

Election 2017: Beginning to see the light?

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We invited a range of contributors to reflect on the results of the June 2017 election, to think about what the results mean for the future of the country, and what we might do to consolidate and develop the gains they represent.

Contributors

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The 2017 election and the public mood

Kirsten Forkert

The past few years of politics, in particular since the vote to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump, have been marked by a consolidation of the idea of the public as passive and reactionary, and above all as *emotional*. The public has been seen to be anxious about social and cultural change - particularly change resulting from immigration. These feelings could not be assuaged by facts, statistics or myth-busting; instead people needed to be listened to and ultimately reassured - by harsh rhetoric and tough policies. And these feelings were not only seen as the private concerns of individuals; they were perceived as representing the public mood: anxious, and nostalgic for earlier periods in history imagined as sustaining a more cohesive society. We are in post-liberal times, David Goodhart and other commentators proclaimed.¹

The mainstream public was being increasingly defined to the exclusion of immigrants, who represented unwanted social change and a threat to settled identities. Within the context of austerity cuts, these fears of loss of identity became entangled with concerns about pressure on jobs, housing and access to public services. Those harbouring these anxieties and resentments were taken to be representative of the public, so that their concerns mattered more than those of others.

Narratives and buzzwords were developed to characterise this section of the society, now broadly regarded as representative of the whole. One of these was the 'left behind': the older, white, socially conservative, working-class voters living in post-industrial areas who felt betrayed by mainstream political parties on the question of immigration and who were switching their allegiances to UKIP.² The term 'left behind' suggests both abandonment and a moral obligation: there is a sense of being owed something. This moral obligation notably did not exist for others, including young people, even though they could equally deserve this label

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of being 'left behind', given that they are faced with zero-hour contracts and other forms of precarious work, overpriced housing, whether for renting or buying, student-loan debt, etc, etc. Prime minister Theresa May referred to the 'just about managing' in her address to the 2016 Conservative Party conference - people who were in work but were struggling financially. However, crucially, she appealed to this section of society primarily on cultural and moral rather than economic grounds, when she claimed that 'they [referring to politicians and commentators, but also broadly meaning the liberal metropolitan elite] find your patriotism distasteful'.³

Such constructions of the public as both passive and reactionary have a long history. Former US president Richard Nixon popularised the term silent majority in 1969, to refer to voters who had not protested against the Vietnam War, or otherwise participated in the 1960s counter-culture. In the UK, Thatcherism's appeal to what Stuart Hall called 'authoritarian populism' created sharp divisions between those who were seen to be *legitimate* members of British society and those classed as undesirables.⁴ Tony Blair's 'Middle England' and David Cameron's 'hardworking families' can also be understood within similar terms. Each political era, arguably, brings with it a rediscovery of particular sections of the electorate who are then defined in varying configurations of passivity, social conservatism, resentment and economic hardship. It is claimed that these people have previously been ignored, and now must be urgently listened to, and taken as representative of the public. The construction of these categories is by its very nature divisive, given that they are designed to pit insiders against outsiders, but the categories are also generic enough to allow everyone, from the low-paid to the wealthy, to be able to imagine themselves as belonging to them: everyone is a 'hard working family' or is 'just about managing'. The 'left behind', while more specific as a category, could still appeal to wider sections of society, on the basis of social conservatism or background (if not current socio-economic circumstances). This is how commentators who operate within elite circles can claim to speak for the 'left behind'.

It is within this context of common-sense constructions of the public as passive and reactionary that the result of the 2017 general election is so remarkable. The election result confounded the expectation of pollsters, politicians and pundits, who were all predicting a Conservative landslide, on the scale of Thatcher's 1983 election victory.

Two horrific terrorist attacks took place in Manchester and London immediately

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before the vote - outrages that are traditionally regarded as engendering support for parties of the right. However, attempts by May, fully supported by the tabloid press, to capitalise on the attacks and smear Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn as a terrorist sympathiser had little success in changing people's minds. Although the Labour Party did not win the election, they did win 40 per cent of the popular vote. The Conservatives were denied a majority, forcing them to cobble together an alliance with the extremely socially conservative Democratic Unionist Party. It was assumed that young people were apathetic and would not vote, and that grassroots campaigns such as Grime4Corbyn would have little effect. But there have been many indications that large numbers of young people turned out to vote (between 60 per cent and 70 per cent), and, in particular, to vote for the Labour Party. This result reveals the limitations of the way in which the public is constructed by politicians, pundits and the media, as well as highlighting their blinkered perspective on whose views matter, and whose are to be disregarded (particularly the young). It also reveals there may be consequences to targeting young people with cuts and punitive policies year after year, especially when combined with continual dismissive moralising from newspaper editorials about millennials as spoiled, apathetic and over-sensitive.

Why did they get it so wrong? Part of the answer is that this dominant conception of the public is oblivious to any instances of active citizenship, and, especially, to social movement politics. Rallies, protests and other activities are usually dismissed as the rituals of an activist subculture that is seen as both immature and residual - living as we are presumed to do in a modern, professionalised era in which political activity is largely confined to politicians, think tanks and elite commentators. If the public is a passive, reactionary silent majority, it follows that citizens cannot be actively engaged; they can only express their thoughts and feelings through polls and focus groups. Such techniques then become a kind of barometer to measure the public mood. And the more reactionary, uninformed and resentful towards other groups this mood is found to be, the more it is regarded as authentic. Such a view of the public is therefore simultaneously technocratic and populist. Those who attend rallies, knock on doors or otherwise engage actively as citizens are seen as members of special interest groups, and not really as genuine members of the public. The outcome of the 2017 election reveals the limitations of this perspective.

