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Post-Brexit Nationalism: Challenging the British Political Tradition?

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Abstract: In the UK, nationalism has been gaining ground for some time, yet Brexit appears to have exacerbated these trends and given legitimation to the nationalist cause. 'Taking back control' from the EU was widely regarded as a means of reinforcing parliamentary sovereignty, notably over national borders, but also, importantly, of legitimising popular sovereignty, of giving a voice to those who often feel unrepresented by their political leaders. The idea of popular sovereignty is closely linked to that of nationalism: the rise of national populism can partly be explained by the crisis of representativity in liberal democracies and the desire for more direct, participatory forms of democracy. This article seeks to analyse the British government's articulation of nationalism following the Brexit referendum in order to determine the impact that the rise of nationalism in this peculiar context might have on democracy in the UK. Will it be Westminster business as usual or may the unleashing of nationalist sentiment represent an opportunity to move beyond the current political model? The article also focuses on the Labour Party's approach to nationalism, analysing its capacity to mark a rupture from dominant forms of nationalism and thus challenge the British political tradition.

Keywords: democracy; Brexit; nationalism; localism; nativism; sovereignty

Introduction

Eric Hobsbawm, writing in 1992, declared, 'nationalism, however inescapable, is simply no longer the historical force it was in the era between the French Revolution and the end of imperialist colonialism after World War II' (1992, 169). He imagined that, with the rise of transnational and international political orders facilitating international collaboration, the nation state, along with nationalism, were on the wane. A quarter of a century later, it seems clear that these trends have actually had the opposite effect, unleashing new waves of nationalism, even among peoples such as the British who have often been thought of as 'reluctant nationalists' on account of their role as an imperial power, preoccupied with governing over foreign nations rather than with the need to assert a national identity under threat of foreign domination (Kumar 2003, 123). The referendum vote in favour of Brexit is widely thought to have been a victory for nationalism over internationalism, representing the collapse of the Anglo-British globalist worldview (Scotto, Sanders and Reifler 2018). Indeed, there is a close link between Euroscepticism and nationalism with the former helping to reinforce the

latter (Gifford 2008; Wellings 2012). Reclaiming sovereignty from Europe has been presented by those in the ‘Leave’ camp as a nationalist cause. Such an idea is particularly resonant in Britain where parliamentary sovereignty, the founding idea of British democratic exceptionalism, is so intricately linked to national identity. The apparent superiority of this system over continental systems has long been a source of national pride.

Yet, it is doubtful whether British parliamentary sovereignty was really top of the agenda for nationalist ‘Leave’ voters. Indeed, it is more likely that the referendum result can be explained by the attraction of ‘antimigrant cultural nationalism’ (Evans 2017). Such nationalism may of course be in favour of the reassertion of parliamentary sovereignty in order to allow the British state to have greater control over its territorial borders by ending EU freedom of movement, yet it is above all characterised by a sense of alienation, a feeling of having been left behind by the political elites who have failed to address the economic dislocations of neoliberal globalisation (*ibid.*). Importantly, the referendum of 2016 allowed people who tend to experience a deep sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis the political establishment the chance to ‘take back control’, using their vote to profoundly upset the status quo. Brexit has arguably brought about a fundamental change in the way that British sovereignty is understood. There is now a popular expectation that the sovereignty of parliament be ceded to the ‘sovereignty of the people’ (Bogdanor 2016), or *peoples* in complex, multinational states such as the UK. The notion of popular sovereignty is hard to dissociate from nationalism. Indeed, the rise of national populism across Europe – defined as a promise to ‘prioritize the culture and interests of the nation’ and to ‘give voice to a people who feel they have been neglected... by corrupt elites’ – can partly be explained by a demand for more direct forms of democracy in the context of a crisis of representative democracy

whereby people feel increasingly unrepresented by the political elites (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, ix). In nations such as Scotland, nationalism cannot generally be associated with national populism – a very different form of civic nationalism has taken root there – but there is certainly a widespread demand for more direct, local democracy, particularly in the wake of the British government’s decision to ignore the Scottish vote in the Brexit referendum. Different forms of nationalism are therefore challenging the British political tradition, associated with the practice of liberal democracy in the UK and defined as a solid belief in the superior capacity of elected representatives in Westminster to act in the national interest, and an aversion to extending popular participation in politics beyond periodic elections (Hall et al., 2018). Ethnic and civic forms of nationalism therefore represent a significant challenge to the British political tradition.

This challenge has not emerged solely as a consequence of Brexit. Brexit is more a symptom than a cause of nationalism that has been rising over a longer period of time in a context of globalisation, multiculturalism, new forms of terrorism and rising migration. But Brexit does represent something of a watershed by giving vent and vindication to cultural and ethnic forms of nationalism, associated with increasingly disaffected segments of the population. Boris Johnson’s conservative government may appear to be responding to this form of nationalism, notably by adopting strict controls on immigration, yet, in line with previous government policy, it is failing to respond to concurrent demands for popular sovereignty, instead shoring up parliamentary – or at least executive (Mabbett, 2017) – sovereignty.

This article seeks to analyse in detail the British government’s articulation of nationalism following the Brexit referendum in order to **determine the impact that the rise of nationalism in this peculiar context might have on democracy in the UK.**

Will it be Westminster business as usual or may the unleashing of nationalist sentiment represent an opportunity to move beyond the current political model?

The focus is on the Conservative Party as the party in power, but the influence of UKIP on this debate cannot be ignored. An analysis of the Labour Party is also relevant, especially as it enters a period of deep introspection following its catastrophic electoral defeat in December 2019. Nationalism is an issue that has – with some exceptions – been overlooked by the Party. The question is now whether it ought to start taking the issue more seriously as it seeks to carve out a new path to power. Drawing on policy discussion, speeches, manifestoes and intellectual debate, the focus is on the nationalism that is currently being articulated by the leadership of both parties, which is not to ignore the obvious tensions which exist within each party. It is hoped that this discussion will illuminate the interplay between the multiple levels on which the politics of nationalism are currently played out: the subnational, national, European and global arenas. Indeed, whilst the focus of the article is on the UK in the post-Brexit context, the conclusions will be of wider significance to parties throughout Europe and across the Atlantic who are dealing with the phenomenon of rising nationalism and numerous challenges to current models of liberal democracy.

