather than unemployed (cf. Edgington 2018).*

*Women have suffered most under austerity, bearing 86 percent of the cuts. (Stewart 2017) Mothers have suffered most amongst the women. It is appalling but parents cannot claim any benefits for a third child, unless the mother can prove she was raped (see DWP 2019). Benefits are poor enough anyhow.*

*Of 12 million children in the UK, 4.2 million live in poverty (CPAG 2020). 1.3 million children get one free meal a day at school. During lockdown, the parents of children who were entitled to free school meals were supposed to get a voucher for each child to make sure they got food. Even this has not worked properly. Some schools have been*

*making lunches and sending them out to the pupils' homes. Hunger is real in the UK. 1.5 million people have gone without food for a day. Many, many more are dependent on food banks to eat. Many of those using food banks are in work. The most generous contributors to food banks are people who have had to use them themselves. Liverpool FC fans organise "Fans supporting food banks" and football fans have made it a tradition to go to the match with food to give to the food bank. Other football clubs support the idea too using the hashtag #hungerdoesnotwearclubcolours. Their Facebook page [6] is worth a read.<sup>1</sup> Community groups have set up kitchens to cook food to send out into the community and in some areas, impromptu mutual aid organisations set up WhatsApp groups for each street so residents could support each other. Solidarity and mutual aid have helped millions through the lockdown.*

*Housing, too, is in crisis. Buying houses is often too expensive for many families and they live in rented accommodation where they have far fewer rights than in Germany. Before the virus large numbers of people slept on the streets, and as the Government is reducing the lockdown many will be sent back onto the streets.*

*The National Health Service in the UK is much prized. Year after year, it won awards as the most cost-effective healthcare system in the world. The NHS was a single national system, offering healthcare to all, free at the point of need and funded by the government. It was also an excellent research organisation. It is 70 years old and has a huge tranche of data that Big Pharma wants and which the people running health*

*insurance want. Sadly for more than a decade it has been starved of funds and used as point of profit for big business. Cuts in funding and shortage of staff caused huge problems. One little boy was treated in hospital on the floor (Stubley 2019). This picture reflected many other people's experience in Accident and Emergency departments but Boris Johnson hid in an industrial fridge rather than speak to the press about the state of the NHS (Stewart and Mohdin 2019). So, when the virus struck, the NHS was already in poor shape, although Johnson did promise more money for the NHS.*

**D**ifficult and immensely sad, though the situation is, for tens of thousands of families, the UK faces yet more problems with the Brexit deadlines approaching.

**I**deologically the current UK government is right-wing populist similar to Trump in the USA and Bolsonaro in Brazil, both of whom also have catastrophic and avoidable death rates from the virus. It is my opinion that Johnson, Bolsonaro, Trump, and Orbán make up a group of reactionary and dangerous politicians. They represent the capitalism of hedge funds and speculation rather than investment. Austerity created poverty, stripped out public investment and infrastructure, like transport, health, social care and education. The governments of Teresa May and David Cameron represented different sections of capitalism. Johnson got rid of many experienced politicians, so his government is inexperienced, inept and malicious. Back in December, Johnson won the election on the slogan "Get Brexit Done". Johnson did not win a majority in the popular vote. He won 47.2 %, which is a high vote, but please do not think everyone in the

UK supports him, far from it. Amongst young people, he is not popular and was not popular in the election (Curtis 2019). Most young people opposed Brexit, want to keep the right to travel and live in Europe, and are happy to have EU citizens living and working here. They are rightly critical of many of the policies and structures of the European Union but they are not reactionary nationalists.

**M**igrants play a hugely important role in the UK economy working at every level of employment. Britain's link with its former colonies has been used over many decades to recruit workers to come from Africa, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the West Indies to work in the UK. These people are referred to as migrants. Then we have refugees and asylum seekers. Seventy million people across the globe have been forcibly displaced, so naturally some end up in the UK (which used to have a civilised approach to such matters). Since 2010, and with increasing venom, Conservative Governments have used anti-migrant rhetoric. The government were deliberately hostile to migrants and introduced a policy called a 'hostile environment'. Many West Indian people came to work in the UK. They are known as the Windrush generation, called after the ship that brought one of the earliest groups of workers. When they first came, the West Indies were still part of the British Empire so people came with British passports. These were not rich people and often did not apply for new passports. Suddenly, in the hostile environment, they were expected to prove their citizenship and were denied health care and the right to rent homes. Albert Thompson was just one man affected by the Windrush Scandal.<sup>2</sup> The 'hostile environment' was

*extended to many other groups of migrants and this has resulted in a brutal detention system for those applying to live in the UK. Brexit supporters want the hostile environment applied to applied to EU citizens too.*

Cummings of course was the architect and chief strategist of the Brexit project. Cummings advertised for “weirdos and misfits” to join his team in supporting Johnson. This is the team negotiating Brexit.

However, the election was clear. Many people bitterly resent the way the press relentlessly attacked Jeremy Corbyn, but he was defeated. “Get Brexit Done” was the slogan that got Johnson into power. So, we can hope these politicians will do better with trade talks than in the Virus crisis but I fear for the worst.

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## Endnotes

- 1 See [www.facebook.com/FansSupportingFoodbanks/](https://www.facebook.com/FansSupportingFoodbanks/).
- 2 See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoDcRCd9gd0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoDcRCd9gd0) and [www.jcwi.org.uk/windrush-scandal-explained](https://www.jcwi.org.uk/windrush-scandal-explained) for more on this.



# Still GETting Across Borders?

## Austerity, Brexit and Scottish Schools

Annegret Landgraf and Jennifer Riedel

*Each year, German students from three universities get the opportunity to spend a school year as teacher assistants at Scottish schools via the GET Across Borders programme. Two of last year's participants from Leipzig share their observations and thoughts on how austerity and/or Brexit have affected and still will affect both Scottish schools and the programme itself.*

### **Striking the Heart of the Educational System: How Austerity Measures Influence Scottish Schools**

**Annegret Landgraf (North Lanarkshire)**

The consequences of the Banking Collapse of 2008 have been covered in all kinds of media. Rising taxes and prices as well as falling incomes have met severe austerity measures in the United Kingdom. National spending was cut down to prevent further debts. This national government policy has of course also affected public spending on devolved matters in all parts

of the UK, among them education in Scotland. In this article, I will present some personal observations and considerations on the impact of austerity measures on Scottish schools.

#### **Poor schools...**

The radical cut-down of the schools' budgets have led to a drastic reduction of teachers as well as learning support staff and social workers, who are actually desperately needed within Scotland's Primary and High Schools. Class sizes are getting larger, which makes teaching as a job ever more demanding. Even at primary schools, teachers have to deal with class sizes up to 25 to 28 pupils. When you consider that these children start at an age of four to five, it becomes patently obvious that they require a lot of care and support, which in this case definitely cannot be guaranteed. When it comes to secondary schools, class sizes are likely to get even bigger. The classrooms are usually equipped with desks and chairs for 30 pupils. However, I have experienced classes with

more than 30 learners, and consequently, some pupils had to share their desks. Anyway, the rooms are quite small and, so to speak, filled to overflowing, so there can be no talk of a good learning environment any more. A lot of time is spent settling down all the pupils properly before the actual lesson can begin. Teachers are really pleased if they can use half of the period for proper teaching because even after all pupils are finally settled down, disturbances and interruptions of the lesson are common, since the children are simply sitting too close to each other.