Shortly after the election, Grenfell Tower caught fire. At least eighty people are presumed dead at the time of writing, but the final death toll is likely to be

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considerably higher. The official response has been dismal. Theresa May was slow to meet with survivors and was at first photographed with members of the police and emergency services rather than the residents themselves. Details emerged of a neglected, under-inspected and poorly regulated building, the penny-pinching cost-cutting of its refurbishment, and, above all, the disdainful disregard of tenants' views. It also soon emerged that some of the residents did not have a stable immigration status, and were fearful of accessing medical and legal support because of concern they would be turned over to the authorities. The official response to the fire has thus been a further devastating revelation of who is and isn't included in mainstream definitions of the public. Although many of the residents have experienced plenty of betrayal and abandonment - particularly by the state - they are not easily written into a melancholic narrative of post-industrial decline and lost community. Nor are they easily framed as the 'left behind'. The inadequate and lacklustre official response to their plight raises serious questions about whose anger and grief should be listened to, or regarded as representing an articulation of the public mood; and it highlights the difficulties encountered by officialdom and the press when they cannot find ways to channel people's sense of anger and loss into a nationalistic and xenophobic framework.

At the time of writing I am cautiously optimistic that things are changing: it has now become a little bit harder to assume that the public is reactionary and passive, and in need of the reassurance of tough rhetoric and hard-line policies. Some of those who have been systematically left out of public debates have now made their voices heard. Much depends on what sort of mobilisations take place in the months to come. And it also depends on further critical reflection on who we see as the public, and whose feelings we see as defining the public mood.

Notes

1. See David Goodhart, 'A postliberal future?'. *Demos Quarterly* 17.1.14.
2. Matthew Goodwin and Rob Ford, *Revolt on the right: Explaining support for the radical right in Britain*, Routledge 2014.
3. Theresa May, 'Theresa May's keynote speech at Tory Party Conference in full', *Independent* 5.10.16.
4. Stuart Hall, *The hard road to renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the left*, Verso 1988.

Dreaming of what might be: tax utopias in the election

Rebecca Bramall

One of Labour's key lines of attack in the recent general election campaign was the assertion that the Conservatives intend to turn Britain into a 'low-wage tax haven'. Labour successfully imputed to the Tories a utopian dream of a post-Brexit neoliberal tax regime: an imagined future in which a deregulated Britain - offering secrecy for billionaires and trickle-down economics for the rest of us - would float off into the Atlantic, a *paradis fiscal* set free from the European Union.

There is more than a kernel of truth to the idea that some Conservatives - particularly Brexiteers to the right of the party - want to turn Britain into an extremely low tax jurisdiction, and that they see Brexit as an opportunity to achieve this ambition. In a recent book, the MEP Daniel Hannan described the opportunity to leave the EU as 'our chance to create a free-trading, deregulated, off-shore Britain'.¹ This aspiration was echoed in Chancellor Philip Hammond's threat to the EU in January 2017: if Britain didn't get its way in the negotiations, he warned, 'we will have to change our model to regain competitiveness'². Aside from this threat, however, Hannan's vision of an offshore Britain has not been actively elaborated under the premiership of Theresa May; it has never been 'owned' by the Tories as a positive, utopian projection of the future.

Instead, Labour's repeated references to Tory plans for a 'tax haven Britain' have converted this vision into a post-Brexit tax *dystopia*. The phrase was central to Jeremy Corbyn's speech on the triggering of Article 50 - 'there are Conservatives who want to use Brexit to turn this country into a low-wage tax haven'³ - and it was

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subsequently repeated in election campaign videos and party political broadcasts. Possession of the 'tax haven' ball has been dominated by Labour, and the prevailing vision of post-Brexit Tory Britain has been successfully shaped by the party's antagonists. In all this Labour has built on the extensive work achieved over the last five years or so by actors for tax justice, and in particular by associates of the Tax Justice Network, who use the phrase to describe the UK's orientation towards corporation tax, and its location at the centre of a web of tax havens.

Neither Hannon's vision nor Hammond's line on tax competitiveness were highlighted during the election, but Labour's attribution of a tax haven dystopia to their opposition achieved a high level of credibility. In part, this is because May said so little about her plans for Brexit: the empty slogan of 'Brexit means Brexit' opened up a space for Labour to animate the Tories' vision on their behalf. But it is also because the Tory dystopian vision was counterposed, through Labour's manifesto promises, to its own, social-democratic, tax utopia: higher corporation tax, a rise in income tax for those earning more than £80,000, and the designation of tax as a social obligation for the common good. This social-democratic tax future - 'tax haven Britain' thrown into relief - helped to define the latter as dystopian, and to underscore the vital differences between the Labour and Conservative offer.

Labour's policies on tax were, from a socialist perspective, rather hesitant. Yet the manifesto has been hailed as ground-breaking - as differing fundamentally from anything the party has offered in decades - because it clearly signalled Labour's support for universal provision of social services funded by more progressive taxation, and its intention to break with neoliberalism.

The credibility of the threat of 'tax haven Britain' was enhanced, during the election campaign and in the months before it, by a greater perception of the alignment of Tory interests with tax avoidance. While we've got used to the public shaming of celebrity tax avoiders, the financial interests of the political class have often escaped notice. When they are exposed - such as in 2016, when the publication of the Panama Papers revealed that David Cameron had profited from his father's investments in an offshore trust - the political consequences have usually been disappointing. During the course of the election campaign, significant members and affiliates of the Tory Party were accused of benefitting from or facilitating tax avoidance: Home Secretary Amber Rudd, political strategist Lynton Crosby, the prime minister's husband Philip May, and Britain's array of right-wing

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media barons. Left-wing commentators have always called out the vested interests of such people, but this time there was a broader narrative about tax with which to associate these claims. Labour's elaboration of a tax dystopia provided something for these revelations to stick to, and helped to consolidate 'the tax avoiders' as a distinct elite group whose interests are served by the Conservative Party.

