A Disaster of the Political Class

While Brexit is above all a calamity of the Conservative Party's making, it is born of entrenched xenophobia and racism in British society

By David Wearing

A week before the 2016 referendum vote on UK membership in the European Union—at the height of a campaign characterized by racist demagoguery from the pro-Brexit side—a member of Parliament (MP) named Jo Cox, who was known for standing up for refugees, was assassinated in broad daylight by a neo-Nazi. When later asked to give his name in court, the assassin, Thomas Mair, replied, "Death to traitors, freedom for Britain". According to a *Guardian* report following Mair's conviction for murder, "prosecutors acknowledge privately that the febrile atmosphere in which the EU referendum campaign was waged appears certain to have contributed to Mair's decision to murder his MP".

Chillingly, the murder of Jo Cox and the context in which it happened did not give a sufficient number of voters pause about the dark path that British "Euroscepticism" had taken. On June 23, 2016, the Leave campaign—with its paranoid vision of a UK overrun by dehumanized brown people—was rewarded with victory, its toxic repertoire imbued with a new swagger and sense of vindication that has poisoned British politics ever since. The referendum result prompted what the chief of London's Metropolitan Police described as a horrible spike in hate crimes against visible minorities and Eastern Europeans in the following weeks and months, another predictable consequence of the demagogic turn.

Cox's murder and the wave of hate crimes after the referendum have essentially become invisible in the political discourse around Brexit in the subsequent two-and-a-half years, their causes and meanings scarcely acknowledged, let alone discussed and confronted. Instead, that discourse sails serenely on, following a course plotted by the chauvinistic right. The *Daily Mail* carries front page headlines such as "Crush the Saboteurs" and "Enemies of the People," aimed at anyone perceived to be frustrating the referendum result, while cries of "betrayal" from

◁ Protesters during an anti-racism march in London, March 16, 2019. *Simon Dawson/Reuters*

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Brexiteers greet any attempt to contemplate a future relationship with Europe that fails to conform precisely to their own extreme demands.

Meanwhile, centrist politicians maintain their longstanding policy of appeasement and victim-blaming, with MP Chuka Umunna demanding a "muscular approach to immigration" and singling out the Somali community for failing to, in his terminology, integrate. Umunna, ironically, is himself of migrant background.

Race is next to nowhere in Britain's Brexit conversation, partly because migrants and people of color are largely excluded from British politics, save for those who can be trusted to conform. A conceited sense of national innocence prevails, disciplining dissenting voices and stifling the honest and self-critical conversations that are urgently required. Additionally, a specific right-wing narrative of class has become pervasive, obscuring the issue of race and distorting the national understanding of what Brexit really means.

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The popular story now goes that the Leave vote was a rebellion of the left-behind working class against a privileged metropolitan elite. This has proved a highly effective rhetorical cudgel since, naturally, the suggestion that one is an elitist patronizing the downtrodden can have a chastening effect on progressives who might otherwise have sought to articulate a confident anti-racist and pro-migrant argument. Yet, this is a selective characterization of the Leave-Remain divide, one which obscures one of the key features of Britain's socio-political discourse: the bigotry directed at migrants and minority ethnic communities by the white middle and upper classes. Confronting the realities of British racism and xenophobia is an indispensable first step toward a better understanding of the causes and nature of the Brexit crisis. Here, analysts with heritage in the former British colonies and upbringing in the heartlands of white British conservatism have an important voice to add to the discussion, one that can compensate for the biases currently dominating the discourse.

Percentages and Facts about Racism in Britain

Taking the major post-referendum exit poll alongside other relevant data, socio-cultural attitudes appear to have been a more important factor in the Brexit vote than social class. It is true that class correlated with voting preference—64 percent of working-class voters chose Leave, but it is simultaneously true that 59 percent of Leave voters were middle-class (the British middle-class is much larger than the working-class). Danny Dorling, professor of geography at the University of Oxford, notes that, "the vote to leave Europe was largely a middle-

class English vote," and dismisses as fantasy the idea that working-class voters from the north of England were the decisive group in the referendum result.

The Leave vote correlated much more strongly with social attitudes than with social class; 81 percent of those expressing opposition to multiculturalism—a strong proxy for racist and xenophobic views—voted to leave. Interestingly, 80 percent of those seeing social liberalism as a force for ill and 74 percent of those seeing feminism as a force for ill also voted Leave. Plenty of middle and upper class Britons hold these views, and plenty of working class people do not. Clearly the politics of Brexit had some attachment to a wider backlash against the erosion of conservative social hierarchies and values.