After gaining an insight into several Primary and Secondary Schools in different towns, it became clear that teachers have to deal with various, widely different types of children. Fortunately, at Scotland's schools inclusion is nothing that needs to be questioned any more. All pupils learn together, regardless of what special educational needs they have. School uniforms create a visual equality and largely conceal the socio-economic background of every pupil. However, these differences still exist and need to be considered by teachers.

Due to austerity measures, the small number of learning and pupils' support staff as well as social workers cannot satisfy all the children with special educational needs properly. Speaking about a school with over 1,200 pupils, it becomes abundantly clear that three learning support teachers and six pupils support teachers are definitely not enough. In consequence, teachers have to embody a lot more roles than working as a lecturer and educator because they need to undertake some duties of

the supporting staff as well. Hence, most classes are divided into different learning levels, which means that teachers almost never work together with the pupils as a whole class. In addition to that, teachers need to prepare various kinds of learning material to respond to the needs of every single child properly. Considering that even at Secondary School some pupils are not able to read and write properly, it becomes really challenging for one teacher to support these children according to their different levels and to prepare the rest of the class for the upcoming national examinations at the same time.

In practice, plenty of paper and photocopies would be required to provide pupils with an adequate learning environment. At this point, teachers experience the influence of the austerity measures again, since they are compelled by the schools to make fewer photocopies to save money. As a consequence, teachers are caught on the horns of a dilemma between assisting pupils as much as they can to become the very best versions of themselves and saving money to go easy on the schools' budget.

On top of this, not only the different learning levels and austerity measures but also the difficult behaviour of pupils in class present a challenge for the teachers. Several pupils with very bad concentration problems would actually need a supportive person next to them, helping them to follow the lesson and preventing disruptive actions. But in reality, shouting at teachers as well as throwing and destroying of school material and furniture are daily occurrences in some classes and require a lot of patience and emotional strength of the

teachers. Of course, such behaviour could be caused by various factors, including domestic problems, but it can also indicate that one basic need is not satisfied, namely, hunger.

### **... and poor families**

Unfathomably, poverty within the United Kingdom, one of the 30 richest countries in the world, is growing. The gap between rich and poor is widening and the poorest have been hit hardest by austerity. Due to growing unemployment, an increasing number of families living on the breadline cannot afford enough food for their children. To reduce the number of children that go to school without any breakfast or packed lunch, several schools have established breakfast clubs and offer breakfast for free.

In theory, it sounds like a great way to solve the problem, especially since the breakfast offers are versatile. Children can choose from a variety of cereals, bread, fruits and even some packed snacks like chocolate and energy bars to get through the upcoming school day. Unfortunately, it has turned out to be rather a nice opportunity for a little talk with friends before school than an opportunity to take a free meal, because most of the pupils do not eat anything. Furthermore, children coming from a poor social economic background are often missing out on the offer. At a school with 1,200 pupils only ten to fifteen of them show up for Breakfast Club, although far more children would need to take up this offer of help. Additionally, the children taking part in the club are usually satisfied with a drink rather



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than taking something to eat. It might be that some of them feel ashamed to reveal that they actually need something to eat, but it could also have other uncharted reasons. For instance, some of them might have to take care of younger children before school or have to help in the household. Nevertheless one cannot rule out the possibility that some of the pupils just want to sleep in.

Part from this, parents who are unemployed or earn only a very low income are given the opportunity to apply for free school lunches for their children. Colourful posters in the school hallways promote this offer, but unfortunately, they often escape the pupils' notice. Hence, schools should work more closely with families living on the breadline in particular, to promote the different offers of assistance much more. However, due to austerity measures, the number of social workers who usually get in contact with poor families and try to improve their living and learning conditions is decreasing, although they would be desperately needed. As a consequence, parents are often unaware of those offers and miss the opportunities of them.

As a consequence of growing poverty only a few pupils are in possession of their own folders, paper, or pencil cases. The majority of children at school do not have more than one pencil or even ask the teacher to borrow a pencil to be able to follow the lesson. One can imagine that these pupils' notes are not really clear, as they are missing the opportunity to highlight important information with different colours or even to underline something. However, especially young pupils desperately need clear

## Fancy a free scan?

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on any of the following:



- Income Support
- Jobseekers Allowance
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- Universal Credit
- Child Tax Credit
- Support Under part V1 of the Immigration and  
Asylum Act



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notes and folders to organize their learning material.

Almost all teachers buy pencils at their own expense to guarantee that all pupils are at least given the opportunity to write and, therefore, to learn. It seems to be only a small amount of money that is needed to buy a bunch of pencils, but if you consider that at the beginning of every period ten out of thirty pupils ask for a pencil and some of them will definitely accidentally forget to bring them back, it becomes obvious that over the course of the school year, teachers spend a lot of money on this. This shows how much empathy, helpfulness and care most teachers extend in the pursuit of their job. Nevertheless, it should not be the teacher's task to buy school material, but

the duty of the government to provide schools with a sufficient budget that enables them to buy necessary material and also to support poor families.

### **Setting priorities**

Over the last couple of years, the budgets for the different departments within schools have been cut down drastically. For example, a modern languages department of a secondary school is equipped with a budget of around 500 pounds per year for all the language-learning pupils. Such a secondary school includes the classes S1 to S6; this means the department should be equipped with books, dictionaries and other learning material for 30 pupils per level at six different levels. Unfortunately, especially when it comes to the examination period, it becomes obvious that there are, for example, not enough dictionaries for everybody. Some pupils have to be content with old ones, other pupils with shortened versions of the standard dictionaries. Hence, there can be no talk of equal conditions for everybody. Because of that, money is needed to buy dictionaries for all pupils to guarantee that the examination conditions at school conform to the rules made by the government.

Paradoxically, almost each school department is equipped with 30 iPads that can be used in class. On the one hand, it should be highly appreciated that schools work with media that are state-of-the-art and teach the pupils how to use them for professional matters. But on the other hand, it is then hard to believe that there is such a lack of basic resources that are of more

fundamental importance.

One possibility to save money and, in addition to that, also save our environment would be to remove disposable cutlery and plates from schools. All of the visited Primary and High Schools make use of disposables that lead to an enormous amount of waste and with that also a huge waste of money every day. Even small changes can make a difference and make the pupils aware of the fact that our resources are limited and everybody needs to take care of our environment.

In my view, the austerity measures strike at the heart of the educational system in Scotland and the whole United Kingdom. Today's children are the ones that will shape the future of the country – they will bear the consequences of the austerity policy longest. Due to that, it is unacceptable to save money at the cost of national education. Already today, the educational standards and the well-being of pupils are endangered, and the situation is likely to get significantly worse over the next years if nothing changes.

### **GETs in Scotland**

**Jennifer Riedel (Aberdeen)**

Working as a German Educational Trainee (GET) gives students from Germany (Mainz, Koblenz and Leipzig) the opportunity to gain practical experience at schools in Scotland. The program "GET across borders" was established at the University of

Mainz. Students do not only gain an insight into teaching and into a new school system, but they also help promoting and maintaining the German language at Scottish schools.

I came to Scotland in September 2019 and started working at a secondary school. The school focuses very much on languages. It is not only interesting to see the different teaching styles but also the differences between Scotland and Germany. Pupils attend primary school from year 1 up to year 7. Having completed primary education, everybody moves on to secondary school. Compared to Germany, Scotland's school system does not differentiate between the students' ability and therefore, all levels are taught at one school.