Utopia in the political imaginary

A concept of utopia can also help us grasp certain positions adopted during the general election campaign by those on Labour's right wing. An idea of utopia as signifying a lack of realism was important to the way in which this constituency heard and reviewed Corbyn's manifesto. Take, for example, Polly Toynbee's analysis, in which the manifesto is described as a 'cornucopia of delights': 'The leaked Labour manifesto is a treasure trove of things that should be done, undoing those things that should never have been done and promising much that could make this country infinitely better for almost everyone ... It's quite right to go large and please Labour people with a dream of what might be'.⁴ Yet Toynbee's point by point endorsement of these policies is at the service of a broader argument: that 'the die was cast long ago', and 'the view of Corbyn is fixed'. The outcome of the election in the form of a Tory landslide is assured. In this way Toynbee portrays Corbyn's project as utopian in a very specific sense: as an unrealistic 'dream of what might be'. It is unrealistic because it lacks an agent - a credible prime minister in waiting - to bring it about. *NME* journalist Jamie Milton articulates a similar concern when he asks - in an otherwise glowing review of the Labour manifesto - 'will they really be able to create this utopia?'.⁵

In designating Labour's vision under Corbyn as utopian, its detractors on Labour's right wing join forces with its Tory critics, who seek to invalidate social democracy, and to insist on neoliberalism as common sense.⁶ When Dominic Raab claims that the Conservative Party are putting forward sensible plans while Jeremy Corbyn 'frolics in socialist utopia', his intention is to paint Labour's manifesto as unrealistic, impractical and unworkable.⁷ Toynbee and Milton's reservations confirm Raab's critique.

But to note this alignment is not to suggest that the concept of utopia should be left out of analysis of our current political moment. On the contrary, applying this concept differently can help us see how the utopian elements of the Labour

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manifesto may - contra Toynbee - have played a distinct role in Labour's success in the general election. As Ruth Levitas remarks, 'utopia does not need to *be* practically possible; it merely needs to be believed to be so to mobilise people to political action'.⁸ The more limited concept of utopia deployed by Toynbee and others ignores the sense in which utopianism can work to convert 'unrealistic' promises - or better, desires - into achievable, workable policies. Utopian thinking can make change possible, by recruiting agents of that change to an image of a desired future. Likewise, the strong projection of someone else's utopia - here, the Tories' low-tax utopia - can help to impede the neoliberal project.

The usefulness of the 'tax haven Britain' trope to the Tories' antagonists has not yet expired. By entering into a confidence and supply agreement with the DUP, May has only strengthened Labour's hand: as the Tax Justice Network were quick to point out, the DUP have a longstanding 'commitment to tax havenry', committed as they are to lowering the corporate income tax rate to 12.5 per cent.⁹ The agreement thus does nothing to disrupt Labour's 'tax haven Britain' formulation. Indeed, there is scope to deepen it, through its articulation to the broader post-imperial fantasy that is said to propel key Brexiteers' ambition to reconstitute an 'Empire 2.0' via new trading relationships with the Commonwealth.¹⁰ The DUP's involvement in government overlays the neoliberal 'Brexit tax haven' utopia with a neo-conservative utopia oriented to the past.

Towards a radical tax utopia

Labour have not yet returned to government, and there are probably limits to the utility of utopian tales about tax in the next general election, and even to a more general emphasis on progressive taxation. Labour's success in activating support for its progressive tax plans has a particular context: opposition to tax avoidance has been building since the global financial crisis; there is particular distaste for corporate tax avoidance, and very strong support for higher taxation for the rich.¹¹ Yet it shouldn't be assumed that support for progressive taxation will necessarily be sustained in the months and years ahead. 'Tax haven Britain' has not been neutralised as a utopia - it is still some people's ideal, and a site of fantasy for others. The political salience of tax as an issue is informed by the ways in which the need for higher taxation is articulated; the definition of the tax base (for example, as the

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top 5 per cent of earners); and the extent to which people can clearly perceive the relationship between tax and spend (for example, the promise that a tax on private school fees will pay for school lunches). This is not an argument for the ring-fencing of tax revenues but for inventive discursive work on making visible the flows of finance in and out of public coffers. Those stories also need to recognise and include the moments where public finance - 'taxpayers' money' - is bled out of public services and ends up as private profit. Stories about tax and spend also need to be stories about privatisation and markets.

At some point, and certainly once Labour gets back in government, the social-democratic tax utopia is going to need radicalising - it won't be enough, in fact, for only the top 5 per cent of taxpayers to contribute more. As Richard Murphy has argued, Labour also needs to do a great deal more to link its social-democratic vision to a positive plan for Brexit. This might involve moving beyond a discursive moment in which two contrasting tax utopias are held in tension, towards the articulation of an economic case for Brexit with tax at the centre.¹² Finally, an even deeper challenge for Labour is to articulate its plans for tax, the economy and the welfare state to environmental imperatives. A radical environmental socialist tax utopia is the one I'm dreaming of.

Notes

1. Daniel Hannan, *What Next: How to Get the Best from Brexit*, Head of Zeus 2016.
2. Adam Withnall, 'UK could become "tax haven" of Europe if it is shut out of single market after Brexit, Chancellor suggests', *Independent*, 15.1.17.
3. BBC Two Daily Politics, 'Jeremy Corbyn's Article 50 speech', BBC, 29.3.17.
4. Polly Toynbee, 'Never mind who leaked it, this Labour manifesto is a cornucopia of delights', *Guardian*, 11 May 2017.
5. Jamie Milton, '11 massive and brilliant things in the Labour manifesto', *NME*, 16 May 2017.
6. Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea, 'Common-sense neoliberalism', *Soundings*, 55, 8-24 (2013).
7. Dominic Raab, 'Labour has abandoned its voters. After today's manifesto, the

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- Conservatives are now the party of working Britain', *Independent*, 18 May 2017.
8. Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, Peter Lang 2011, p221.
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10. David Olusoga, 'Empire 2.0 is dangerous nostalgia for something that never existed', *Guardian*, 19.3.17.
11. ComRes, Sunday Mirror/Independent political poll, 18.3.17: www.comresglobal.com/polls/sunday-mirror-independent-political-poll-march-2017/.
12. Richard Murphy, 'What Corbynomics should look like right now', *Tax Research*, 7.5.17: www.taxresearch.org.uk/Blog/2017/05/07/what-corbymomics-should-look-like-right-now/.

Why we need to talk about money

Joe Painter

After a succession of apparent victories for the populist right, the British general election on 8 June has been hailed as something of a turning point, even perhaps as the death knell of neoliberalism and its unlovely offspring, austerity. There was certainly much to cheer: the collapse of UKIP, the Conservatives left without a parliamentary majority and in increasing disarray, and the popularity of a Labour manifesto that sought to break decisively with some of the orthodoxies that have dominated political discourse since the Thatcher era.