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It is particularly revealing that ethnicity correlated with referendum voter preference as much as, or more strongly than, class: 67 percent of Asians voted to remain, along with 73 percent of those of African and Afro-Caribbean descent. The most vindictively racialized "other" in British society today, 70 percent of Muslims, also voted to remain. These groups are disproportionately likely to be working class. What therefore does it mean to describe Brexit voters as the "left behind" when a black working-class voter is less likely to vote Brexit than an affluent white property owner, or when multi-ethnic working-class areas of British cities voted to remain in the EU whereas the richer and more ethnically homogenous Tory heartlands of England voted to leave?

Attempts to discuss the role of racism and xenophobia in the referendum result are almost invariably met with aggressive incomprehension, born of the widespread sense that British racism is a fringe pathology that cannot substantively account for over 17 million Brexit votes. The lack of black and minority ethnic voices in Britain's media and politics allows this naivety about the extent and nature of British racism to go undisturbed. However, many of those who have experienced it first-hand recognize racism as a problem that goes far beyond Brexit voters. Nevertheless, the specific degree of overlap between racist or xenophobic attitudes and the choice to vote for Brexit is a question that needs to be faced.

In the 2016 referendum, 37 percent of the UK's registered voters (which does not include all adults since many remain unregistered) voted for the United Kingdom to leave the EU. A similar-sized group—29 percent of the public—admit to some level of racial prejudice, a number which stood as high as 38 percent in 2011. This self-reported prejudice will, naturally, understate the true extent of the problem since there will inevitably be many more people who are prejudiced but are unprepared to admit it.

A poll in 2014 showed 26 percent of the British public agreeing with the statement that "the government should encourage immigrants and their families to leave Britain (including family members who were born in Britain)," while only 43 percent of those polled disagreed. That is to say that a majority of the British public either regard their British-born compatriots with foreign-born parents as an illegitimate or undesirable presence, or cannot decide whether or not those people have the right to live in the country of their birth. It is inescapable that racialized "othering" is playing a significant role here.

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Another poll from shortly after the referendum indicates the depth of this prejudice, as well as its close association with the Brexit vote. When asked if the government should allow a group of fourteen refugee children, stranded in the French port of Calais, to join their families already in Britain, 32 percent said no, and only 50 percent said yes. The responses differed according to social class to a degree, but the correlation with the Brexit vote was far more striking. Only 34 percent of Leave voters thought the refugee kids should be allowed to join their families. Fifty-two percent said they should stay out of Britain, and 14 percent could not decide.

Cozying Up to the British Empire and the Leave Vote
The standard (now clichéd) line from politicians across the spectrum who seek to win the anti-immigrant vote is that the public has "legitimate concerns" about immigration that must not be dismissed as racist or xenophobic. The false association of the Leave vote with the working class has now given that admonition—that whitewashing of British racism—a veneer of moral force. Plainly, however, there can be no "legitimate concern" about, for example, the right of a refugee child to be with their family, and yet two-thirds of Brexit voters (alongside many in the wider public) are incapable of recognizing this child's rights. The question is not whether racism and xenophobia played a role in the Brexit vote, but what the precise nature of that role was.

No useful account of voter motivation and preference can be reduced to questions of narrow economic self-interest. We must bear in mind that people's individual and collective sense of who they are, their status and self-worth, also matters to them, and at a sometimes visceral level. Moreover, these senses are relative. A collective sense of self acquires the quality of a status through juxtaposition with an "other," often one that is denigrated in a racialized way. Of course, this is particularly true when the relevant questions are ones of nationhood and relations with the rest of the world.

These questions are not abstract but based in concrete, historical, and material circumstances. For a three-and-a-half-century period—ending around the same time that the UK joined what has now become the European Union—Britain's economy, society, and international power developed in close symbiosis with Empire, a system of violent domination and exploitation of people of color all over the world. That racism, whether articulated with reference to biology or culture, was the key ideological ingredient that allowed the British elite of the liberal Enlightenment to reconcile its claimed values with the violence and iniquities of empire. In terms of how Britain understood itself relative to others, racism and nationalistic chauvinism were two sides of a coin that was standard currency at all levels of the national culture through the imperial centuries preceding the modern era.

One could not reasonably expect the cultural and ideological legacies of that long period to simply disappear, not least given the quasi-imperial nature of the UK's ongoing relations with the global south, including but not limited to the Middle East. It should be no surprise that the imperial mindset (and its racist counterpart) remains strong across British society. Today, 59 percent of the public believe the British Empire is something to be proud of, a view perhaps rooted in the ignorance displayed by the 49 percent who believe that colonized countries were better off for the experience.