Because of the fact that I am studying primary education, I was looking for a primary school here. I eventually found one. However, this school never offered German classes, only French. Now it is on me to arouse the students' interest in learning a new foreign language. It is absolutely great to share the German language and cultural values with them. The Scottish Government aims to ensure that by 2021 all students at primary schools will have learnt two additional languages before moving on to their next school. This so-called 1+2 approach is a great opportunity to start language acquisition already in early childhood.

However, as the primary school I am currently working at shows, not all primary schools are working on this approach yet or might not have the means to realize this approach at all. This is one of the reasons why it

is important to send language assistants abroad, but how will "GET across borders" change with Brexit? The program is mainly financed by ERASMUS. GETs do get a certain amount of money from the Council, but the biggest share of the funding comes from ERASMUS. With the UK not being part of the EU anymore, the financial situation is difficult. As a result, if students cannot be financially supported, they might not be able to pass on the German language and cultural values to pupils at Scottish schools in the future.

#### **Author's Note:**

For more information on the GET programme see:

<https://www.get-across-borders.uni-mainz.de/get-across-borders-2/>

# Dispatches from Brexit-land

M.G. Sanchez

*What's it like to live in a Brexit-voting stronghold when you are not 'local'? Gibraltar author M. G. Sanchez – who moved to the UK shortly after the Brexit referendum – explores the question in this autobiographical piece written in early 2017.*

A woman in a Fiat asked me for directions this morning. She was about sixty years old, frumpy, fleece-jacketed, tangles of yellowy-grey hair falling in untidy clumps on her shoulders. Switching on her hazard lights, she pulled up by the side of the road and asked me if I knew where Barry Street was. 'I'm afraid I don't know,' I replied, holding on to my dog's leash. 'I've only just moved into the area.'

I've had plenty of negative reactions to my Gibraltarian accent over the years, but this woman was in a league of her own. The initial glimmer of uncertainty, the rapidly hardening sense of suspicion, the subsequent look of visceral contempt – it all played on her face like a series of gradually darkening shadows, changing

the contour of her features, leaving me in no doubt as to what she thought of me.

'I can google Barry Street on my phone for you if you want,' I added seconds later, trying to shame her with my solicitousness.

'No, no, yer awright,' the middle-aged Yorkshirewoman snarled back, already reaching for her gear stick. 'I won't keep you any longer, luv.'

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The last time I lived in this town was back in the winter of 2003. I had been finishing a PhD in English Literature at the University of Leeds and my finances were a bit stretched. My Yorkshire-born girlfriend took pity on my plight and invited me to move into a property she was renting a stone's throw away from the M62. It was a red-brick terrace house set two doors from a working man's club. Single-glazed windowpanes. Nettle-ridden back garden. Mould rupturing through layers of

peeling mauve wallpaper. In the cellar there was a mildewed stone table which my partner believed to be some kind of butcher's chopping table, but which in actual fact, thinking about it now, must have been one of those 'cold tables' which the Victorians used for storing milk, butter and other perishables. On Saturday and Sunday mornings we'd walk out into the front garden and find beer bottles and half-eaten kebabs strewn across the grass. Once – I can still picture the scene vividly in my mind – I opened the front door and discovered the garden gate hanging abjectly from one hinge, victim of some late-night drunken attack. It was a pretty depressing situation all round, but because I was focused on my postgraduate research I rarely engaged with my surroundings. Only one thing bothered me – and that was having to go to the local post office with the items I used to sell on eBay to supplement my scholarship monies. A thin, brown-haired, bony-faced woman worked in this tiny post office, and every time I'd appear before her with my carefully wrapped parcels, she would glare at me like I was the devil incarnate, no doubt having reconstructed me within her racist brain as some kind of lazy, benefit-scrouring foreigner. I will never forget the way that post office worker used to look at me – so full of animosity, *con cara de asco*. If that woman had still been around when the referendum results were announced in June 2016, she must have half-fainted with rabid delight.

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Our semi-detached house is in a small private estate surrounded by a cordon of council estates. Until a few days ago I used

to walk the dog along the road running past the top end of the estate. I didn't particularly mind doing this – like all busy roads, it has the benefit of attracting few pedestrians – but the amount of rubbish and broken glass on the ground was a bit off-putting. Now, though, I've discovered a large field around the corner from the house. Bordered on one side by a council estate and an unused rugby pitch on the other, it is fairly secluded and a good place to let the dog off the lead. Motorway traffic can be heard in the distance. Pylon lines stretch endlessly into the horizon, brutally suturing the grey sky. Today, for the very first time, a fellow dog owner stopped to chat with me. Young guy in his mid-twenties. Striped Adidas tracksuit bottoms. A dishevelled, hippyish air about him. I think he was surprised that I wasn't local, but he quickly relaxed and loosened up, happy to carry on conversing. He told me that his lurcher was called Molly and that she was eleven months old. He also said that she had been attacked last week by an out-of-control Shar Pei. I continued chatting with him for a couple of minutes, then I said goodbye and started walking across the adjacent rugby field towards the main road.

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In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell speaks about 'a cult of Northernness' and holds up Northerners as real-life embodiments of 'pluck', 'grit', 'stubbornness' and 'warm-heartedness.' This is the way that the North has been imagined by writers for decades – as an anomalous zone, both attached to its surroundings and yet peculiarly set apart, a place where people act and think differently.



But are Northerners that dissimilar from their southern compatriots? Is there really such a pronounced North-South personality divide? Part of me wants to believe that Orwell was wrong and that people are the same all over the UK – but I would be lying if I said that I hadn't detected certain differences between living here and living 'down South'. Primarily, these revolve around interpersonal relationships and the way folk hold themselves before strangers. There seems to be more solidarity between individuals here, a greater supply of empathy. It might take the form of a nurse postponing her lunch break to spend some additional time with a frightened patient. A taxi-driver carrying an old woman's shopping bags all the way up the steeply inclined steps of her Victorian mid-terrace. The flat-capped pensioner who will put down his bag of groceries and, panting asthmatically, without thinking about his own safety, position himself between a teenager who is being bullied and those bullying him. The best explanation for this type of behaviour is that provided by the York-born novelist Andrew Martin, who sees this spirit of confraternity as a direct legacy of the region's industrial past, when there was a strong sense among the overworked and the underpaid classes that they were 'all in it together.' And yet, hand in hand with all this affinity, there is also a deep-rooted streak of bigotry and intolerance, an almost pathological fear of 'difference.' I think this is the other main inheritance that has survived from Yorkshire's proletarian past: a tendency to close ranks against outsiders, to bristle at the merest suggestion of foreignness...

\*\*

Another dog walker approached me today. Elderly guy. Old-fashioned wire-framed spectacles. Greying hair swept back along the sides, but combed on top into a billowing 'Elvis Presley' quiff. Coughing apologetically, looking rather pained, he told me that he'd left his poo bags in his other jacket, after which he asked me whether I could lend him a couple of my own. 'Sure,' I replied, pulling out a handful of bags. 'Here, help yourself.'

'So where's you from, then?' he asked, noticing my accent.

'I'm from Gibraltar.'

'Ah, Gibraltar,' he said, stuffing the bags into the pockets of his padded jacket. 'Been plenty of times to Gibraltar in me time with t'Royal Navy, me. Love it there. Monkey and t'dockyard and tha' pub near t'Governor's place – what's it called again?'

'You mean The Angry Friar?'