In at least one respect, however, the official positions of all the principal parties stuck to an orthodoxy so embedded that it is taken as an unchallengeable given by politicians from across the political spectrum, broadcasters, commentators, columnists, think tanks, academics and probably by most voters. This orthodoxy is represented by a variety of code words and political clichés. Some are serious-sounding: ‘we must live within our means’, ‘we will deliver sound public finances’, ‘balancing the books’, ‘government borrowing must be reduced’. Others are more jokey. The recent austerity era has been bookended by two such seeming flippancies. The first was the note left after the 2010 General Election by the out-going Labour Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Liam Byrne, for his successor, which read ‘I am afraid there is no money’. (Byrne has since said he deeply regrets writing it.) The second is the repeated appearance in the 2017 election campaign of the ‘magic money tree’, or rather of the idea of its non-existence. Fittingly, this meme reached its zenith (or nadir) when, on live TV, prime minister Theresa May patronisingly explained to a nurse whose pay had not increased for eight years that ‘there isn’t a magic money tree that we can shake that suddenly provides for everything that people want’. With hindsight, this moment epitomised the failing Conservative campaign, revealing May’s lack of empathy and awkwardness. It also licensed a torrent of satire, with

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magic money trees sprouting all over social media to pay for corporate tax cuts, nuclear weapons, high speed rail and repairs to Buckingham Palace. Then, following the election, which left May eight seats short of an outright majority, the government agreed to one billion pounds of additional public expenditure in Northern Ireland to secure the support in parliament of the Democratic Unionist Party. Money might not grow on trees, but it appears that it can be found in abundance when political circumstances dictate.

And that should not be surprising. As heterodox economists such as Richard Murphy and Ann Pettifor point out, governments of sovereign states with their own currencies can indeed create money at will - and they do.¹ Most obviously, governments print banknotes and mint coins, but in wealthy countries notes and coins represent only a very small proportion of the money in existence (about 3 per cent in the UK). The vast majority of money exists only as stored information: as hand-written or typed entries in ledgers and account books in the past and today as digital records on computer servers. Moreover, all this money, including the physical notes and coins, is debt. Every British banknote carries the phrase 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand' - in other words the note represents an obligation owed by the issuer to the holder, that is, a debt. Electronic money is also debt. Every time we buy something using a credit card the issuing bank creates new money to finance the transaction. The same thing happens whenever an individual or a business takes out a loan. If my bank makes a loan to me of £5000 I can immediately spend it - there is £5000 more in the economy that did not exist the day before the loan was made. In fact most money is created privately by banks, albeit under licence from the government. Given the importance of money and the potentially disastrous consequences of poor lending decisions, the regulation of private banking is one of the most important functions of any government.

As well as licensing private money (debt) creation, the government can create public debt with which to finance public expenditure by issuing government bonds. Because government bonds are repayable in the currency issued by the Bank of England there is no possibility of the government defaulting on the debt, which is thus exceptionally secure. Governments can, though, default on debts incurred in currencies which they do not themselves issue: the position of the Greek government is thus fundamentally different in this respect to that of the British government, since the authority to issue Euros is vested in the European Central Bank, rather than the

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Bank of Greece. The central bank can also re-purchase government bonds by issuing new money - the process known as quantitative easing (QE).

As all money is debt, any net reduction in debt represents a net reduction in the amount of money in circulation. And since the circulation of money is what enables much economic activity to take place, generating employment, incomes, profits and the taxes on all of them, reducing total debt (public and private) is not the self-evidently sensible economic strategy that mainstream economists, and most politicians, think-tanks and media commentators take it to be. If this seems counter-intuitive, consider what happens if I win the lottery and use the proceeds to pay off my mortgage: both my lottery winnings and my mortgage disappear. The money they represented no longer exists and it cannot be used to buy goods and services (which would create demand, boost employment and fund tax revenues to pay for public services). Granted, I now own the house (a capital asset), which I can live in, but I was already living in it before I won the lottery, and I cannot spend the value the asset represents unless I re-mortgage (which would put me back to where I was).

To be sure, large swathes of economic activity are not monetised and so do not depend directly on the level of debt. Unpaid housework, caring for children and people who are disabled, sick or elderly, growing food for our own consumption, making things for our own use and mending them when they break or wear out, entertaining and educating ourselves and each other, are all activities that contribute greatly to human well-being and fulfilment without necessarily involving monetary exchange. But while all these activities are important and often necessary, many human needs - food, housing, health care and education chief among them - can currently be met in full only by spending money, whether publicly or privately. And since money is debt, ensuring there is enough money to meet them means ensuring there is enough debt.²

This perspective challenges the world-view that underpins almost all media discussion of public policy. That world-view takes it for granted that government borrowing is undesirable and should be reduced (eventually to zero), that public debt must be repaid, and that the government's ability to spend is therefore largely dependent on their ability and willingness to tax (both often assumed to be low). These assumptions form part of what Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea identified as 'common-sense neoliberalism'.³ There are a number of variants of

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the world-view. The most prominent, popularised by Margaret Thatcher, sees the public finances as analogous to those of a household or family. As Mr Micawber put it in *David Copperfield*, 'Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen [pounds] nineteen [shillings] and six [pence], result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.' In this view, the government can spend no more than it can raise in tax. It assumes that the government can run out of money and that lax financial management on the part of the government will lead to bankruptcy. Both these assumptions are fallacious, though that does not mean that poor financial management is a good thing.

The political discourse associated with this world-view invokes a distinctive vocabulary and set of metaphors: 'the nation's purse strings', 'the national piggy bank', 'taxpayers' money' and 'maxing out the nation's credit card' feature prominently, alongside the gendered stereotype of the thrifty housewife (supposedly personified by Mrs Thatcher) and the figure of the chancellor of the exchequer as Scrooge (or occasionally as Father Christmas when there is an election in the offing). Other countries afflicted by neoliberalism have equivalents: think of Angela Merkel's idealisation of the 'schwäbische Hausfrau'.

An even more strenuously right-wing version of this world-view sees taxation for collective provision as inherently undesirable. Thus environment minister Michael Gove argues that student fees are justified because: 'It's wrong if people who don't go to university find that they have to pay more in taxation to support those who do.' For some on the right, taxation is a form of legalised theft, a view bolstered by the widespread and almost entirely unquestioned use of the term 'taxpayers' money', rather than alternatives such as 'citizens' money', 'public money', 'government money', 'the nation's money', 'the community's money' and so on.

