

EDITORIAL

The patriotism problem

James Stafford

Labour cannot hope to match the shallow, misanthropic nationalism of today's Tories.

For the five years that it has been my privilege to co-edit *Renewal*, and for a long time before that, the Labour Party's allegedly difficult relationship to questions of identity, nationhood and belonging has been a constant backdrop to our debates about the future of social democracy in Britain. Labour's anxieties about 'patriotism' have a Groundhog Day quality to them. No matter how hard successive leaderships – Blair, Brown, Miliband, and yes, Corbyn too – have tried to wrap themselves in the flag, significant sections of the press and public are always ready to condemn the party and its supporters as somehow alien to the nation. Hand-wringing party intellectuals, meanwhile, are all too ready to believe these transparently self-interested denials of Labour's legitimacy as a national governing force.

By turns shifty and condescending, Labour politicians then offer ritual sacrifices of principle, so as to display their allegiance to ideas of British identity that have no room for them and never will. These rarely do much to enhance Labour's political credibility, but they can have real policy consequences: the establishment, under the last Labour government, of the brutal principle of 'no recourse to public funds' for vulnerable asylum seekers; the 2014 vote to support the Immigration Bill that enabled the Windrush Scandal. As Eunice Goes observes in this issue, to win again, and to govern in line with its better traditions, Labour badly needs to articulate a British patriotism that does not rely on performative cruelty towards today's out-group of choice. The party must recall the 'stories of radical dissent that define progressive patriotism', and appeal to different national 'character traits such as gentleness, and respect for constitutionalism and legality'. The difficulty here, however, is that it is precisely this liberal idea of Britishness that has been systemati-

cally degraded by the rejuvenated right of the later 2010s. In its absence, the task of telling a progressive story of British nationhood is harder than it has been at any time since the Second World War.

The dystopia of Tory nationalism

To treat British ‘patriotism’ as a static set of ‘values’, that ‘metropolitan’ Labour has carelessly abandoned and must now rediscover, is to totally misread the political and cultural history of twenty-first century Britain. The story of our time is not Labour’s abandonment of an English working class that has long been undergoing a wrenching process of decline and recomposition. It is the right’s increasingly successful purge of both liberalism and social democracy from British political culture, leaving behind a plastic, misanthropic nationalism: one devoid of any real knowledge of British history or culture, and based on little more than blind deference to privilege, cruelty to outsiders, and contempt for our fellow citizens.

We know that the Tories do not care much for Britain and its people, because they regularly tell us so. Four current members of Johnson’s Cabinet notoriously wrote that British workers were ‘among the worst idlers in the world’, something for which they have suffered no political consequences.¹ Sajid Javid, a former member of Johnson’s cabinet, is now routinely feted as a sage moderate, despite allowing a British baby to die in an Iraqi refugee camp so as to avoid assuming legal responsibilities for its mother, an erstwhile ISIS supporter radicalised as a British teenager. Tens of thousands of British citizens died from Covid-19 last year – unnecessarily, alone and in pain – because this government did not trust us to follow lockdown regulations for more than a few weeks and consequently waited until far too late to impose them. In the course of the Brexit negotiations, this same government casually kneecapped the entire British music industry by refusing to negotiate any reciprocal arrangements for performing artists touring in the EU and the UK. The reason, we are told, was that the Home Office didn’t want to sign up to anything that looked like even a shadow of pre-Brexit ‘freedom of movement’. Only the purest patriotism, it seems, is willing to sacrifice the jewel of the national culture to the pressing imperative of *keeping foreigners out*.

In his attempts to differentiate himself from Jeremy Corbyn and introduce himself to the public in the middle of a national crisis, Keir Starmer has emphasised his stentorian side, as a prosecutor and a knight of the realm. This is fine as far as it goes. In the absence of the kind of strong, autonomous and internationalist labour movement that tried (and failed) to prevent the First World War, minimal displays of reverence for the coercive arms of the state are simply the price of entry into national electoral competition. (Despite the selective memories of many on the Labour left, Jeremy Corbyn also realised this, which is why Labour under his

leadership ultimately pledged to keep Trident, remain in NATO, and increase spending on the police.)