He nodded and without further ado began telling me about his Royal Navy days. It was a tale that must have been sprung on many an unsuspecting listener – judging from how adroitly he switched from one exotic location to the other. I listened to him with a polite smile on my face, conscious that I needed to be at the station in less than half an hour to pick up my partner. Finally – realising that I was in serious danger of having my neck wrung if I didn't get to my destination in time – I beat a hasty retreat with the pensioner's phlegmy, saliva-drenched

voice trailing genially behind me:

‘Ta-ra, then, matey. It were really nice talking to you. Makes a change from t’usual conversations what one usually has in this type o’ place.’

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My partner says that I have two accents when I speak in English. The first is what she calls my ‘place of comfort’ accent, which is the way I talk at home or when I am with friends. This accent is so unremarkable and English-sounding, she claims, that it is easy to forget that I haven’t been born in the UK. The second accent is the accent that I put on when I interact with strangers – my so-called ‘place of discomfort accent.’ When I speak in this manner, the opposite happens: my accent thickens and it becomes evident that I’m not originally from the UK. ‘It is like you are trying *too hard* to sound English,’ she says, her own voice imbued with only the subtlest hint of a Yorkshire accent. ‘I don’t know how to explain it. It just sounds stilted and forced.’ Lately, I have noticed another embarrassing development when talking to strangers – I am now slipping into spoonerisms and metathetic substitutions. ‘Do you sell any Lockett’s loney and lemon lozenges?’ I might say to a shop attendant. ‘Or yes, please,’ I will reply to a poker-faced post office counter clerk. ‘I’d like to send it first-flass recorded, please.’ I have tried to analyse why this is happening and I can only conclude that I must be wary of how people will react to my Gibraltar accent. In general, too, you could say there are three types of reaction up here to a foreign accent. There are those, first of all, who don’t give a damn.

Those who initially look at you with suspicion, but rapidly relax once they realise that you are fluent in English. And, finally, those who will keep looking at you suspiciously no matter what comes out of your mouth. Prognosticating when and where you will encounter these three different responses is no easy task, but observation and day-to-day experience always give you a decent idea. Drive into a roadside car wash manned by Eastern Europeans, for instance, and the likelihood is that there won’t be much of a reaction. Stumble into a regulars’ pub in one of the rougher suburbs, by contrast, and you’ll stand a good chance of getting heckled on account of your ‘foreignness.’ These ‘statistical probabilities’ condition your behaviour, shape the way you interact with your environs. You will soon learn to divide your surroundings into ‘safe zones’ and ‘no-go zones’, to stop yourself from entering certain pubs and shops, to keep quiet at bus stops and at late-night taxi ranks, to whisper into your phone if someone calls you while you are on a packed bus or train, to swiftly press the cancel button if you’re shopping in Poundland and your Gibraltar mother’s number flashes up on your mobile phone. Individually, these little acts may not add up to much, but cumulatively they can be very disempowering. Without realising it, you are practising a form of daily self-censorship, placing limits on your own volition, continually being forced to adapt and modify your behaviour. You are, some might say, trying to camouflage who you really are.

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Every morning on my way to drop off my partner at the train station, I see groups of

schoolkids trudging up the hill towards the local academy. A large percentage of them are sipping Monster, Relentless, Rockstar and other energy drinks. Many are also wearing hoodies. It's a little disconcerting, actually, the number of people who wear hoods in this town. Kids making their way to school, construction workers on a fag-break, homeless people selling the *Big Issue*, middle-aged men walking their dogs, students travelling in buses. Only last week when I was at the dentist there was a guy sitting beside me in the waiting room with his hood on. He must have been thirty or thirty-five, a brawny, freckly, ginger-haired knucklehead who sat there staring dumbly at his mud-caked boots, seemingly unaware of how uncomfortable he was making everyone else feel. Why are hoods so popular in this part of the country, I wonder? Is it because of fashion reasons? Because they've replaced the baseball cap as the ultimate symbol of urban hardness? Because they open up miniature 'no-go' zones around their wearer? Actually, that could be it, couldn't it? The moment you slip up your hood you are in effect turning inwards, isolating yourself from your surroundings, voluntarily renouncing everything around you. I am reminded of those Japanese who wear disposable face masks not because of hygiene reasons, but simply because they don't want anybody coming near them and bothering them. In the language of semiotics, both hood and mask serve as non-verbal pointers helping to demarcate proxemic space, silently but effectively transmitting the message 'fuck off and stay away.'

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I am in bed with the flu. I have caught it off my partner, who appears to have caught it off her mother, who caught it from her other daughter, who in turn must have caught it off somebody else. Never ceases to amaze me how a single strain of the influenza virus can zigzag its way like this across a city, dexterously hurdling over barriers of class and culture, infecting people regardless of race, nationality or creed...

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It is 17 January 2017. On the front cover of today's *Daily Mail* there is a cartoon of a 'Thatcheresque' Theresa May, tweed-suited and handbag in hand, standing on the white cliffs of Dover while trampling on an EU flag. The accompanying text focuses on the speech which May delivered yesterday, in which she made clear that Britain would be pulling out from the EU on all fronts, while still expecting to preserve strong trading rights with the Union. Translated into layman's terms, this means that May wants to retain all the positive elements associated with EU membership while ditching what she sees as all the negatives (freedom of movement, adherence to the European Convention on Human Rights, having to pay regular membership dues). I'm not sure what your average *Mail* reader thinks about all this, but it seems to me highly unlikely that the EU will agree to a deal which, in the words of Guy Verhofstadt, Chair of the EU's Brexit Steering Group, will ensure that it 'is better to be outside the single market than be a member of the European Union.' My worry is that when the rebuff comes (for it is bound to come *sooner or later*) the right-wing press will deviously

repackage it as an out-and-out attack on British interests, furiously harping on about European treachery and the duplicity of foreigners. In turn, this will create a xenophobic mindset among some sectors of the population, who will conveniently forget that it was they themselves who originally repudiated the EU. Hate crime levels will once again rise. Right-wing politicians will trumpet out increasingly radical proposals. And through it all the pusillanimous Tory administration will watch limply from the sidelines, too scared to intervene in case they are perceived to be soft on migrants and foreigners....

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**I**t is half past three and my partner still hasn't returned from walking the dog. The first lights are switching on in the street, casting jittery reflections on car windscreens and rain puddles. Police sirens can be heard somewhere in the distance. I am pacing up and down the corridor in my dressing gown, glancing repeatedly in the direction of the window, pausing every few seconds to check my mobile phone. Then, lo and behold, the door swings open and there she is stamping her boots on the thickly bristled doormat.

'I was trying to call you,' I say, putting my phone back into my dressing gown pocket. 'I was worried that something had happened to you.'

'I must have had my phone on silent,' she replies, taking off her wellies and placing them on the boot tray. 'I'm half-frozen. Why don't you go and make us a cup of tea?'

'You're not annoyed with me because I'm still too unwell to walk the dog, are you?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then why do you look so angry?'

'Do I? Must be because of that silly old berk on the rugby pitch.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I was walking through the rugby field when I bumped into this old man walking a fat staffy. Real friendly bloke. The sort that will stay there gabbing forever if you give them half a chance. Anyway, there we are, me and this old guy, talking about dogs and how cold it is and other silly stuff like that, when we reach the part of the field near the main road – you know where I mean, don't you, that part where there's plastic bags and beer cans and broken bottles and all other kinds of rubbish. "Shame about that," I say to the man entirely innocently. "It never used to be like that," he says, a strange look suddenly coming into his eye. "What do you mean?" I ask. "Well, it's them Poles, in't it, luv?" he says, nodding as he speaks, as if he were agreeing with himself. "They are t'ones who are always coming here at night and dumping all this rubbish." "Have you actually seen any Polish people do this?" I ask, drawing back. "Not I meself, luv, but I know plenty of people what have. It's common knowledge round here, in't it, luv?"