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Naturally this chauvinism is particularly strong on the political right (though by no means limited to it), where anxiety over the loss of empire and Britain's steadily diminishing status as a world power has been palpable for decades. To some degree, these feelings attached themselves to a right-wing view of the European Union. Britain's political and economic integration with Europe came to symbolize its loss of self-sufficiency as a major power in its own right, and the extent of the integrationist project driven from Brussels elicited a fear of further loss of status and virility. The majority of the UK's political class took a more pragmatic approach to their own sense of Britain's entitlement to international power and influence, seeing the EU as a useful avenue to achieving that aim. Theirs was a more considered form of nationalistic chauvinism. Conservative Eurosceptics, however, remained irreconcilable.

The Collusion of the Tories and Labour for Euroscepticism
Euroscepticism struggled for a long time to turn itself into a serious political force. It remained a fringe of the Conservative parliamentary party for many years, and a smaller fringe of the Labour Party amongst socialists who opposed the neoliberalism that increasingly characterized the economic dimensions of the European project. A significant proportion of the public preferred to leave the EU, given the choice, but doing so was never high on voters' list of priorities.

What changed was the ability of the Eurosceptics to exploit a growing set of tensions within twenty-first century British conservatism, and to attach their cause to issues that a sufficient proportion of the British public care about.

The partial and uneven relaxation of immigration laws across the EU in the 2000s was seized upon by British Eurosceptics as a way to tie this widespread public grievance to their own specific aims. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) managed to pitch itself rather astutely as a semi-respectable proponent of the preoccupations of traditional far-right voters, and as a home for those alienated by the Conservative leadership's attempts to modernize and liberalize its image. Some right-wing voters who had been attracted by Labour's rightward shift under Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (especially on immigration) also came to prefer UKIP's full-throated offer of the real thing.

The presence of racialized others in Britain, their efforts to secure their rightful place in a gradually diversifying and liberalizing society, and Britain's place in a fast-integrating Europe were all woven into a narrative of a country losing its way, of a rightful order of things being upended. With its leader Nigel Farage wielding the niche charisma of an English golf club bore, UKIP began to siphon votes from both main parties, and from the Conservatives in particular.

It was Prime Minister David Cameron's hubristic decision to call a national referendum on EU membership, assuming he would win the vote and kill off UKIP in the process, that plunged the country into its current socio-political crisis. Furthermore, it was the choice by his successor Theresa May to pursue a Brexit negotiation strategy that prioritized (to no avail) the unity of her own party over the wider public interest which guaranteed that the entire process would descend into farce. However, while Brexit is above all a disaster of the Conservative Party's making, it is one born of deeper problems in British society and politics.

In 2000, after a judicial inquiry found London's Metropolitan Police to be institutionally racist following its mishandling of an investigation into the murder of an Afro-Caribbean youth, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain produced a report surveying the wider social context in which the murder had taken place. The report argued that the country stood at a crossroads. It could attempt to reimagine itself as a pluralistic nation with a welcoming approach to its minority ethnic communities and an open and honest view of its history, or it could cling harder to familiar forms of exclusionary, chauvinistic jingoism, and reap increasingly grim consequences as a result. Two decades on, the report makes for grimly prescient reading.

The Blair administration of the time was inherently incapable of taking on board these recommendations, characterized as it was by deep political conformism and a conviction that it was governing a resolutely right-wing country.

Labour under Blair and Brown never missed an opportunity to broadcast their "toughness" on immigration—particularly on asylum seekers—passing a series of draconian immigration acts, repeatedly portraying racialized others as social problems requiring unsentimental solutions, and turning the language of "legitimate concerns" into the hegemonic political discourse. Unfortunately, it continues to be these same politicians or their successors that lead much of the present Remain movement in the Labour Party and outside it.

In doing so, the Labour government played a key role in the legitimization and mainstreaming of twenty-first century British racism and xenophobia. Reported racist attitudes soared and fresh racist discourses thrived, with particularly severe consequences for Muslims in the context of the "War on Terror". The extent to which this helped prepare the ground for Brexit should not be underestimated, given the central role that Islamophobia played in the Leave campaigners' demagoguery. Blair's claim in April this year that the way to combat the far right is to get tougher on migrants and their supposed failure to "integrate" is striking for a level of dogmatism that borders on eccentricity. It was precisely this approach that laid the ground for the 2016 referendum result that Blair and his New Labour colleagues now lament, apparently incapable of recognizing their own culpability.

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Two Divides and the Reimagining of Britain

From surveying the chaotic state of British politics in the summer of 2019, and the dark forces within it that continue to stir, it is clear that the task of reimagining Britain as a pluralistic, open, and welcoming national community has never been more urgent.

Had this task been taken up in a serious way in the years before the Brexit vote, the vote's result would likely have been different. It might even have changed the minds of those who did vote Leave for primarily economic reasons. Had this sort of project been pursued, it might even have been possible to effect a major and sustained shift in public opinion against Brexit in the years after the vote. That this has not happened is down to the failings of the Conservatives' opponents.