The problem, however, is that it is difficult to accept that anybody voted Conservative in 2019 because they seriously believe that Boris Johnson is an honest and dutiful servant of the Crown. At best, they did so because he represented irreverence, optimism and good humour – a rumbunctious, carefree vision of ‘merrie England’, in gleeful opposition to Corbyn’s high-minded moralism (itself, of course, a noble British tradition, significantly older than the Labour Party itself). At worst, as the sociologist Will Davies argued at the time, Johnson’s appeal rested on a strange mixture of libertinism and resentment, emblematic of the curdled counter-cultural sensibilities of the post-war generations. ‘With his loose talk, his racism and sexual incontinence’, Davies wrote shortly before the 2019 election, ‘Johnson offers a vicarious free-for-all for a generation of men who missed out on the 1960s’ and ‘feel suffocated by “political correctness”’.²

We now live in rather different and more serious times, and Johnson’s personal popularity (though not that of his party) has suffered as a result. The fundamental problem still remains, however. The core attraction of the new Tory nationalism is the manner in which it styles voting for Britain’s traditional governing party as an act of thrilling rebellion against the supposed ‘woke orthodoxy’ represented by people under forty who live in large cities. In the vaguely anthropological focus groups that are now so often conducted in the so-called ‘red wall’, the accusation is often heard that Labour is a party ‘for students’. This is rightly read as an invitation to find out just what it is the party needs to do to convince some of its former voters that it still represents them. But it’s the intensity of the hatred for students, not the belief that Labour is ‘for’ them, that is new and concerning here.

As things stand, Labour is going to have a hard time convincing anybody that it isn’t ‘for’ the young and the ‘woke’ – at least to a greater degree than the Conservatives, which is what matters in electoral terms. It would be folly, then, to allow this kind of obviously ginned-up cultural resentment to set the parameters of how Labour tries to tell its own story about Britain and its future. Unless the party can convincingly articulate that idealistic young people have a role to play in the nation’s future (something that, in a functional political culture, would not be such a hard sell) then it will be permanently boxed into the defensive crouch it has occupied for much of the past decade.

Generosity and dissent

Accusations that Labour lacks a sense of ‘patriotism’ are nearly as old as the party itself. The strikingly revisionist history told by many in the commentariat – that Labour was regarded as irreproachably ‘patriotic’ by all and sundry until Jeremy

Corbyn came along – is a laughable invention. In the interwar years and the 1980s, the organised industrial working class, inflationary, uncouth and potentially seditious, was styled as standing outside a ‘true’ British nation characterised by the ‘vigorous virtues’ of bourgeois thrift and propriety. In today’s virtual absence of effective trade unions, it is the urban precariat and professions of all kinds who suddenly find that their interests and values are not to be included within a ‘serious’ definition of national politics. Because these groups don’t conform to many people’s idea of a ‘traditional’ Labour supporter – and because some people who look and sound like versions of the latter have switched allegiance to the Tories – it’s sometimes hard to identify the structural similarity within the argument of these more recent undesirables with the position of Labour’s core constituencies in those earlier periods of electoral woe for the party. Yet it is nonetheless there. The only way to durably escape it is for Labour and ‘its’ people (whoever they are) to establish their own idea of Britain, and confidently invite others to join them there.

A good starting point for this effort would be to take a little more pride in Labour’s good standing with Britain’s young people. In many other European countries, established parties of the centre left would do almost anything to attract thumping majorities of the under-35s in support of their programme. It is not something to take for granted. We all know that, in an ageing society where the young are forced to seek work in a small number of large cities, the votes of these cohorts count for less than they once did. But Labour shouldn’t accept a zero-sum choice between keeping the coalition it has and growing the coalition it needs. The party leadership doesn’t need to praise or condemn every stance taken by the social movements advancing racial and climate justice in contemporary Britain. Nor should these movements, for that matter, set much store by what the ‘Leader of Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition’ does or doesn’t say about them.