**I** look at my partner and then at the mud-spattered mutt standing by her side. 'This guy you're talking about – did he by any chance

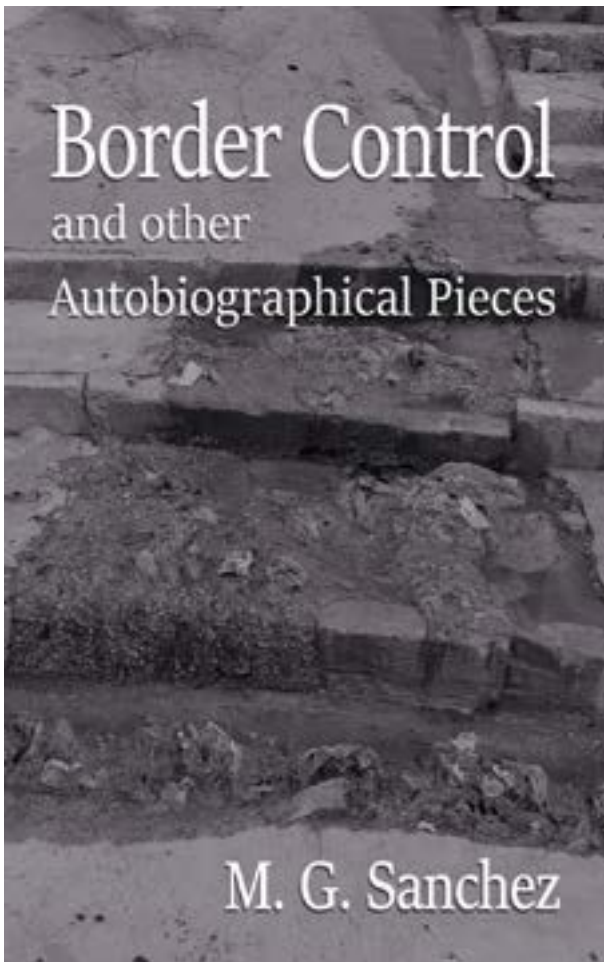
have his hair combed tightly backwards and with a bouffant at the front, sort of Elvis Presley style?’

‘Yes, that’s him – how on earth did you know?’

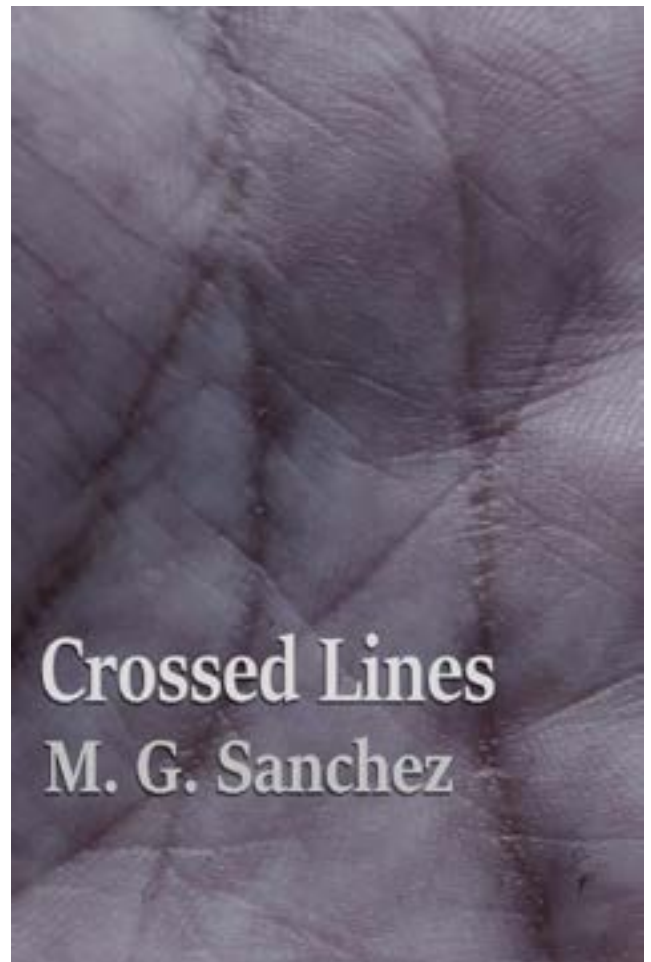
‘You know what us dodgy foreigners are like,’ I say, tapping the side of my nose. ‘Nothing escapes our attention. Anyway, sit yourself down and I’ll bring you your tea in a sec. I’ve already got the cups and saucers ready.’

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M. G. Sanchez has written various novels and books of short stories on Gibraltarian themes. More information about his writing can be found at <https://www.mgsanchez.net> and also at <https://www.facebook.com/mgsanchezwriter/>.



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# A European in Wales, in Times of Brexit

Elena Schmitz

*Originally from Osnabrueck, Germany, Elena Schmitz (Cardiff) is currently Head of Programmes at Literature Wales, the national company for literature development in Wales. In her very personal contribution (written in February 2020), she describes responses to Brexit and other challenges by the Welsh Government and by artists living in Wales and reflects on her own identity in uncertain times.*

‘And now we’d like you to give us the European perspective’ – I remember this moment very distinctly. It was in 2001 and I was a visiting exchange student from Germany at Bangor University, North Wales, on a six-month Erasmus-funded place to study abroad. I looked around the room and wasn’t sure who the question was directed at. As far as I could tell, we were all Europeans in the room. It took a repeat of the question before it dawned on me that I was meant to answer, the only evidently non-British person in the room. I was ‘the European’. It is a small example of the UK’s troubled relationship with Europe and uncertainty of its place within

it. The EU referendum in 2016 did not come from nowhere and was maybe inevitable after decades of right-wing Tories stoking anti-European sentiments, further funnelled by increasingly harsh austerity measures. However, the extent to which these anti-European feelings and outright xenophobia have been unleashed and are now publicly and proudly displayed are hard to understand and accept.

I now live in Cardiff. Europe’s so-called youngest capital with around 350,000 inhabitants, it has only been a city since 1905 and became the capital of Wales in 1955. Wales or *Cymru* in Welsh, its native tongue. This small, beautiful, ancient, geographically varied, linguistically diverse, and culturally rich nation on the western edge of the island of Great Britain. Finally conquered and colonised by the English in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century (with many much earlier attempts), it has been struggling with its relationship to its all-powerful Eastern neighbour ever since.



© Schmitz

Nothing is straightforward here.

Wales forms part of the United Kingdom but is the only nation not reflected in the UK's national flag. Is it a country, nation, region, home nation, principality? Choose the wrong term, and your political allegiance – or ignorance – is laid bare. Devolution ensured the creation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, to which 60 *Assembly Members* (AM) or – since May 2020 – *Members of the Senedd* (MS) are directly elected. Responsibilities fully devolved to Wales include education, health and culture, for instance. The *Senedd*, or the Welsh Parliament and the seat of Welsh Government, stands proud in Cardiff Bay. Welsh and English are both official languages (the Welsh Language Act (1993) and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure (2011) enshrine this in law) and the

country has a dual education system (English and Welsh medium schools), with demand for Welsh medium education rising.