Throughout the article, reference will be made to various forms of nationalism. Like democracy itself, it can be understood in many different ways. Here, we will deal primarily with economic, nativist, parliamentary and civic forms of nationalism. The precise meaning of these different forms of nationalism will emerge in the course of the following discussion. In practice, these different nationalisms constantly overlap and are by no means confined to one particular political party. A key distinction will be made between forms of nationalism that are ‘descending’, defined and promoted from above, rather than ‘ascending’, defined from below (Hall 1993). Obviously, the latter are more

likely to foster participatory democratic politics and thus challenge the centrist, top-down British political tradition.

The article begins by examining the kind of nationalism that is currently being promoted by the British Conservative Party post-Brexit, analysing whether its attempts to reconcile nationalist sentiment with its project for a 'Global Britain' can widen democracy in any meaningful sense. It then looks at the Labour Party's approach to nationalism, discussing its failure to address this issue in an original way until fairly recently, and the possible alternative nationalisms that it might promote that could present a challenge the British political tradition.

The Conservative Party: nationalism in the service of neoliberalism

The Conservative Party is currently divided between hyperliberal 'hard Brexiteers', who place a premium on the liberation of the market from all possible constraints, and those who are willing to accept a 'softer' form of Brexit that would see the UK continuing to accept some EU market regulation. With the victory of Boris Johnson at the 2019 general election, it is this former wing that is now governing the country. Yet, Johnson, perhaps in a cynical attempt to secure the political support of the economically marginalised, is prepared to accept a degree of state intervention in the market by providing government aid to deprived areas and to companies to offset the negative economic consequences of Brexit. This is coherent with his promises, following his predecessor Theresa May, to tackle the problems of the 'left behind', even if this means increased state interventionism. Colin Crouch thus sees the party as splitting into nationalist and neoliberal wings, as economic protectionism gains ground (Crouch 2017). This is to assume that neoliberalism is incompatible with both state protectionism and nationalism.

Yet, in practice, neoliberalism has always entailed a significant degree of interventionism in order to guide markets and make them behave in a certain way (Dardot and Laval 2009; Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2009; Harcourt 2012). It has also worked to ensure that private enterprise is supported through various forms of corporate welfare (Farnsworth 2013). Crouch cites the example of the government reassurances made to the Nissan motor company in 2016 that it would not be adversely affected by Brexit as evidence that the government is moving ‘in protectionist directions’ (Crouch 2017, 227). Yet, this is nothing new: government assistance to the company began under the Thatcher governments in 1984, allowing it to benefit from £797 million in various forms of corporate welfare such as loans, research and development grants and tax relief between 1984 and 2017 (Farnsworth, Cola and Conn 2017). Economic protectionism has always sat alongside neoliberalism – it would thus be a mistake to regard such measures as threatening the neoliberal project (Bell and Christoph 2019).

Similarly, economic protectionism, often associated with nationalism, should not necessarily be assumed to run contrary to neoliberalism. To the extent that economic nationalism can be defined as a desire to reinforce national identity and the prosperity and power of the nation state, it has always been compatible with liberalism (Helleiner 2002). In the nineteenth century liberal economic nationalism emerged as a means of maintaining Britain’s economic superiority – this was the main justification provided by Robert Peel for the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 (320). The gold standard, often considered as an emblematic policy of economic liberalism, was actually a nationalist policy, primarily aimed at restoring national prestige (321). Today, the neoliberals continue to promote liberal economic policies on the grounds that they are most beneficial for the nation state in terms of promoting prosperity at home and allowing the UK to punch above her weight abroad (323). Margaret Thatcher pursued a form of

‘nationalist neoliberalism’ whereby economic liberalism was presented as being deeply rooted in the traditions and character of the British nation, associated with individualism and Britain’s pride in her historic role in developing the global economy (Gifford 2008, 68). Neoliberals in general tend to simultaneously adopt internationalist discourse to promote economic globalisation and nationalist discourse to resist political globalisation, considered as a barrier to the free market and the sovereign power of the nation state (Harmes 2012). The Conservative Party’s discourse is indeed simultaneously nationalist and internationalist. Whilst recognising that the vote in favour of Brexit can partly be interpreted as a vote against globalisation and its elites, former leader Theresa May insisted that free trade and open markets are in the best interests of the nation state and its citizens, especially the worst off (May 2016). Presenting economic liberalism in nationalist terms is a very effective way of presenting it as a force for progress (Fekete 2016). As highlighted above, nationalism is essential in ensuring popular support for free market policies (Rosamond 2018). There is significant irony in this, given that the economic dislocations caused by neoliberalism are widely considered as having been a major driver behind the rise of right-wing ethnic nationalism (Evans 2012).

Regardless of their differences over the form that Brexit should take or the degree of state interventionism in the market that is considered permissible, the Conservative Party Brexiteers appear to be united in regarding Britain’s departure from the EU as an opportunity to reassert neoliberalism. They are also united in using nationalism to advance this cause. Two key interlinked forms of nationalism are invoked here: parliamentary nationalism and ethnic nationalism. Contrary to claims that Brexit is primarily about promoting democracy, these forms of nationalism actually represent a threat to the enhancement of popular participation in politics and are instead

likely to simply bolster the centrist British political tradition. They are defined from above and eschew participatory politics. Let us examine each in turn:

Asserting parliamentary nationalism

Arguments in favour of the repatriation of sovereignty from European institutions to the Westminster parliament are nationalist in two senses: firstly, they aim to ‘give back control’ to ‘the people’; secondly, they appeal to national chauvinism, presenting British institutions as being inherently superior to those in continental Europe. In her first speech on the government’s negotiating objectives for leaving the EU, Theresa May noted the differences in political traditions between the UK and the rest of Europe, highlighting the importance of parliamentary sovereignty for the British, implying that this is a principle that continental Europeans have difficulty understanding (May 2017). This is a view shared by current Prime Minister Boris Johnson and other conservative supporters of the so-called Anglosphere who favour a closer relationship between Britain and countries such as the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand than with continental Europe on account of the common values that bind them together (Gardiner 2010, 3). The profoundly eurosceptic European Research Group within the Conservative Party goes further, suggesting that the traditions of the Westminster parliament are superior to the political traditions that can be found on continental Europe, considering that forming a close union with states that are considered as inherently inferior somehow devalues Britain’s status (McKay 2019). Parliamentary nationalism is therefore a means of legitimising the British political tradition.