The discourse of 'sound public finances' and 'balancing the books' is nowadays just as entrenched on the centre left. Here there is at least an acceptance that borrowing for long-term infrastructural investment can be legitimate and that balancing the books should take place over the course of an economic cycle; and that fiscal policy can reduce the volatility of economic activity, as fiscal deficits during economic downturns (to support demand) are balanced by surpluses in years of plenty (to prevent overheating). Such thinking nevertheless still implicitly treats the public finances like those of a household - you run up an overdraft when times

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are tough, and then pay it back when things improve. From a centre-left perspective there is also - at least in principle - flexibility about the balance in fiscal policy between taxation, borrowing and expenditure. Taxation is not seen as inherently undesirable, but as simultaneously a means of macro-economic management (tax cuts stimulate the economy, tax rises dampen economic activity down), as a mechanism of redistribution, and as the source of funds to finance valued public services. In practice, however, the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats have all sought to avoid being portrayed as favouring either general tax increases or increased public borrowing. During the election campaign, shadow chancellor John McDonnell was at pains to emphasise that Labour's commitments were carefully costed and fully funded (in stark and ironic contrast to the lack of costings in the Conservative manifesto). In terms of political tactics McDonnell was surely right, given the ubiquity of the household metaphor for public finances and the likelihood that media would pounce on anything that could be viewed as financial ill-discipline.

According to Richard Murphy, a fundamental flaw in all these variations of the dominant world-view is that they assume that taxation pays for public expenditure (either immediately or by funding future debt repayments). They treat money as a scarce commodity, rather than as a socially created and regulated mechanism for enabling exchange. Instead, Murphy argues, it is expenditure that allows for taxation, not the other way round.⁴ Governments can create new money at will to finance their activities, and doing so will not lead to increased inflation until the economy is operating at full capacity (with full employment). Murphy's case is compelling, but, because of the almost universal adoption of the household metaphor, it is counter-intuitive. If there is to be a decisive break with austerity policies, underpinned as they are by the doctrine of balancing the books and the narrative that money is scarce, then new narratives and (non-magical) metaphors are urgently required.

Many of the ideas in this article are drawn with his permission from Richard Murphy's Tax Research UK blog (www.taxresearch.org.uk/Blog/), which is essential reading on this topic. However, responsibility for any shortcomings in the arguments presented here rests with the author.

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Notes

1. Richard Murphy, *The joy of tax: how a fair tax system can create a better society*, Bantam Press 2015; Ann Pettifor, *The production of money: how to break the power of bankers*, Verso 2017.
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Speed and authenticity: the changing rules of power

Ash Ghadiali

The moment the meaning of #GE2017 lands for me, it's a week since the results came out and I'm watching a video on Facebook. Since the end of the election, Kensington keeps coming back into focus, first through the startling announcement, after multiple recounts, that a landslide has seen Labour's Emma Dent Coad elected as Member of Parliament in a seat perceived as the quintessential symbol of Tory power.

Four nights later, there's the horrific image of Grenfell Tower ablaze. This is the same borough that the Queen of England lives in, one of the most unequal boroughs in the land, and the story emerges that Grenfell, recently renovated by the Conservative-run council of Kensington and Chelsea, has had ten million pounds spent on a cladding designed to make it more attractive to residents of the surrounding luxury flats. It's that cladding that, in breach of all safety regulations, seems to be the main cause of the fire spreading.

For months, we learn, Grenfell residents had been warning of such a tragedy, saying that fire exits, smoke alarms and sprinkler systems (all missing) were urgently needed, but the council had claimed its hands were tied. The reason was austerity.

Through that night and over the following days, hundreds of Grenfell residents fail to emerge from the fire and are never seen again, but figures issued by the government and mainstream media acknowledge only the number of people

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confirmed dead, and that's a much lower figure: seventeen, twenty-something, thirty-something dead. The number keeps going up, but it's never close to the hundreds we all know are missing.

On the ground, this looks like a cover-up. It looks like wilful misinformation, though what newscasters say and what the government officials say is that this is factual precision.

People expect a cover-up. They expect the system to protect itself. Fearing a risk to her security, Theresa May refuses to meet survivors at the site, and, when she does finally agree to meet them, it's behind closed doors. Afterwards, as she hurries to her car, the crowd calls her a coward.

Meanwhile, residents and activists, demanding answers from their local politicians, have stormed Kensington town hall. They want accountability. They say that the people inside have authorised the decisions that condemned their friends and family to death and they want to know why.

Through social media, scenes like these are playing instantly and constantly, creating a network of heightened emotion, a sense of authority with nowhere left to hide, and it's within this ecology of imagery that a website called *The Deep Left* posts a short unedited video, filmed on a Kensington estate on a mobile phone.

It lasts about two minutes and a half, and sees writer and activist Ishmahil Blagrove challenging a Sky News reporter. We don't quite catch the question that's provoked him, but it sounds like the reporter has made some comment that equates the feeling on the streets that day with the rise of Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn.

Blagrove tries to put the reporter straight. 'This isn't about politics,' he says. 'It's about people's lives!' But he's incredulous at the reporter's ability to keep asking what he sees as the wrong questions, and he takes the opportunity to dig into the roots of what he finds in front of him - this edifice of ignorance.

The prism through which the mainstream media perceives the world, he suggests, means that it simply fails to see the world at all. It fails to see people. Even the idea, he says, that there is such thing as a 'black community' - this amorphous object that the news crew have come looking to encounter - is naive.

Community, he says, is, in reality, in a place like Kensington, a complex, layered interaction. It's an umbrella term that unites a diverse multitude of communities -

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African-Caribbean, white working class, Moroccan, Somali, Spanish, Portuguese. All of this, he says, 'when it comes together interfaces and becomes what we construct as a community'.

Emma Dent Coad, he suggests, speaks for all these people, this complexity, diversity. Victoria Borwick, on the other hand, the defeated Conservative MP, speaks for another tribe that 'comes in and buys in because they've seen the movie or they think it's a trendy area because the media says, look how wealthy it is'.