I have now called Wales my home since 2004, long before the 2008 financial crash, and before anyone would have considered the 2020 reality of Brexit a remote possibility. I have worked in the arts sector in Wales ever since and have experienced how things have changed since I first arrived. After more than a decade of UK Tory Government imposed austerity, public funding for the arts has seen reduction upon reduction, which would have been unthinkable in 2004. Local authorities, for instance, responsible for anything from schools, public toilets, care for the elderly, libraries and leisure centres, have in large parts of the country cut their arts budgets altogether, while dozens of



libraries have closed (see Ballinger 2017).

When I arrived, I came as part of my degree in *British Studies* at Humboldt Universität in Berlin and undertook a 4-month work placement with the Arts Council of Wales. I was a German European, on a fleeting visit. I have now called Wales my home for 16 years and have lived in Cardiff longer than in any other city. But I am not so sure anymore how best to describe myself or how other people might describe me. European, German, Welsh, British or a citizen of nowhere? Brexit has certainly had an impact on us migrant workers, even before it has really happened. Established concepts of identity, previously taken for granted, have shifted and despite us all having more in common than divides us, it has polarized attitudes and perceptions. I feel less British now than ever before, although I became

naturalised as a (dual) British citizen in 2017, in direct response to Brexit. I am more aware of my ‘otherness’ and will never quite be able to trust this country in the same way as I did before the 2016 referendum.

Brexit is all-encompassing and all around us. And yet, explicit cultural, artistic or literary works directly dealing with this theme are still relatively uncommon or less visible. Possibly because the shock of the referendum result and subsequent departure from the EU still sits deep. There is denial, grief, sadness and disbelief on the one hand, celebration and euphoria on the other, but also a shared uncertainty and worry about what Brexit will actually mean in practical terms.

A lot of artists focus on dealing with the general paranoia and this state of



Flags outside Senedd after Brexit - no EU Flag. © Schmitz



uncertainty in their works and this is also a looming theme in cultural and intellectual debates everywhere. The increasingly divisive discourse has also brought to the fore real xenophobic attitudes, as well as a rise in hate crime (see Quinn 2019), including incidents of racist attitudes to the use of languages other than English (see also Weaver 2020). In Wales, where Welsh is frequently spoken (predominantly in some parts of the country), this is felt very acutely by some communities, but also highlights the lack of knowledge and understanding between the UK's own home nations and its diverse inhabitants.

And yet, Brexit has also triggered an outpouring of support and solidarity with Europe, Europeans and the values associated with a post-WW2 united and peaceful existence. *Wales in Europe* have tirelessly campaigned for keeping Wales in the EU, while the Leader of Cardiff Council, Huw Thomas, has publicly declared that “Cardiff will always be a welcoming home to the tens of thousands of EU citizens who live here, and no one can take away from us the fact that we are European” (@huwthomas\_Wales). Since Brexit day on 31 January 2020, the Welsh Government have also announced that they will support EU citizens with their settled status applications and will cover the costs for these. Their advice website declares: “EU citizens – we want you to stay” (Welsh Government). The *Yes Cymru* movement towards an independent Wales has also seen a surge in support, with the stated “belie[f] in an inclusive citizenship, which embraces and celebrates the fact that everyone who chooses

to make Wales their home – regardless of their background – are full citizens of the new Wales” (Yes Cymru).

There is a lot of soul-searching happening, where views conflict and opinions clash. Who represents the UK, who speaks for Wales? What does it mean to speak and use Welsh, English, Arabic, Polish, German, Mandarin or Urdu in contemporary Wales? Who decides what is and isn't representative? And why does language, nationality and identity matter so much? And why should it matter? I feel that these questions have become more urgent, more loaded and politically charged than ever before. I have reflected a lot on Stefan Zweig's writings about nationalism, identity and 'the intellectual unity of Europe' recently, when the world seems to be moving again in the opposite direction.

One of the most direct Brexit-related art works I have seen last year is an exhibition called 'Go Home Polish', shown by Ffotogallery as part of the city-wide Diffusion Festival in Cardiff.<sup>1</sup> It featured works by Polish photographer and artist Michal Iwanowski and chronicles his walk, on foot, from his home in Cardiff to his native Poland, after having seen the words 'Go Home Polish' graffitied onto a wall near his home in his adopted city. A deeply moving, thought-provoking and poignant piece of work, very much of these times.

Despite this unease and sense of uncertainty, there are examples of hope, forward-thinking policy making and initiatives of solidarity to highlight. Wales has many areas of excellence to offer, celebrate and shout about.

These are areas where Wales can perhaps offer unique learning points and inspiration to others.

**B**ilingualism and specifically Wales' above-mentioned legal framework (the Welsh Language Act (1993) and Welsh Language (Wales) Measure (2011)) around protecting the Welsh language and securing its future are a key aspect. How this forms part of public and civic life, as well as how this is reflected in the education sector in Wales is exemplary and something Wales can be proud of. We have a lot to offer other bi- and multilingual nations in terms of best practice in this area. Additionally, Welsh Government's strategy to roll out a new curriculum from 2022 and root the creative arts firmly in the education sector is impressive and worth celebrating.<sup>2</sup>

**T**he fact that culture and education are devolved matters is not well-known overseas (or even in England) and I think this should be emphasised and utilised more as an asset. The harsh financial environment and increasing necessity to 'diversify income streams' and justify 'return on investment' for any arts and cultural organisation has forced a more streamlined approach to strategic planning and budgeting. Despite the challenges, it has also enabled a professionalisation and clearer focus in the arts. There are now more experts in Wales in the areas of arts and health, combined with a passionate understanding that the status quo is no longer acceptable when it comes to striving for more equality and diversity. Arts and cultural provision has to be relevant, accessible, inclusive and representative of a wider group of people and many arts organisations in Wales are

increasingly serious and innovative in making this happen, including the one I work for, Literature Wales.

**B** Brilliant work is also being done in arts and health, arts and sport and in using arts and culture generally to meet the aims of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. The fact that Wales has legislation around protecting its indigenous language, as well as the wellbeing of future generations is in itself worth emphasising and many other countries might be really interested in this kind of legislation, which is unique and different from that of other parts of the UK. Very recently, Welsh Government also declared a Climate Emergency, as one of the first governments to do so. There are great examples of artists who work in an ambassadorial capacity on these key messages, including the *Poet in Residence* for the Future Generations Commissioner, Rufus Mufasa.<sup>3</sup>

**O**verall, Wales is a tolerant, welcoming and inclusive nation and strives for a more equal society with opportunities for all. These core values underpin a lot of current cultural activities, particularly in international contexts.

**S**o, what of my identity living in Wales in 2020? Am I European? British? Welsh (enough)? German (still)? More than anything, I believe in our common humanity. We're in this together and we've got to find better ways and creative solutions to the bigger, global challenges. And if that makes me a citizen of nowhere, I take that anytime.



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We would all do well to remember Stefan Zweig's words, written down in his *Memories of a European* from 1942, that "all our differences and our petty jealousies must be put aside in order that we might achieve the single aim of faithfulness towards our past, and of our community-based future".

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## Endnotes

- 1 For more information see <https://www.ffotogallery.org/programme/go-home-polish>.
- 2 See <https://gov.wales/education-changing> for details.
- 3 Check out Rufus Mufasa’s reading of her poem “Can’t Change Slow Got to Change Completely” at <https://futuregenerations.wales/news/cant-change-slow-got-to-change-completely-rufus-mufasa-poet-in-residence/>.