The use of the referendum to instigate the UK’s departure from the EU suggested a challenge to this tradition and a promise of more popular participation in politics. Yet, the close association of nationalism with Parliament means that it is

Parliament itself that is ultimately strengthened (Vines 2015). Indeed, although ‘the people’ are regularly invoked to justify going through with Brexit, ‘the people’ were largely excluded from decision-making processes beyond the referendum. One way put forward to encourage more democratic participation in the process was the establishment of numerous ‘citizens’ assemblies’ which would bring together randomly selected representative groups of citizens to discuss the possible options following the Brexit referendum. The idea was modelled on the Irish Citizen’s Assembly set up in 2016 to discuss contentious issues such as the legalisation of abortion. Yet, an amendment (put forward by Labour MPs Stella Creasy and Lisa Nandy) to the legislation intended to enact the Withdrawal Deal negotiated between the British government and the EU which would have created such assemblies on a widespread basis in the UK was not even selected for debate in January 2019. Similarly, the conservative government rejected any attempt to involve the electorate in discussions over the form that Brexit might take via a second referendum.

Parliament as a whole has been strengthened to a certain extent in the post-referendum debates over Brexit, inflicting many defeats on the government, most notably with the successive defeat of the former Prime Minister’s Brexit deal. Yet, more than anything, it appears to have been executive power that has been strengthened by post-Brexit appeals to parliamentary nationalism, thus helping to ensure the survival of a British political tradition characterised by strong executive power (Hall et al. 2018). In rejecting any jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice post-Brexit, the government alone will have the power to decide on economic relationships with its EU partners, international diplomacy being a prerogative power reserved to the executive (Mabbett 2017, 169). Furthermore, it is the executive that claims to be the sole legitimate interpreter of the will of ‘the people’ (169). Despite the Miller case whereby the

Supreme Court reasserted parliamentary authority regarding the UK's triggering of article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on the basis that a referendum is merely advisory unless explicitly stated otherwise (*R. [Miller] v. Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union* [2016] EWHC 2768 [Admin]), the executive has constantly reaffirmed that it must respect the will of 'the people' in ensuring that Brexit goes ahead, regardless of the democratic will of those people who voted to remain in the European Union.

'The people' is a useful, malleable term which is generally used by conservative MPs to refer to 'the British people'. Indeed, the conservative appeal to nationalism is dressed in the language of unionism, with Theresa May constantly referring to the need to protect 'the precious union' (for example, May 2018). Yet, this is a nationalism that conflates English and British interests. It is in reality Anglo-British nationalism which can trace its roots back to the eurosceptic debates of the 1970s, notably those put forward by Enoch Powell (Vines 2015). Powell's nationalism was 'a consistent English nationalist position' (Gamble 2003, 28). His reverence for the Westminster model of government stemmed from the fact that he situated the tradition of parliamentary democracy firmly in the English inheritance (Kenny and Pearce 2018, 89). Consequently, his staunch defence of the British union had to be on English terms (Gamble 2003, 28). This is also true of Theresa May and Boris Johnson who have talked up the importance of the union whilst simultaneously excluding political leaders from Scotland from the Brexit negotiations and refusing to grant any special concessions that may placate the majority of Scottish people who voted to remain in the EU (whilst political leaders from Northern Ireland were initially given somewhat more attention, largely due to May's dependence on 10 DUP MPs to support her minority government and on account of the threat that Brexit poses to the Northern Irish peace process, Boris Johnson's majority government has largely ignored their concerns). This

reflects a long-held conservative (and, indeed Labour) belief in the primacy of the unitary state. Such nationalism appeals more to the English majority that supported a referendum on EU membership in the first place and subsequently voted 'Leave'. English conservative Brexit-supporting voters, it seems, are prepared to sacrifice the 'precious union' in favour of a clean break with the EU that would satisfy their nationalist demands to see sovereignty returned to the UK Parliament: 79% of English conservatives would support Scottish independence as the price of Brexit, whilst 75% would accept the collapse of the peace process in Northern Ireland as a price worth paying (Henderson and Jones 2018). These voters also show a clear dissatisfaction with the Westminster model as it currently stands, with almost half of English Conservative voters believing that Scottish MPs should not sit in the UK Parliament (*ibidem.*). It is perhaps unsurprising that the notion of 'taking back control' has more resonance amongst an English population that, lacking local democratic structures of governance akin to those of other nations in the UK, feels a particularly acute need to address this democratic deficit (Barnett 2016). Indeed, 79% of those who voted 'Leave' in the 2016 referendum identified themselves as 'English, not British' (Ashcroft 2019).

Furthermore, 42% of those who identify as English rather than British believe that an English Parliament should have more influence than either the UK government (25%) or local councils (15%) over how England is run (Jeffrey et al. 2014, 18). Yet, the Anglo-British nationalism promoted by the Conservative Party is currently doing little in practice to address the democratic deficit in England, largely ignoring English nationalist demands (O'Toole, 2018). Deprived of these democratic structures, 'normal' democratic nationalism (Nairn 2003) could easily give way to ethnic nationalism. Indeed, in the absence of political and institutional conduits for national pride, people may be more prone to seek exclusive, ethnic forms of national expression (Nodia 1992).