'These people,' Blagrove says, 'come in and they sit down in their Bugattis and Ferraris and their Porsches and they make no effort to integrate.'

At about this point, the reporter, dressed in a suit and tie - Blagrove's in a t-shirt and a baseball cap - asks him if he wouldn't mind saying everything he's just said again, but now on camera.

Pointing at the mobile phone, Blagrove asks him, 'What do you mean? It's on camera there!'

The Sky News shooter, we realise, has been watching the whole exchange while his camera has been pointed at the ground.

In the meantime, whoever holds the mobile phone has got the shot, has captured this moment, and, once it's uploaded, more than 2.7 million people watch that video online.

Rupert Murdoch, it's been said, when he saw the results of the exit polls on the night of the 8 June, just left the room.

Back on the pavement, one week later, Blagrove manages not to laugh as he tells this Sky News camera crew that 'the mainstream media has dropped the ball'.

Interestingly, in this video, neither the reporter nor the cameraman seem to feel that they have 'dropped the ball'. They're both doing their jobs. They're being respectful, choosing not to interrupt, waiting for an opportune moment to ask Blagrove for his permission to start filming before they pull out the camera.

They do re-film (although by then our video is over). Presumably, they go back to the office, having recorded what they needed, and call it a good morning's work.

There's no sense, from the reporter, that he sees the guy with the mobile phone as in any way a kind of competition. He explains to Blagrove, or his friend, that he's

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offering to put him on the television: the news crew as a modern form of privilege and patronage.

He has no idea of the power of the people he's talking to. They tell their own stories. They find their own audiences, instantly and in their millions. They represent themselves and make him look, to the world, the way he looks to them.

That shift of power and the story of hubris it reveals is really the story of our time.

May thought she knew the way things worked. She could call a snap election that would 'crush the saboteurs'. She had the media behind her and would exude a clear appearance of authority. She chose to decline TV debates, believing this would leave her unassailable. She would avoid getting drawn on too much detail, preferring to push out the elegant simplicity of her soundbite of choice - 'strong and stable government'.

It didn't work. The rules of power are changing at a rapid rate. New synergies and networks of power can be formed at a moment's notice, and, since we can see around the corner of a strategy of persuasion in an instant, bad acting can destroy a good political career.

An insincere sound-bite turns out quickly, in this digital age, to be a source of mass ridicule, coming back to the ears of its performer time and again as irony, as parody, as shame. New rules are emerging. What flies in this democracy that's growing all around us, is what inspires. Power, very simply, as an authenticity that makes me want to share.

A divided nation

Ewan Gibbs

The June 2017 general election will be remembered as an occasion when the political map of the UK was dramatically and unexpectedly redrawn. This was nowhere the case more than in Scotland, where the outcome indicates the birth of a three-party system. The major headline was the SNP losing its hegemonic status, going down from fifty-six MPs to ‘only’ thirty-five (though this is still a majority of Scotland’s fifty-nine seats). This setback was compounded by the loss of nearly 500,000 votes: the total SNP vote fell from over 1.45 million to under 980,000. This is partly explained by a decline in turnout, from 71 per cent in 2015 to 66 per cent in 2017. The Tories gained over 320,000 votes and increased their number of seats from one to thirteen. On the other hand, the number of votes for the Labour Party only increased by around 10,000, to a total of 717,000, but this secured them an additional six seats.

These results substantially modify perceptions of the 2015 result as representing a generational shift; instead, they reveal the fluid nature of Scottish politics, and the possibility that the forward march of political nationalism of recent decades could now be halting.

For the first time since the 1980s, political momentum in Scotland does not lie with forces that seek to articulate a politics of greater autonomy to an agenda of social justice, through a strategy based on implementing divergent Scottish egalitarian ideals. This is a major change of direction, perhaps of even more significance than the shift in support from Labour to the SNP that occurred between the Scottish Parliamentary election of 2007 and the Westminster election of 2015. That shift entailed a deepening of the logic of devolutionary argument and a strengthening of the ideals of civic Scottish identity.

The redrawn political map of 2017 indicates that wider cross-UK forces are now having a specific impact within the distinct political landscape of Scotland.¹ There is some question as to whether it was the Corbyn effect or opposition to a second

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independence referendum that enabled Labour hold its own in Scotland (on which more below). However, these results, alongside Ruth Davidson's ability to channel small-'c' conservative opposition to further constitutional disruption, make it evident that perspectives that were previously regarded as hegemonic are now being challenged; and the electoral majority of the party which champions them now looks embattled. 'Indyref2' - which was being spoken of as a fact on the ground only weeks ago - has departed from the horizon.

Meaningful multi-party democracy has been a comparative rarity in the Scottish experience of Westminster elections. In the age of mass enfranchisement, Liberals, Unionists (Conservatives), Labour and then the SNP have successively tended towards dominating outcomes, if not votes - as is the way in first-past-the-post systems. Each of these parties, some more successfully than others, enunciated itself in terms of representing national political interests towards the unitary state. But the 2017 general election result reveals Scotland as a divided nation, with votes relatively evenly split between Labour, the Conservatives and the SNP for the first time since the 1970s. The distribution of these votes, however, is geographically polarised. Conservative seats are mainly concentrated in the traditional Tory heartlands of the North East, Perthshire and the south of Scotland. Having said this, the Conservative victory in the traditional Labour, coalfield, constituency of Ayr, Carrick & Cumnock reveals the plebeian as well as patrician nature of their rising support in Scotland.

The SNP now effectively faces a war on two geographical and ideological fronts: the Conservatives' Unionist assertions are now a rising threat within much of rural Scotland, including the former SNP heartland in the North East; while under Corbyn Labour are a far more potent challenge on economic and social reform now that the party has a bona fide social-democratic programme. The battle on the terrain of social justice requires a different response from the SNP, particularly across Scotland's central belt, an area the party has only recently come to dominate - thereby finally attaining a key objective of the proponents of the '79 Group', whose strategy for a left-facing nationalism ultimately came to predominate in the party during the 1980s and 1990s.² It is somewhat ironic that Alex Salmond, one of the strategy's key architects, has now fallen victim to a pincer movement of social division and traditional class and regional political alignments: these account for the loss of his seat to the Tories in the Aberdeenshire constituency of Gordon.

