

Brexit Reveals Jeremy Corbyn to be the True Moderate

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If there is an upside to Brexit, it is this: it has made it increasingly hard to present Jeremy Corbyn, contrary to everything the corporate media has been telling us for the past four years, as anything but a political moderate. In truth, he is one of the few moderates left in British – or maybe that should read English – politics right now. The fact that still isn't obvious to many in Britain is a sign of their – not his – extremism.

Brexit has brought into sharp focus, at least for those prepared to look, the fanaticism that dominates almost the entire British political class. Their zealotry has been increasingly on show since the UK staged a referendum in 2016 on leaving Europe that was won by the pro-Brexit camp with a wafer-thin majority. The extremism has only intensified as Britain approaches the exit deadline, due at the end of October.

The feud has usually been portrayed this way: The UK has split into two camps, polarising popular opinion between those who feel Britain's place is in Europe (Remainers) and those who prefer that Britain makes its own way in the world (Brexiters). But it has actually divided the British political class into three camps, with the largest two at the political extremes.

On the one side – variously represented by the new prime minister Boris Johnson and many in his Conservative party, as well as Nigel Farage and his supporters – are those who want Britain to break from Europe and rush into the embrace of the United States, stripping away the last constraints on free-market, ecocidal capitalism. They aren't just Brexiters, they are no-deal Brexiters, who want to turn their back on Europe entirely.

The other side – variously supported by many Labour MPs, including the party's deputy leader Tom Watson, and the Liberal Democrats – are those who wish to stay in the secure embrace of a European bureaucracy that is nearly as committed to suicidal capitalism as the US but, given the social democratic traditions of some of its member states, has mitigated the worst excesses of free-market fundamentalism. These UK politicians aren't just Remainers, they are Remainists, who not only refuse to contemplate any weakening of the bonds between the UK and Europe but actually want those bonds to tighten.

Suspending parliament

And as the divide has deepened, it has become clear that neither side is prepared to pay more than lip service to democracy.

On the Brexit side, Johnson has suspended parliament, an institution representing the people, that is supposed to be sovereign. Like his predecessor, Theresa May, he has

repeatedly found there is no legislative majority for a hard or no-deal Brexit. He has faced an unprecedented and humiliating series of defeats in parliament in the few days he has been prime minister. So now he has swept parliament out of the way in a bid to run down the clock on a no-deal Brexit without legislative interference.

Watson and the Remainists have been trying a counter-move, arguing that the referendum is no longer valid. They believe that new voters, youngsters more likely to support Remain, have come of age in the three years since 2016, and that more information about the true costs of Brexit have lately swung support to their side. They want to ignore the original referendum result and run the ballot again in the hope that this time the tide will turn in their favour.

The reality is that, if Johnson drives through a no-deal Brexit by ignoring parliament, or if Watson gets to quash the first referendum result to engineer a second, it is likely to trigger civil war in the UK.

The first option will drive Scotland out of the union, could very well reignite the sectarian “Troubles” of Northern Ireland, and will have English urban elites in open revolt. The second option will ensure that large sections of the English public who voted for Brexit because they feel marginalised and ignored are up in arms too. Their trust in politics and politicians will sink even further, and there is the danger that they will turn in droves to a crowd-pleasing autocrat like Johnson, Farage or worse.

Zealotry vs compromise

In these circumstances, anyone responsible would be looking to find common ground, to understand that political compromise is absolutely necessary to stop Britain breaking apart. And that is exactly what Corbyn and the largely ignored and maligned third camp have been trying to do.

They want to honour the spirit of the vote by leaving the EU but hope to do so in a way that doesn’t cut the UK adrift from Europe, doesn’t prevent the continuation of relatively free trade and movement, and doesn’t leave the UK exposed and vulnerable to serfdom under a new US master.

For many months Corbyn has been calling for a general election as a way for the majority of the public, having chosen in the referendum *what* they want to do, to now decide *who* they want to negotiate *how* Britain departs from Europe. But even that realistic compromise has not satisfied the fanatics within his own party.

Because the zealots of the right and the immoderate centre dominate the political and media landscape, this approach has barely registered in public debates. Corbyn’s efforts have been misrepresented as evidence of muddled thinking, ambivalence, or his covert opposition to Europe. It is none of those things.

Caught in the spider’s web

The common argument that Corbyn is a Brexit wolf in sheep’s clothing draws on the fact that, like many democratic socialists, such as the late Tony Benn, Corbyn has never been enamoured of the unelected European technocratic class that is misleadingly termed simply “Europe” or the “European Union”.

Rightly, socialists understood long ago that the more Britain was locked into Europe's embrace, the more it would become caught like a fly in the spider's web. At some level, most people have started to recognise this, if only because finding a way to leave Europe, even for Brexiters, has proved so inordinately difficult.