The Conservative Party's failure to take English political nationalism seriously and to rethink the democratic process and the executive sovereignty of the UK parliament, so closely linked with the British political tradition, may unleash 'uglier' forms of nationalism. Yet, rather than resisting such forms of nationalism, it seems the Conservative Party has been actively promoting them.

Appealing to nativism

The Conservative Party deliberately eschews the ethnic nationalism often associated with Enoch Powell and his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech. In recent years, it has sought openly to defend and promote racial equality. As Home Secretary, Theresa May expressed concern about police stop and search powers which disproportionately target ethnic minorities (May 2013) and introduced a revised code of police practice aimed at curbing their use. The appointment of Asian Sajid Javid to the post of Home Secretary in 2018 helped to project an image of a modern Conservative Party at ease with multiculturalism. In Boris Johnson's new Cabinet, Priti Patel of Indian origin was given the job of Home Secretary whilst Javid was given the post of Chancellor before resigning and being replaced by Rishi Sunak, also of Indian origin.

Yet, Conservative immigration policy appeals to nativist sentiment in promoting the rights of British citizens over those of citizens of other nations. Nativism may be understood as distinct from ethnic nationalism: while the latter seeks to establish a homogeneous ethno-nation, the former focuses on preserving a particular ethnic configuration from change (Kaufman 2018). The British Conservative Party tones down the ethnic aspect of its discourse but nonetheless seeks to protect those who have attained British citizenship – the natives – from citizens of other countries. Amber Rudd, former Home Secretary under the May government, considered that native

British people should have priority access to the labour market, stating that when companies recruit from abroad, they ‘should ensure people coming here are filling gaps in the labour market, not taking jobs British people could do’ (Rudd 2016). Native British people are also given priority over access to welfare services. From 2014, under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, the criteria for determining whether EEA citizens are ‘habitually resident’ in the UK in order to have access to means-tested benefits were made more stringent, notably limiting the rights of jobseekers without ‘a genuine prospect of finding work’. In 2015, in response to concerns about ‘health tourism’ whereby people come to the UK specifically to benefit from NHS treatment (although it is estimated that spending on non-UK citizens is negligible, representing 0.3% of total annual health spending in the UK – Factcheck 2016), since October 2017 providers of NHS treatment have been required to ensure that patients are eligible for free healthcare and to apply charges if they are not. Such measures contribute to creating a ‘hostile environment’ for migrants, building on Theresa May’s policies as Home Secretary to extend identity controls from physical borders to the domestic arena, forcing employers, landlords, doctors and teachers to check the immigration status of people they provide services to. It was this policy which led directly to the Windrush scandal in Spring 2018 following revelations by *The Guardian* that immigrants who arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1973 and who, as Commonwealth citizens, had an automatic right to settle in the UK, found themselves deprived of medical treatment and employment and, in some case, threatened with deportation should they fail to be able to prove their status as British citizens. These measures were accompanied by the immigration acts of 2014 and 2016 intended to make entry into the country more difficult, notably introducing an income threshold of £18 600 for non-EEA citizens wishing to bring their spouses to Britain.

Post-Brexit, immigration controls will become stricter. In 2019, Parliament voted the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Act to end the free movement of EU citizens to the UK (with the exception of Irish citizens), rendering them subject to UK immigration law. The changes are dressed in the language of equality. The Prime Minister, in her foreword to the White Paper preceding the Bill highlighted ‘the huge contribution’ migrants have made to the UK and promised that the system would be based on skills alone, not the country that migrants come from (HM Government 2018a, 3). In an earlier speech outlining the core elements of the Withdrawal Deal between the UK and the EU, May stated that EU nationals would no longer be able to ‘jump the queue ahead of engineers from Sydney or software developers from Delhi’ (BBC 2018). Whilst this latter statement sparked controversy for suggesting that EU nationals were failing to respect existing rules, such language did imply that future immigration controls would be colour and race-blind. Similarly, the current Conservative government’s new points-based immigration system is to accept applications for residency on criteria that are based on skills and earnings rather than on country of origin. These policies are far-removed from Powell’s ethnic nationalism which specifically sought to limit immigration ‘of colour’. Yet, racism is today simply articulated in more subtle ways. Measures to restrict access to public services and benefits reinforce the idea articulated so successfully by Powell that migrants avail of Britain’s public services to the detriment of native British citizens. Powell would also surely have approved of May’s and Johnson’s constant reassertion of the need for the UK ‘to take back control of its borders’ (HM Government 2018a, 3) and thus reassert the sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament over the issue.

Furthermore, despite the language of equality, it is unlikely that conservative immigration policy will be colour-blind in practice. The ‘hostile environment’ policy is

set to continue: despite the Conservatives' preference for the term 'compliant environment' over 'hostile environment', and government plans to give the Home Office 'a more human face' and to fully compensate those affected by the scandal (HM Government 2018b; Conservative Party 2019, 21), no substantial policy change has so far been implemented at the time of writing (March 2020). Given the lack of commitment on the part of the Johnson government to roll back the immigration legislation that led to the 'hostile environment' policy, it seems will continue in all but name. The risk is that racial discrimination will be encouraged. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance:

a hostile environment ostensibly created for and formally restricted to irregular immigrants, is in effect, a hostile environment for all racial and ethnic communities and individuals in the UK. This is because ethnicity continues to be deployed in the public and private sector as a proxy for legal immigration status. Even where private individuals and civil servants may wish to distinguish among different immigration statuses many likely are confused among the various categories and thus err on the side of excluding all but those who can easily and immediately prove their Britishness, or whose white ethnicity confer[s] upon them presumed Britishness (Achieme 2018, para. 38).

Beyond mere suspicion on grounds of race, racial hatred may even be fuelled by the government's tendency to play to public fears regarding immigration, as exemplified by the former Home Secretary's reaction to 40 refugees crossing the English Channel in small boats during the Christmas period in 2018. Questioning the legitimacy of their claims to asylum before their demands had been properly processed, he asserted that Britain should do all that it could to ensure such claims generally do not succeed (Dearden 2019).