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For the Labour Party, after years on the back foot, the election was a surprisingly positive affair. It gained six seats across the central belt, from the former coalfield constituencies in Fife and Midlothian in the east to Glasgow North East and Coatbridge & Chryston in the west. This return to contention was further marked by close-run losses in a number of other seats - by margins of less than a hundred votes in Glasgow South West and Glasgow East, and in the low hundreds in Motherwell & Wishaw and Airdrie & Shotts in North Lanarkshire, east of Glasgow. Thus, there is now considerable evidence to suggest that Labour can win in Yes-voting areas of Scotland. However, the predominant trend showed Labour's vote increasing only marginally whilst the SNP's nosedived. For instance, in Glasgow East the SNP majority fell from over 10,000 to 76 votes, but the Labour vote only rose by 220; and, as mentioned above, Labour's vote only increased by just under 10,000 votes across the whole of Scotland.

There are already signs of a key strategic battle developing over the factors underpinning Labour's partial recovery. In effect, Scottish Labour simultaneously deployed two different electoral strategies. The party leadership campaigned largely in opposition to a second referendum, whilst a large contingent of left-wing candidates, including some who were subsequently elected, fought on the lines of the UK manifesto's promise of major economic reforms. The former strategy delivered for Scotland's only incumbent Labour MP, Ian Murray, who held Edinburgh South with a 15.8 per cent swing. But it utterly failed Blair McDougall, the architect of the Better Together campaign in the first independence referendum, who prominently stood on a platform against another referendum in affluent Renfrewshire East, and saw Labour's vote fall by 7.8 per cent. Meanwhile, in a television interview before his victory had even been formally announced, Paul Sweeney, the new MP for Glasgow East, credited a campaign for economic justice as having led him to victory.³ And on the weekend following the election, the *Sunday Herald* reported the view of left-wing MSP and former Scottish Labour leadership contender Neil Findlay that a campaign in line with the UK manifesto - which delivered considerable increases in vote share and turnout across the UK - would have delivered more gains.⁴ Findlay's contention appears to have some basis, in that Scottish Labour recovered during the campaign from poll levels that were at 19 per cent before the 'Corbyn surge' was felt across the UK, while a YouGov poll showed Scottish Labour at 41 per cent among young voters, ahead of the SNP.⁵

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The strategy of the labour movement and the left in Scotland is likely to be shaped by the outcome of the debate within Scottish Labour to decide which strategy is more viable: one based predominantly on support for the Union, or one inspired by Corbyn, which would attract left-wing Yes-voters.

Although the SNP remains the dominant party, its strategy of linking together political autonomy and egalitarian national values has lost some of its momentum. A political landscape is developing that is based on divisions within Scotland, and especially between different regional alignments. Labour has demonstrated an unexpected capacity to maintain its position within its former industrial 'heartlands', whilst Conservatism has proven attractive in rural Scotland. Scottish society and politics merit, and now evidently require, an analysis that recognises the complexities of divisions that clearly have roots in class and culture, and stretch beyond binary constitutional affiliations.

Notes

1. This accords with traditional experience of distinctly Scottish brands of UK traditions. See Paul Ward, *Unionism in the United Kingdom, 1918-1974*, Palgrave Macmillan 2005.

2. Ben Jackson, 'The moderniser: Alex Salmond's journey', *Renewal* 20:1, 2012: www.renewal.org.uk/articles/the-moderniser-alex-salmonds-journey/.

3. BBC Scotland election coverage 9.6.17.

4. Andrew Whitaker, 'Corbyn ally: Scottish Labour could have more-than-doubled its seats with a more radical approach', *Sunday Herald*, 11.6.17.

5. Matthew Smith, 'Voting intention (Scotland): SNP 42 per cent, Con 29 per cent, Lab 19 per cent (15-18 May)', YouGov 18.5.17; Simon Osborne, 'Election 2017: Labour lead SNP among young voters in Scotland', *Independent*, 6.6.17

Northern Ireland: hardening borders and hardening attitudes

John Barry

In this year's general election it was perhaps Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party that had the best result of all. The DUP took ten of the eighteen seats in Northern Ireland (up from eight in 2015), and roundly defeated their main unionist rivals to consolidate their position both as the largest party in Northern Ireland and as the largest unionist party. Now that Theresa May has been forced to agree a supply and confidence deal with them, many people are scrambling to figure out who and what the DUP are - and are by turns expressing surprise, horror and incredulity at what they discover.

The DUP have so far been the main beneficiaries of the triumph of the extremes over the centre that has been a feature of Northern Ireland's consociational model of governance.¹ And it is the combination of this trend and Westminster's first-past-the-post system that has now given the DUP its current pivotal role in the UK as a whole.

Sinn Féin, the DUP's erstwhile 'enemy' and now partner in the Northern Ireland Assembly, also increased their tally of MPs at the general election (from four to seven), and also thereby defeated their nationalist rivals, the Social Democratic and Labour Party.² In this, the two ethnic champion parties of Ulster were continuing a dynamic that had begun in the spring 2017 Assembly elections, when each increased their number of MLAs at the expense of their intra-community rivals.

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Ever since the much lauded sectarian power-sharing Executive of 2007, power in the Assembly has been effectively 'shared out' between SF and the DUP. Indeed Northern Ireland appears to be heading towards a Janus-faced system in which each of the dominant parties publicly appeals to their sectarian base for electoral power by blaming the 'other' for all the Assembly's faults, while privately collaborating with the very same 'other' to ensure they remain the dominant powers in the political process. This model has been further complicated, though by no means disturbed, by the fall-out from Brexit. Thus SF, who habitually opposed the European Union and did not campaign in the referendum, now claim to be the leaders of the anti-Brexit movement, while the DUP, who campaigned for a hard Brexit, now quietly counsel the Conservative Party for a soft Brexit.