Just like banks were too big to fail in 2008 so they had to be bailed out with *our*, public money to save them from *their* private malfeasance, the publics of Europe have incrementally had their sovereignty transferred to an unelected and centralised bureaucracy all in the name of pursuing freedom – of movement and trade, chiefly for global corporations.

We haven't noticed, it is true, because for decades our own, domestic politics has come in one flavour only – support for our little corner of the global neoliberal empire. Till recently the consensus of Britain's ruling elite, whether of the right or of New Labour centrists, was that being a player in Europe was the best way to protect their – though not necessarily our – interests on that global battlefield. Now, as the neoliberal empire enters a period of terminal decline, this same elite are bitterly divided over whether the US or Europe is the best guarantor of their wealth and influence continuing a little longer.

Iron fist in velvet glove

But Britain and the world's problems – whether in the shape of impending economic meltdown or environmental collapse – cannot be solved from within the neoliberal paradigm, as becomes clearer by the day. New political structures are desperately needed: at the local level to foster new, more decentralised economic models, free of corporate influence, resource-stripping and unnecessary consumption; and at the global level to ensure that such models reverse rather than perpetuate the ecocidal policies that have dominated under neoliberal capitalism.

To start on that path will require the democratisation of Britain. The fear of Benn and others was that even if a truly socialist government was elected, its ability to make real, profound changes to the political and economic order – by bringing much of the economy back into public or cooperative ownership, for example – would be made impossible within the larger framework of European corporate managerialism.

We have been given glimpses of the iron fist Europe's technocrats wield beneath the velvet glove in the treatment of Greece over its financial troubles and the Catalan independence movement in Spain.

The attitude of Corbyn and other democratic socialists to Brexit, however, has been wildly misrepresented by the other two camps of zealots.

In Benn's time, it was still possible to imagine a world in which neoliberalism might be prevented from gaining a tyrannical grip on our political imaginations and on national economies. But things have changed since then. Now the issue is not whether Britain can stop being locked into a European neoliberal order. It is that the UK, like everyone else, is *already* in the stranglehold of a *global* neoliberal order.

Not just that, but Britain has willingly submitted to that order. As the zealotry of most of the political class demonstrates, few can imagine or want a life outside the neoliberal cage. The debate is about which corner of that suicidal, ecocidal global order we prefer to be located

in. The Brexit row is chiefly about which slavemaster, America or Europe, will be kinder to us.

Inside the leviathan's dark belly

In this context, there is no real escape. The best that can be done, as the moderates in both the Brexit and Remain camps realise, is loosen our chains enough so that we have room once again to contemplate new political possibilities. We can then breathe deeply, clear our heads and start to imagine how Britain and the world might operate differently, how we might free ourselves of the tyranny of the corporations and heal our planet of the deep scars we have inflicted on it.

These are big matters that cannot be solved either by binding ourselves more tightly to European technocrats or by cutting loose from Europe only to chain ourselves to the US. The Brexit feud is an endless theatrical distraction from the real questions we need to face. That is one reason why it drags on, one reason why our political class revel in it, John Bercow-style.

Strangely, it is the Remainists of the immoderate centre – typified by commentary in corporate “liberal” media like the Guardian – who so often claim to lament the fact that the left has failed to offer a vision, a political future, that might serve as an alternative to neoliberalism. But how can such a vision emerge from deep inside the leviathan's dark belly?

Hiding in ideological life-rafts

It goes without saying that the Atlanticists cheerleading Brexit are up to no good when they speak of “taking back control” and “reclaiming our sovereignty”. They demand those powers only so they can immediately surrender them to a US master.

But the much-maligned leftwing, soft Brexit – a version that wishes to distance Britain from Europe without pretending that the UK can stand alone on the global neoliberal battlefield – also has use for such language.

This version of taking back control isn't about spitting in the face of Europe, blocking the entry of immigrants, or reinventing the imagined halycon days of empire. It is about recognising that we, like the rest of humankind, are responsible for the crimes we have been, and still are, committing against the planet, against other species, against fellow human beings.

Chaining ourselves to an unelected, distant European technocratic class that simply follows orders – implementing the requirements of an economic system that *must* end in the destruction of the planet – is cowardice. We can more easily shelter from that truth when we cede our political and economic powers to those compelled to carry out the (il)logic of neoliberalism.

Standing a little outside Europe is probably the best we can hope to manage in current circumstances. But it might give us the political space – and, more importantly, burden us with the political responsibility – to imagine the deep changes that are urgently needed.

Change has to happen if we as a species are to survive, and it has to happen soon and it has to happen somewhere. We cannot force others to change, but we can recognise our own

need to change and offer a vision of change for others to follow. That can begin only when we stop shielding ourselves from the consequences of our decisions, stop hiding in someone else's ideological life-raft in the forlorn hope that it will weather the coming, real-world storms.

It is time to stop acting like zealots for neoliberalism, squabbling over which brand of turbo-charged capitalism we prefer, and face up to our collective responsibility to change our and our children's future.

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