Despite attempts to reject ethnic nationalism, the Conservative Government's determination to reinforce Britain's borders and repatriate immigration control to Westminster, whilst ensuring that British citizens are given priority access to jobs and services in the UK in an environment that is increasingly suspicious towards migrants, appeals to nativist nationalist sentiment. Appeals to nativism and ethnic nationalism are often regarded as a threat to liberal democracy. For European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, 'exaggerated nationalism' that 'projects hate' is a 'poison' that 'destroys all in its path', including presumably liberal democracy (2018). Yet, such nationalism can be regarded as forming part of the liberal political tradition. Alongside the tradition of liberal internationalism which sees all nations as being capable of embracing liberal politics, there is a nationalist liberal tradition that regards only specific nations as culturally predisposed to develop and nurture liberal democracy (Kosc 2017). For the latter tradition, which can be traced back to the American Founding Fathers, political liberalism 'was a uniquely British inheritance that could be undermined by French, German, and Irish migrants with radical political views or foreign loyalties' (Kosc 2017). In contemporary Britain, the threat to liberal values is seen as coming from migrants with different cultural values, from those who live 'in segregated communities', leading 'separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream', often 'behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values' (Cameron 2011). Migrants are presented as lacking the liberal values of self-help and responsibility, drawn to Britain by 'our generosity' and 'the attractiveness of our benefits system' (Cameron 2013). Due to their different values, they make it 'impossible to build a cohesive society' (May, 2015). Furthermore, some of them are thought to harbour 'real hostility towards Western democracy and liberal values', such as respect for gender equality (Cameron 2011). The focus on culture rather than race

enables the Conservative Party to differentiate its nationalism from that of the extreme right and, significantly, to present it as being compatible with liberal democracy.

The Conservative Party approach to promoting a national identity based on liberal values fails to enhance democracy. It seeks to apply ‘muscular liberalism’, as opposed to ‘passive tolerance’ in order to ‘actively promote’ liberal values (Cameron 2011) and a certain kind of national identity. This has entailed stricter controls on immigration, together with the increased surveillance of Muslim communities in particular through the anti-terrorism strategy, *Prevent* (Kundnani 2009), aimed at tackling extremism. Such measures may be experienced as authoritarian rather than liberal governance by the communities concerned, even if authoritarianism is not overt (Bell, 2015). Furthermore, nationalism may help to generalise authoritarian governance throughout the broader populace as neoliberal governments use it to police inequality to ensure that social disorder does not create unstable political conditions threatening to global capital (Fekete 2016). Increased surveillance measures may be accepted by nationalists lured by the promise of national security faced with the threat of the immigrant other. Consequently, ‘nationalism could well provide the route unto the “strong state”’, providing ‘the climate that allows for its break from democracy’ (Fekete 2016, 18). A hard or ‘no deal’ Brexit paving the way for a deregulated, hypercompetitive Britain, as desired by the Brexit neoliberal utopians (anon), will surely generate exacerbated social insecurity, strengthening the appeal to nativist nationalism and the need for politicians to invoke it to garner electoral support and justify the implementation of more authoritarian policies. Liberal nativist nationalism thus risks tipping over into authoritarian nativist nationalism, shoring up the power of the central state. The promotion of nativist nationalism may appear to be a challenge to the British political tradition to the extent that it responds to genuine fears about

immigration. Indeed, ‘strong public concerns over immigration, and its perceived effects on the country and on communities, were central to explaining the 2016 vote for Brexit’ (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017, 13). ‘Leave’ voters tended to see the EU as the best way to allow Britain to reclaim control over its borders and reduce immigration that they believe has negative effects on the welfare state, the economy and cultural life of the nation (10). According to Evans, these sentiments cannot be dissociated from economic deprivation linked to the post-industrial service economy which has helped to fuel a sense of xenophobia or ‘placeism’, defined as ‘a fierce sense of territoriality and a social preoccupation with a hierarchy of born-and bred belonging [which] implie[s] a generalized suspicion of outsiders of all kinds’ (2017, 217). It is a sentiment which was effectively exploited by the British National Party and repackaged by UKIP which managed to sanitise the immigration debate and shift the political centre to the right (*ibid.*). This in turn allowed the Conservative Party to pick up the debate, to present itself as being more ‘in tune’ with popular concerns and simultaneously to stave off the electoral threat from UKIP and then the Brexit Party (which risked dividing the conservative vote).

Yet, it doing so, it has adopted national populism, leading the debate from above, whilst presenting its policy as one that is informed only from below. It is a policy that ‘give[s] voice to a people who feel they have been neglected... by corrupt elites’ (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, ix). Yet, the Conservative Party has failed to address the underlying question of deprivation or, more importantly for this debate, to inform the public about the facts of immigration, propagating rather than challenging myths. The first myth is the notion that post-Brexit Britain will be able to gain full control of immigration policy. Given the Conservatives’ commitment to pursuing the ideal of a ‘Global Britain’ via trade deals with the rest of the world, it is likely that it

will have to grant some concessions on immigration restrictions to countries, such as India, that it hopes to trade with. Furthermore, whilst neoliberalism can sit comfortably alongside nativism, the free movement of people tends to underpin the free movement of capital. Secondly, the government has tended to exaggerate the extent of immigration to Britain. Politicians often refer to a ‘migrant crisis’, despite the relatively low numbers of migrants living in the UK compared to other countries: in 2016, there were nine non-national citizens per 100 000 inhabitants living in the UK, compared to 38 in Malta or 18 in Ireland (Eurostat 2018). The government also fails to inform the public of important facts about immigration which tend to run counter to people’s concerns about its negative impact, such as: the positive impact migration has on stimulating demand in the economy; large increases in EU immigration did not cause falls in wages; EU migrants can help to reduce the budget deficit and fund public services by paying more in taxes than they take out in benefits (Wadsworth et al. 2017). The government has also played down the potential negative impact of post-Brexit immigration restrictions. Whilst it is difficult to establish post-Brexit immigration growth models, Portes and Forte suggest that the impact on GDP per capita will be ‘almost certainly negative’ whilst any possible increase in low-skilled wages will be ‘relatively modest’ (2017, S40).