What Labour politicians *can* do, however, is more vigorously reject the notion that there is something inherently unpatriotic about challenge and dissent; and more proudly weave popular movements, past and present, back into a more generous, less brittle account of what it might yet mean to live in twenty-first century Britain. For in the end, unlike the cynical politicians and journalists who fall over themselves to sneer at them for clicks, movements like Black Lives Matter and Fridays for Future actually believe (at least on some level) that the population of Britain might ultimately prove capable of addressing both the nation’s past atrocities and present injustices with a modicum of maturity and resolve. This isn’t ‘patriotism’ by the lights of the opinion pages or the focus groups. But it exhibits a greater faith in the actual moral and intellectual capacities of British citizens than the boosterist pabulum spouted by Johnson and his acolytes whenever the cameras are rolling.

Scotland and Brexit

It ultimately remains to be seen how much traction the Conservatives' confected anger about Labour's supposed 'woke agenda' really has with the electorate. While the former is imported more or less wholesale from the US culture wars, the charge that Labour is secretly in hock to the SNP is of a more authentic, local origin. While it was Keir Starmer's occasionally flat-footed response to the Black Lives Matter protests that most exercised the Labour Twittersphere last year, the firm line he has taken against any prospect of a second referendum on Scottish independence is arguably more consequential. 'No responsible First Minister should contemplate it', he declared in a December speech, 'and no responsible Prime Minister would grant it'.³

Given that Scottish Labour was and remains acutely divided on the question of a second referendum, to declare opposition so unequivocally, and so early on, was a risky and high-handed move. This is even more the case given that there is a genuine case for unionists to answer regarding the difficult interaction of the 2014 and 2016 referendums. While David Cameron's plans for an EU referendum had already been announced at the time of the 2014 'no' vote on Scottish independence, the argument that remaining in the UK was the safest route to remaining in the EU was repeatedly made by spokesman for the Better Together campaign, including Labour's Alistair Darling.

Leaving not just the EU but the single market and the customs union, and doing both without any meaningful involvement from Holyrood, was a deliberate act of vandalism against the Union by the Conservative Party; one that Starmer rightly condemned in that same December speech. It remains more or less impossible, however, for Labour to both voice Scottish anger at being brushed aside in the Brexit negotiations and to maintain that nothing has changed fundamentally enough to warrant revisiting the verdict of 2014. The party can only hope that the independence movement exhausts itself in internal recriminations before it threatens Labour's fortunes in England once more. The SNP is increasingly divided, and the case for 'independence in Europe' has undoubtedly been damaged by the EU's sluggish Covid vaccination rollout and its embarrassing threat to close the Irish border.

The slow-burning disaster of a Brexit deal that Labour is loath to relitigate, however, means that the party is unlikely to find a way out of its Scottish predicament any time soon. In the 2020s as in the 2010s, it is the deliberate trashing of the institutions that once held Britain together, not Labour's abandonment of a pure and unchanging notion of British identity, that lies at the root of the party's real 'patriotism' problem.

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Further reading

Ross McKibbin, 'Class and conventional wisdom: The Conservative Party and the "Public" in inter-war Britain', in *Ideologies of Class*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1990.

Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial resistance and British dissent*, Verso, London 2019.

Deborah Mattinson, *Beyond the Red Wall: Why Labour lost, How the Conservatives won and what will happen next?*, Biteback, London 2020.

Notes

- 1 Kwasi Kwarteng MP, Priti Patel MP, Chris Skidmore MP and Elizabeth Truss MP, *Britannia Unchained: Global Lessons for Growth and Prosperity*, Palgrave Macmillan 2012, London 2019, pp64-66.
- 2 Will Davies, 'The punishment of democracy', PERC Blog, 10 December 2019: https://www.perc.org.uk/project_posts/punishmentdemocracy/.
- 3 Keir Starmer, 'A socially just Scotland in a modern United Kingdom', 21 December 2020: <https://labour.org.uk/keir-starmer-union-speech/>.