# Obituary:

H. Gustav Klaus

Christian Schmitt-Kilb

(Rostock)



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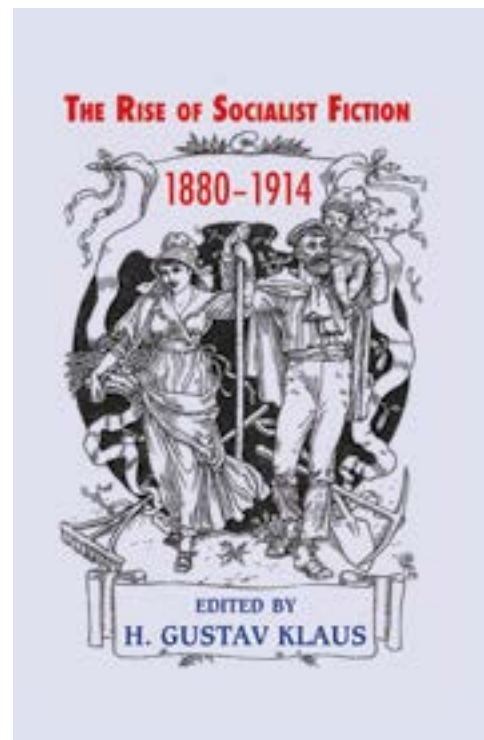
On February 25, 2020, H. Gustav Klaus died after a short and aggressive illness. We had been colleagues in Rostock for almost ten years before he retired in 2009 – he held the chair for Literature of the British Isles (1994-2009), I was his research assistant since 2000. Our collegial exchange and friendly relationship continued after his retirement and his move to the south of Germany. Only four weeks before he died, we had exchanged emails about personal and family matters, but also about the 2018 re-issue of a collection of his essays (*Voices of Anger and Hope*) and his current scholarly interests.

No word at this stage about health concerns. It came as a shock when, three weeks later, his son contacted me with the bad news of his father's illness and with the grim prospect that Gustav had only a few days to live. Five days later, he died.

One of Gustav's last publications was an obituary of Stuart Hall that appeared in an issue of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* co-edited by Sebastian Berg and myself. As much a personal memoir as an obituary, it leaves the reader struck not only by the extent of Gustav's involvement with the transformation, in Germany, of English Departments during the 1970s and 1980s, but also by the role he played as part of a generation that was at the same time an international community of left-wing scholars. Many of them, like Stuart Hall, went on to quickly achieve well-established academic posts and become household names, in Britain, as public intellectuals. Gustav's 'memoir' reads in part as a who's who of those intellectuals and university teachers, and his

own publications on Marxist literary criticism, but above all on working-class literature, attained a degree of visibility and recognition beyond the boundaries of German academia that remains unusual among German scholars of English literature. Furthermore, Gustav's collaboration and friendship with key figures of what was to become the field of cultural studies allowed him to edit and sometimes translate some of the first collections of their texts to be published in Germany. While Gustav's research, his collaborations and his political commitments align him with the concerns of cultural studies during the early years of the field's emergence, when many of the leading scholars had had their academic training in literary studies, he continued to regard himself as a scholar of literature and literary criticism. Perhaps this was partly a response to the field's gradual consolidation as a discipline that, at times, seemed more akin to a version of media studies than to the political endeavour it had started out as during the early days.

The trajectory of his career, in comparison to those of some of his contemporaries and collaborators, is symptomatic of the differences between the British and the German higher education sector and public sphere. Thus, while Gustav worked under precarious conditions, "on a six-month basis never knowing whether a contract for another semester would come" (108), with the Christian Democrat government of Lower Saxony wary of appointing Marxists to professorships by the time he had finished his *Habilitation*, the British higher education sector was rapidly expanding and transforming



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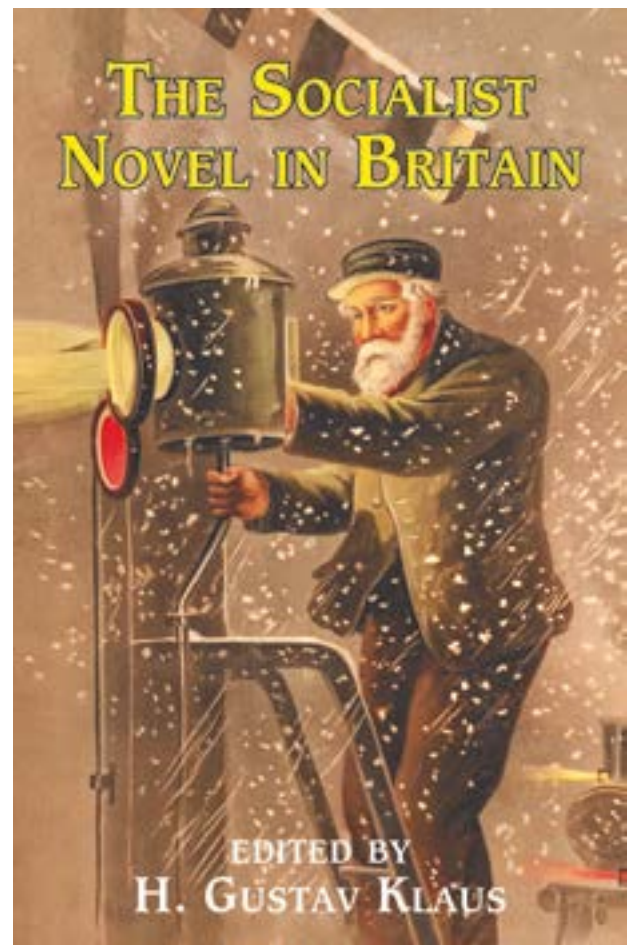
itself, creating openings for the appointment of some central representatives of cultural studies from the 1970s onwards, regardless of their overtly left-wing political orientation. The transformation of the former polytechnics into universities, the substantial increase in admission numbers, and the founding of the Open University were crucial developments that allowed for the creation of new positions that were sometimes filled based on achievements that did not necessarily correspond to pre-defined qualifications. Thus, Stuart Hall never completed his doctorate (in English Literature) and did not hold even a first degree in sociology, yet could be appointed Director of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary cultural studies, and, later, Professor of Sociology at the Open University. No comparable changes took place in Germany, and it was only with the "restructuring of the universities in the East" that professorial positions for some of the most active German left-wing scholars of English



literature and cultural studies opened up. As Gustav put it, “It is one of those ironies of history that an originally leftwing project profited from the collapse of an entire system that had labeled itself as ‘actually existing Socialism’.” (112) Therefore, when in 1994, Gustav was offered the chair for Literature of the British Isles at the Institute for English and American Studies of Rostock University, the path by which he reached this destination had not been without its difficulties. A Ph.D. in Bremen (1977) and *Habilitation* in Osnabrück (1982) were followed by research periods in Denmark, Australia and Scotland as well as visiting professorships in Warwick (UK), Osnabrück, and Bremen. These years – “years of irregular employment and insecure income”, as he himself put it – were in part due to his unbridled commitment to English Studies with a decidedly political, left-wing bent. He repeatedly topped the short list for professorships at one university in Lower Saxony, only for the position to be scrapped by Lower Saxony’s ministry of education rather than letting him be appointed.