Rather than engaging in genuine democratic dialogue, capable of promoting participatory democracy, the Conservative Party has been happy to tap into public fears about migration for political gain. The Conservative Party thus promotes a ‘descending’ nationalism (Hall 1993, 355) that is defined from above and excludes ordinary people from the democratic process of defining the contours of national identity, despite appearing to be responding directly to their concerns. Nativist nationalism therefore becomes yet another way of shoring up executive sovereignty, albeit in the guise of

responding to popular fears. Such a strategy is likely to exacerbate sentiments that liberal democracy is not working in the popular interest if the public see no long-term positive impacts following Brexit. We will now move on to a discussion of the Labour Party's articulation of nationalism in order to determine if it may be capable of articulating a more democratic version of post-Brexit nationalism that goes beyond the British political tradition and allows alternative democratic models to develop

The Labour Party: building nationalism from the bottom up?

Although nationalism is often associated with right-wing governments, particularly at the present time, it is not a naturally conservative ideology. Historically, it has often been associated with radicalism and popular movements seeking to overturn the status quo (Miller 2003: 309), even if Conservative Prime Ministers such as Benjamin Disraeli and Winston Churchill drew upon nationalism. Disraeli appealed to nationalist sentiment to advance the spread of democracy and unite people under one nation, whilst Churchill sought to unite the nation in face of a common enemy. Margaret Thatcher also drew on nationalism to bring people together against a common enemy 'without' in the Falklands War and the trade unionists and left-wing activists she described as 'the enemy within'.

Nationalism has been treated with some suspicion by the Left, particularly by international socialists such as G.D.H. Cole and Harold Laski who regarded the nation state and the nationalism associated with it as an obstacle to international peace, with Laski even going so far as to propose the creation of a 'world community' in which nations would give up ideas of national sovereignty (Matthews 2013, 33-35). New Labour followed a very different political trajectory, but it also advocated going beyond nationalism, embracing post-nationalism in an attempt to deepen globalisation and

Europeanisation (Kenny 2014, 33). Yet, paradoxically, its refusal to appeal to nationalist sentiment only helped to fuel it. In the wake of the London terrorist attacks of 2005, perpetrated by British-born citizens, Gordon Brown did address the question of patriotism, launching a national debate on the meaning of Britishness. For him, it entailed celebrating national symbols such as the Union Jack and associating being British very clearly with values, notably those of ‘responsibility, liberty and fairness’ (Brown, 2006). He was essentially promoting a civic form of nationalism and focussing on what could bring multicultural Britain together as a nation. But white British people who rejected this multicultural model were largely ignored in this discussion, as was the rise of nationalism, in England or elsewhere. Whilst Brown recognised Britain as ‘a country of different nations and thus of plural identities’, he argued that a British identity should be celebrated ‘which is bigger than the sum of its parts’. This was to ignore the rise of political nationalism in Scotland and in England, and, perhaps more seriously, the rise of ‘antimigrant cultural nationalism’ (Evans 2017). This form of nationalism became increasingly prevalent in the context of the post-class politics pursued by New Labour whereby Tony Blair sought to follow a new politics which would go beyond class binaries and ‘liberate Britain from the old class divisions’ (Blair 1999). Failing to address the specific problems of those who were being left behind by the new neoliberal post-industrial economy, New Labour thus paved the way for people to self-identify in terms of place and local identity rather than class (Evans 2012). The rejection of internationalism and multiculturalism that ensued was easily exploited by racist parties such as the BNP and later by the forces of Euroscepticism, first the UKIP and then the Conservatives, who helped to stoke fear about migration, particularly from the EU. Despite adopting populist tropes about ‘bogus asylum seekers’ and the need to prevent migrants from becoming a ‘burden’ for the welfare state (Mulvey 2010), New

Labour was perceived as being ‘soft on immigration’ (Evans and Chzhen 2013, 142), to such an extent that the party adopted ‘controls on immigration’ as a key slogan in the 2015 general election. This perception was far from justified: although in 2004 the Blair government decided to join just two other EU countries (Sweden and Ireland) in placing no immediate restrictions on migrants from the ten new EU member states, his government also introduced legislation to significantly limit the rights of asylum seekers and to deter them from seeking asylum in the UK, and led an escalation in detention and deportation (Gibney 2008). Nevertheless, the party was perceived as ignoring the interests of its key working-class electorate by both failing to address economic hardship and rising concerns about immigration. In seeking to combine Thatcherite neoliberal economics with an internationalist, multicultural outlook, it failed to address nationalistic sentiment in a way that Thatcher herself had done, providing the ‘glue’ that allowed people to coalesce around her project. Yet, the Labour Party has not always ignored the question of nationalism. Clement Attlee invoked civic nationalism to rally popular support around a universal welfare state. Tony Benn, despite his international socialism, grounded his opposition to Britain’s membership of the European Union in a defence of the sovereignty of the Westminster parliament (Vines 2015; Gifford 2008, 63). This was in many ways a natural position to hold given the Party’s long-term commitment to parliamentary sovereignty and the British state (Jones and Keating 1985). The Labour leadership under Michael Foot also demonstrated a preference for such nationalism in its support of British intervention in the South Atlantic during the Falklands War (Williams 1984, 371). In its historical defence of parliamentary nationalism, Labour differs little from the Conservative Party. This attitude perhaps results from the confusion it makes between parliamentary and popular sovereignty, assuming that the former is the embodiment of the latter (*ibid.*, 187-8). This would

suggest that the Party is ill-equipped to respond to popular challenges to the British political tradition that are being fuelled by new forms of national populism. As with the Conservatives, it has largely adopted a descending form of nationalism, defined from above and closely associated with the institutions of the British state.