If an embrace of multiculturalism occurs, Britain will first need to reinvent itself. This reimagining will need to be actively pursued at all levels of British society. The goal would be to transform the dominant sense of who fully belongs in the UK, of who is included as us rather than othered as them. A long overdue confrontation with the realities and historical legacies of Empire would play a central role, in the interest of promoting understanding rather than collective shame, and as an antidote to the nationalistic chauvinism that continues to toxify the socio-political discourse. Migrants and people of minority ethnic

background could and should play a leading role in this endeavor, staking our claim as a legitimate part of society, not to create a new multicultural basis for British self-satisfaction, but simply to establish a more healthy, inclusive, and egalitarian collective sense of self.

The main political voices dedicated to preventing Brexit hail almost entirely from the political center, and are deeply implicated in the politics of recent decades which created the conditions that made Brexit possible to begin with. There is no acknowledgement from the veterans of the Blair and Brown governments that their own record in office might have contributed to the problem. Only an incessant demand for a second referendum without any convincing idea of how to shift public opinion to the extent required to make a re-run worthwhile.

Centrist Remain politics has its own chauvinistic view of Britain's rightful role in the world, articulated through liberal rather than conservative language, but sharing the same fundamental sense of patriotic self-satisfaction that has helped bring the country to this point. This mentality was exemplified two months before the Brexit vote by the former New Labour Foreign Secretary David Miliband, when he said that:

"If the world is increasingly divided between firefighters and arsonists, then Britain has for centuries been a firefighter. This is no time for Britain to join the ranks of arsonists and there should be no doubt that Brexit would be an act of arson on the international order."

This whitewashing of centuries of Britain's destructive imperial past, and presenting of British power as a leading force for good in the world (being a firefighter), is no less ahistorical or chauvinistic coming as it does from a centrist liberal than it would be if articulated by a Conservative Brexiteer.

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Miliband's remark is entirely representative of the centrist politicians who continue to dominate the politics of Remain. His former boss, Prime Minister Gordon Brown, told a newspaper during a 2005 trip to Africa that "The days of Britain having to apologize for its colonial history are over".

Brown's Conservative successor, David Cameron, who effectively led the Remain campaign, once said, "I think there is an enormous amount to be proud of in what the British empire did and was responsible for" (adding the empty platitude, "But of course there were bad events as well as good events").

For the centrist politicians who have pushed themselves to the fore of Remain politics, British greatness is axiomatic and best situated within the parameters of the European project. For the Brexiteers, British greatness is no less axiomatic, but best situated outside of that project. These shared delusions of grandeur have drowned out the possibility of a frank and honest conversation about the real roots of the current crisis.

Meanwhile, although the Labour Party has changed significantly since the days of Blair and Brown, and while it is now led by figures known for their vigorous and vocal opposition to their predecessors' policies on asylum and immigration, those expecting an aggressively proactive anti-racist and pro-migrant agenda from Jeremy Corbyn's leadership have been left disappointed. Corbyn does not actively court the racist and xenophobic vote, but he appears to share the somewhat simplistic view of many on the left that these prejudices are merely misdirected economic concerns which can be addressed through a more egalitarian economic policy. Labour's reluctance even to argue for the sort of open immigration policies that would make a softer and less economically damaging Brexit possible is testament to its timidity and confusion on the issue.

Yet, while the immediate future looks bleak, it is also true that the reimagining of Britain is, to a large degree, already taking place beyond the realm of politics. In many communities up and down the country, multiculturalism is experienced not as a policy imposed by a metropolitan elite, but increasingly as an unremarkable fact of everyday life. Anti-immigrant sentiment and the electoral success of racist and xenophobic political projects like UKIP and the Brexit campaign fare best precisely in the areas that have experienced the least immigration. The largest Remain votes, and the lowest votes for parties like UKIP and the Conservatives, by contrast, come in areas (including some of the most deprived in Britain) where immigrants are not an unknown, demonized other, but one's neighbors, colleagues, friends, and family.

This emerging Britain remains sidelined from mainstream politics, not substantively represented by the leading politicians of Remain, and finding limited expression mostly through grassroots activism in defense of socioeconomic rights. Yet, its presence is growing. The Brexit vote can in many ways be read as a backlash against both this change and the challenges to familiar social values and hierarchies that emanate from it. In an optimistic view of the future, Brexit might come to be seen as the last, dying spasm of the old imperial mentalities, before a new post-colonial Britain, shaped in no small part by formerly colonized subjects and their descendants, finally came into being. That future might still happen, but it may require a new generation of political leadership to ensure that it is fully realized. ℝ