The field of literature and literary studies was Gustav’s major domain, as his contributions to a British literary history from below in his research as well as his teaching testify. Nevertheless, his specific interests and political commitment, as previously suggested, were aligned with those of the emerging field of cultural studies, and he played an important role in the reception and popularisation, as early as the 1970s, of pioneering British scholars pertaining to that field, and in the implementation of their ideas in the discourse of German *Anglistik*. In this

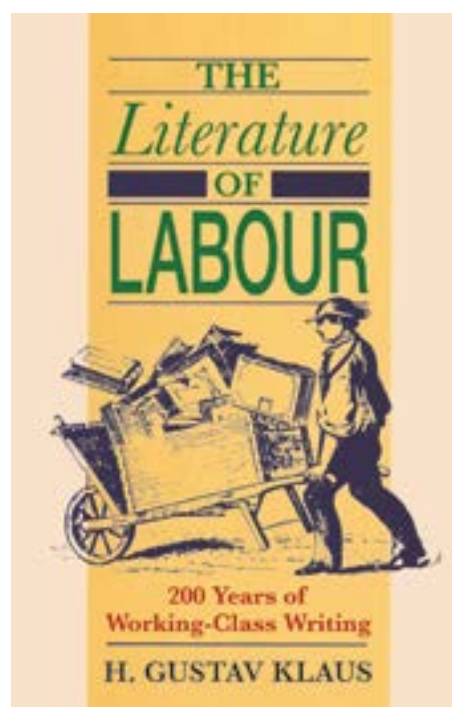
context, the turn from *Landeskunde* to cultural studies played a central part. Gustav had a hand both in the introduction into German *Anglistik* of names and ideas from across the channel and in contributing to journals that advocated new left-wing perspectives on English Studies. He translated and published Raymond Williams as early as 1975, he traced the history of the Old and New Left in an anthology of Marxist literary criticism which he edited in 1973, wrote pieces on Richard Hoggart and the Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies and interviewed Stuart Hall for the second edition of the newly founded journal *Gulliver: German-English Yearbook* (1977) – itself an emerging platform for the discussion of a re-organisation of English studies in Germany along the lines of gender studies, postcolonial studies, Marxist



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literary criticism and cultural studies generally. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that he later became one of the founding members of the “German Association for the Study of British Cultures”, today an integral part of English Studies in Germany, wielding a determining influence on the development of the discipline.

Gustav’s intellectual biography had been shaped by his student years in Frankfurt/Main, Marburg and Berlin in the 1960s. This was the time when the cracks in the façade of what was widely recognized as the cultural, social and political post-war consensus became more and more visible, and demand for change was gaining momentum, especially amongst politicized students at the universities. Gustav’s first major publication, the above-mentioned anthology of Marxist literary criticism in 1973, set the course for the general direction which his future research and work should take. One key feature which characterises much of Gustav’s critical work stems directly from his political commitment: a strong focus on neglected and overlooked aspects of the literary tradition – something that was also a central concern of British cultural studies during its early years. This holds true for Gustav’s 1987 volume *The Rise of Socialist Fiction, 1880-1914*, for his edition of writings by the Spanish Civil War volunteer Thomas O’Brien (in *Strong Words, Brave Deeds: The Poetry, Life and Times of Thomas O’Brien*, 1994), but also for his excursion into the field of detective fiction (ed. with Stephen Knight, *The Art of Murder. New Essays on Detective Fiction*, 1998). While crime fiction is not necessarily associated with a lack of popularity, Gustav

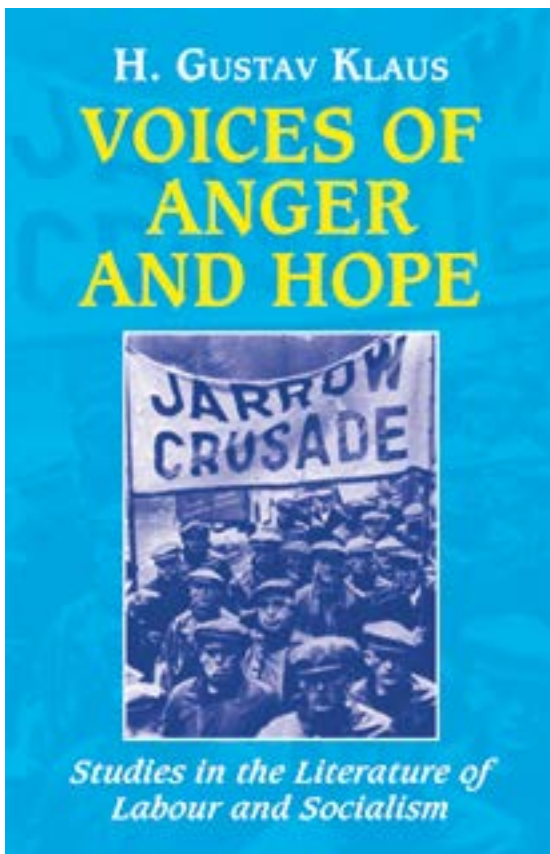


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made sure that the major and well-explored lines of the generic tradition were complemented with little-known sources, ideas and authors which turn crime fiction into an ideal site to investigate the interrelation of culture and society. *To Hell With Culture. Anarchism and Twentieth-century Literature* (ed. with Stephen Knight, 2005) is another volume dedicated to marginal(ized) figures. Most obviously, this focus on the overlooked is predominant in his 1993 volume *Tramps, Workmates and Revolutionaries*. In this collection of essays, which concentrates on many writers whose names rarely make an appearance in standard literary histories, it is the odd chapter on well-known authors like D. H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield rather than the majority of essays on the unknown ones that needs justification in the preface.

Many of Gustav’s publications were based upon preceding conferences that he helped to organize, e.g. in Rostock or Oxford. He wasn’t the man for the big get-togethers of





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the *Anglistik*-guild; the events he enjoyed most were characterised by small groups of scholars working on related issues who met in an equally familiar and intense atmosphere (as far as I can tell from having been present at three of them). They were carefully planned so that both intellectual exchange and informal talk had a good chance to come into their own. As an example for the successful combination of a small conference with a subsequent publication, let me mention “The Red and the Green: Ecology and Literature of the Left” held in 2007 at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. The event, organised together with John Rignall, underlines Gustav’s openness for critical developments (ecocriticism, literature and ecology) which, as he himself admitted in a 2010 essay entitled “Raymond Williams and Ecology”, were alien to him to the point that he automatically heard ‘economy’ when people said ‘ecology’.

Throughout his academic work and his life, Gustav insisted on the necessity of a politically charged and socially relevant form of literary criticism in order to keep the utopian dimension of literature alive and to prevent literary studies from becoming the intellectual pastime of a small bourgeois elite. These convictions manifested themselves in his research (as outlined above) but also in his university teaching. Courses on working-class literature, detective fiction and the literature of the Spanish Civil War underlined that he was deeply convinced of the integration of scholarly research and university education, while a seminar on the films of Ken Loach was inspired by cultural and media studies. Amongst students, he gained for himself the reputation of having challenging reading lists and high expectations, and of offering unvarnished critical responses to their work. Nevertheless, or perhaps in consequence, his courses enjoyed great popularity. His class-based approach to literature managed to reveal the social-critical content inherent “even in seventeenth-century country house poetry” (as of one of his students put it), thus bringing alive these texts and contexts for a fresh audience in the twenty-first century.

At the time of the text’s publication in our co-edited issue of the *JSBC* in 2015, it did not cross Sebastian’s and my minds that Gustav’s combination of obituary and personal memoir was to be his last text written for the *Journal*, one of his last texts altogether, and with hindsight, indeed, almost a legacy. It testifies to the significance of his loss, as a central representative

not only of a politically-committed literary criticism that also played a crucial role for the emergence of cultural studies in Germany, but also of an exemplary political commitment that did not remain confined to his publications but that characterised his intellectual and teaching practice as well as his life.

# HARD TIMES



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Eds. Cyprian Piskurek and Mark Schmitt