However, in response to the revival of nationalism on the right of the political spectrum, some voices on the Left have highlighted the urgency of challenging the Right on its own terms. Through his exploration of the dissonance between politics and identity, Stuart Hall explained how Thatcher successfully managed to link the two together by appropriating national identity to create ‘an active popular consent’ for her policies (cited in Matthews 2013, 180). These policies became part of identity itself: it became British to be in favour of the free market and against socialist policies. To challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism, Hall believed the Left would have to create a new version of the national popular by taking identity seriously. This call has been taken up more recently by Anthony Barnett who explains, ‘A class-based anger expressed in patriotic themes cannot just be answered by economic policies’, suggesting that Labour will have to go beyond policies of redistribution and the reduction of inequalities of wealth if it is to be successful (Barnett 2016, 242). Similarly, John Denham, Labour MP and founding member of the English Labour Network, a group launched in 2017 to further discussion on the political identity of England, has underlined the need for the Labour Party to embrace ‘a new progressive patriotism’ grounded in ‘nation, people and place’ if it hopes to secure popular support for its policies (2016). Although it is questionable that such a form of nationalism can be furthered if the focus is on addressing concerns about immigration (as Denham suggests) – there is a risk of mimicking the nativist nationalism of the Conservative Party. Nonetheless, Denham’s focus on the importance of place may pave the way for a

progressive nationalism that would no longer be ‘banal’, limited to the symbolic ‘flagging’ of symbols of national identity in our daily lives (Billing 2002). It would become a positive force, underpinning a new democratic politics. How might Labour go about doing this?

From Parliamentary Sovereignty to Popular Sovereignty: fostering civic nationalism?

Contrary to the Conservative Party, Labour could promote ‘ascending’ nationalism (Hall 1993), defined from below and associated with the everyday practices of ordinary people rather than with the institutions of the State. Indeed, ‘democracy is not just a set of institutional arrangements but a culture and a spirit, a way of doing politics’ (Wright 2017, 195). Democratic involvement can itself become a way of expressing one’s identity and pride in the nation. Yet, such involvement is meaningless if confined to voting every few years in elections or in a referendum. It must be something that is integrated into people’s daily lives, that starts at the level of community and works upwards to the level of national institutions. Indeed, feelings of identity and belonging have always been rooted in the community first and in the nation second. This is not about rejecting existing institutions – that is the stuff of anti-establishment populism – but rather about transforming them from below so that they can work better in the national interest.

For Raymond Williams, nationalism did not have to be about the nation state – indeed, such nationalism is essentially regressive. A positive nationalism is linked not to the unitary state but rather grounded in the ‘politics of place’ (1984). The sentiment of ‘placeism’ identified by Evans (2017) does not therefore have to lead to negative, nativist nationalism. Evans would undoubtedly agree with Williams when he suggested that place becomes particularly important as a site for social bonding when other means

of bonding through class or institutions such as trade unions have broken down in the wake of deindustrialisation and globalisation (373-4). Attachment to place can encourage new forms of democratic participation aimed at tackling issues which affect the locality, whilst participation in local politics can help to reinforce attachment to place. Thus, there exists a positive symbiotic relationship between a locally-based nationalism and democracy. Given that localities – cities and regions – are ‘natural units of government’ (Williams 1984, 372), what happens there necessarily relates to wider issues that affect the nation as a whole. In this way, local politics necessarily impact upon the national.

The Labour Party is currently proposing policies which seek to empower local communities, allowing them to take decisions about issues that affect them directly, such as housing and urban planning. Reviving the old tradition of ‘municipal socialism’, it has promised to devolve power from the centre to local councils but, importantly, also to give more direct control to local communities over the actions of those councils (Corbyn 2017a). Labour has also proposed cooperative ownership of newly-nationalised services such as railways and energy companies, combining state ownership with local, regional and community ownership and ensuring that consumers and employee representatives sit together on boards with representatives of state, regional and local government (Labour Party 2017a, 31; Labour Party 2019).

Local control of the economy and public services is potentially a very effective way of tackling the feelings of disempowerment engendered by conditions of post-democracy whereby power has been increasingly displaced from national representatives to multinational corporations (Crouch 2012). In taking power away from international capital, it might be considered as a form of economic nationalism. It entails turning holding capital to account into a ‘progressive national cause’ by placing

national interest first (Denham 2017: 102). The popularity of such a cause may be grounded in place, through local participation in economic decision-making, fostering the development of civic nationalism that links identity to popular democracy and cooperativism. This may be a good way of tapping into feelings of political disempowerment that may have helped inform the decision to vote in favour of leaving the European Union¹.

Yet, just as for the Conservative Party, there are risks that, rather than promoting popular democratic participation, nationalism could undermine democracy. Labour is not immune from the ethnic nationalism that taints the Conservatives. There is always a danger that suspicion towards foreign capital may tip over into hostility for foreign workers, especially if Labour fails to make the case for immigration. Despite the generally positive views of immigration on the part of Corbyn, including his calls to avoid scapegoating immigrants for the problems encountered by public services (Corbyn 2018), the party leadership has largely accepted the need for stricter immigration controls post-Brexit. The Opposition failed to mount an effective opposition to the Conservatives' Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill 2019, discussed above, allowing the Bill to pass with 76 Labour MPs absent (after changing its position from abstention to imposing a mere one-line whip). In doing so, it responds to Denham's call for Labour to make the case for an end to freedom of movement in its current form in order to dissociate the Party from 'massive and rapid immigration' (Denham 2017: 100; 105). Blindly responding to popular sentiment about immigration without engaging in meaningful debate about the issue

¹ It is obviously rather difficult to measure such feelings, but it might be assumed that the popularity of the slogan 'take back control' appealed to many who felt marginalised by the current political system. Though qualitative research methods, Flemmen and Savage have identified a distinct anti-establishment feeling amongst those who are often considered as the 'left behind' in the UK (2017).

risks creating exclusive communities that would undermine attempts to increase popular, inclusive participation in local decision-making processes. Such an approach also ignores the fact that nationalist sentiment is not driven solely by an anti-immigration stance. Whilst regaining control over immigration was cited as the second main reason for voting by 'Leave' by Leave voters (Ashcroft, 2019), in the general population, anti-immigrant sentiment amongst the white working class tends to be regarded as a legitimate way of expressing what is essentially anti-establishment sentiment (Flemmen and Savage 2017). Labour's focus on the local has real potential to take nationalism beyond its association with the institutions of Parliament by addressing that anti-establishment feeling, creating 'multiple sites of sovereign' (Keating 2001) in localities across this country. Importantly, this would allow it to accommodate multiple identities in the way that the Good Friday Agreement allows the people of Northern Ireland to be British or Irish or both. It could accommodate nationalist sentiment in Scotland, Wales or England whilst bringing people together to fight for the common national cause of genuinely taking back control from both transnational capital and central government. A truly democratic culture fostered by a 'new politics' which rejects both neoliberalism and socialist statism could be what unites the country behind a new progressive nationalism.

For such a project to be successful, Labour's focus on the local should not ignore the national: micro-level politics can only be facilitated by ambitious reform of macro-level politics, starting with the Westminster Parliament. The Labour Party promised in its last general election manifesto to establish a Constitutional Convention, led by a citizens' assembly to 'answer crucial questions on how power is distributed in the UK today, how nations and regions can best relate to each other and how a Labour government can best put power in the hands of the people (Labour Party 2019, 81)).

This follows the model of the Scottish Constitutional Convention established following the failure of the Scottish referendum on devolution in 1979. It brought together the Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green and Communist parties, the Scottish Trades Unions Congress, local government, churches and other representatives of civil society to put forward proposals for constitutional reform regarding Scotland. Its ideas were eventually taken up by Labour when it came to power in 1997, paving the way for the creation of the Scottish Parliament. A new Constitutional Convention could go some way to address the democratic deficit that is currently being reinforced by the Conservative Party's promotion of parliamentary nationalism post-Brexit. Furthermore, in May 2018, the Labour Party committed to abolishing the House of Lords and its replacement with a second elected chamber.

Yet it remains to be seen exactly how the Party would ensure that such a reform does not end up reinforcing the strength of Parliament to the detriment of ordinary citizens, ensuring that it is accompanied by electoral reform to ensure a more proportional representation of the nation's political preferences. A truly representative parliament should be capable of representing multiple identities and multiple sites of sovereignty in order to promote a truly progressive 'ascending' nationalism that can accommodate democratic expression from below. Whilst Brexit may have opened up opportunities in this regard by encouraging popular expectations of more participatory politics, the Labour Party seems to have considerable difficulties breaking from the constraints of the centralised Westminster political tradition. Similarly to the Conservatives, it has eschewed continuing involvement of the wider public in the debate over Brexit, slow to embrace unconditionally a second referendum or to address the denial of the democratic will of the majority of the Scots and Northern Irish who voted

to remain in the European Union. In doing so, it also risks advancing descending nationalism and ultimately failing to treat the current ills of British democracy.

Conclusion

The Conservative government under Boris Johnson certainly appeals to nationalism, yet it does so primarily to build popular support for a hyperliberal project that aims to reinforce the power of global capital, failing to empower ordinary people. It is a good example of descending nationalism, firmly entrenched in the centralised British political tradition. In the context of Brexit, ‘taking back control’ has translated as the reinforcement of executive power as government appeals to parliamentary nationalism to protect the institutions of the British State, failing to recognise multiple identities and to address the democratic deficit that exists within the UK. It also fuels exclusionary populism through its appeal to nativism, instrumentalising fears from below in order to secure support for its own political project. It has let the nationalist genie out of the box and will find it very hard to control, especially if it fails to address popular demands for greater representativity and participation.

The Labour Party should ignore nationalism at its peril – ignoring English nationalism was considered to be one of the main reasons for its electoral defeat in December 2019 (English Labour Network 2020). But this does not mean mimicking the Conservative Party: Labour does show some potential to promote a radically different form of nationalism, defined from below and articulated through popular democratic participation in local government. Following Williams, it could reappropriate the politics of ‘placeism’ (Evans 2017) to develop a genuine ascending form of nationalism, built from the bottom-up. Yet, in supporting post-Brexit immigration controls, there is a danger that it may also appeal to an exclusionary form of nationalism that excludes

certain citizens from the democratic polity. It has also ultimately failed to challenge the British political tradition in excluding the wider public – and even political representatives of the three devolved nations – from the Brexit process. A truly progressive nationalism should be ‘ascending’, capable of recognising multiple sites of identity and encouraging genuine dialogue about the contours of nationhood. Identification with the national begins with the local.

A progressive nationalism does not represent a retreat from the international arena. On the contrary, it might be regarded as a means of making people comfortable with multi-level governance that can sit more easily alongside cosmopolitanism. Indeed, if people feel properly anchored in place and believe that they have real control, they may be more willing to adopt a global perspective. At a time when post-Brexit nationalism appears to herald the end of cosmopolitanism, there is a strong imperative to promote an alternative nationalism capable of promoting international cooperation to find solutions to global problems.

Whilst Brexit may represent an obstacle to the development of a more open form of nationalism that does not preclude internationalism, it may also be regarded as an opportunity for politicians seeking to promote a genuine ascending nationalism as a means of empowering local communities and sating their demands to seize control of the political process. In order to avail of such contingent factors, it will first be necessary to address the structural deformities of the British state and its dominant centralised political tradition which currently frustrate the exercise of multi-level democracy. Similarly, in Europe, the rise of exclusionary nativist nationalism might be countered by reforming national and European structures in such a way that they enable citizens to participate more actively in the shaping of the contours of their national and European identities.

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