This trend towards sectarian polarisation has resulted in a geographically based division of Westminster seats: the DUP now represents the eastern part of Northern Ireland, from East Londonderry to Strangford, while SF represents the border counties and the nationalist redoubt of West Belfast. Indeed, the (relative) pluralism of the Assembly - reflects the complex and rich diversity of the Northern Ireland population more accurately than its representatives at Westminster: the DUP and SF between them hold 55 seats out of 90, but there also MLAs from the UUP, SDLP, Alliance, Greens and People before Profit. The polarising effects of the FPTP system can be seen most vividly in the South Belfast constituency, which in March 2017 elected five MLAs from five different parties, but in June returned only one elected representative - from the DUP.

The Assembly election in spring 2017 (called to solve the deadlock after the resignation of Martin McGuinness following the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal) was notable in that Sinn Fein won only one seat less than the DUP (27 to 28). Perhaps even more significantly, the combined Unionist parties (DUP, UUP, TUV), for the first time were no longer a majority in the Northern Ireland Assembly (and the DUP's loss of MLAs meant they no longer had the power to issue a petition of concern, used to stop reform of social policy, such as same-sex marriage or abortion). This was interpreted as a 'warning' to unionists that they needed to mobilise and get the vote out. This was a consistent theme of the Westminster election campaign, and it contributed to the greater sectarian atmosphere: the DUP convinced unionist voters to back them as the strongest unionist party to 'take on' Sinn Fein.

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Here one must understand the two most important features of post-Agreement Northern Irish politics. The first is the longstanding position that here we vote to keep someone out rather than to vote someone in (such tactical voting was of course also in evidence in other parts of the UK, but it's long been part of the political DNA here). The second - and this is perhaps unique to Northern Ireland - is that we tend to elect 'negotiators' not 'legislators': the dominant parties portray themselves as locked into a permanent opposition with 'the other', and each argues that they will be the strongest tribunes in the head-to-head battles with the tribunes from the other side. In this sense SF and the DUP need each other (and not just because of the mandatory power-sharing arrangements of the 1998 Agreement and the operation of the NI Executive): they need their counterpart in order to scare their own voters into turning out for them.

The results of the Westminster election have now strengthened calls within unionism for 'one unionist party' - viz, the DUP. For its part, Sinn Fein, in wiping out the SDLP at Westminster, has helped create a situation in which, for the first time since 1966, Irish nationalists will have no representation in the House of Commons, given the SF policy of abstentionism. The only Northern Irish voices heard during this Parliament will be unionist ones.

DUP-UDA links

One major focus of concern over the DUP's new position at Westminster is their links to loyalist paramilitary groups. These can be traced back to the early 1970s, when Ian Paisley, the party's founder, marched at the head of masked and armed loyalist paramilitary units during the 1974 Ulster Workers Council strike, which brought down the first power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. Over the years many loyalists claiming allegiance to Paisley and his views were jailed for bombings, though Paisley himself denied inciting them. He repeatedly denied that his sectarian rhetoric - warnings that Catholics would 'breed like rabbits and multiply like vermin' and that 'loyal Ulster' would be sold down the river if it did not fight for its very existence - could ever be taken to imply support for physical violence.

The DUP was also linked to Ulster Resistance, a quasi-paramilitary and political organisation that was set up to oppose the 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement. The mass meeting to launch Ulster Resistance, held at Belfast's Ulster Hall, was addressed not

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only by Paisley but also by his successor as DUP leader Peter Robinson; and both Paisley and Robinson appeared at Ulster Resistance rallies wearing red, paramilitary-style berets.

More recently the DUP has also been accused of receiving support from and in turn supporting community organisations linked to the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), a loyalist paramilitary group that was responsible for hundreds of deaths in the troubles and is widely viewed as being involved in criminality, drug dealing, money laundering and extortion.

The DUP is not the ‘political wing’ of the UDA ... but the UDA certainly publicly supports the DUP as its preferred political party. Any endorsement from loyalist paramilitaries was publicly rebuffed by senior DUP figures during the election campaign, but the proverbial ‘dogs on the street’ know that there is an unhealthy positive relationship between the two organisations. Thus, for example, between 2014 and 2016 UDA-affiliated organisations successfully applied for and were granted £5 million of public money from the Social Investment Fund (SIF), for projects in Belfast, Lisburn and Bangor. Last year, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP, in comments comparing the relationships of the DUP with the two main loyalist paramilitary groups, stated: ‘In truth, with the UDA we get a lot more cooperation at local level, in dealing with the transition, in the transformation in those loyalist communities, because the UDA doesn’t have political ambitions. So they’re prepared to work with the mainstream unionist parties’.³

In the 2014 local elections former UDA prisoner Sam ‘Chalky’ White was an (unsuccessful) DUP candidate in East Belfast. White was also a full-time employee of a publicly funded initiative, Resolve, an organisation strongly linked to the UDA which addresses issues of restorative justice. A NI Criminal Justice Inspectorate report into Resolve named a local DUP MLA, Robin Newton (a former speaker of the NI Assembly) as being ‘very supportive of Resolve and keen to see it flourish in the interests of community cohesion’. Newton’s old office is now occupied by the Resolve group, and he was also a member of the Social Investment Fund steering panel that recommended that the UDA-linked Charter for Northern Ireland be awarded £1.7 million from SIF funds. Dee Stitt, the CEO of Charter NI, is a former UDA boss. In 2012 DUP Assembly Member Alex Easton wrote a glowing reference in support of Stitt’s application to join SIF’s South Eastern Steering Group: he later claimed to be unaware that Stitt had been a paramilitary gangster.

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Supply and confidence ... with a Northern Irish twist.

All these funding decisions are above board, in plain sight, and no brown envelopes are exchanged in the dead of night. And a generous interpretation would be that the DUP is simply lacking in political judgement in the support it gives people and groups who it sees as being on a journey from terrorism to peace, which inevitably means it is sometimes faced with the issue of what to do about people who are 'community workers' and officers in charitable and voluntary organisations by day, and drug-dealers and thugs by night.

On the other hand, imagining the English Defence League or some other violent right-wing xenophobic group publicly endorsing and calling on people to vote for the Conservatives may assist an understanding of how strange (to say the least) we are in Northern Ireland, where 'paramilitary peacekeeping' has become the norm - and how strange it is for the Conservatives to be seeking a confidence and supply arrangement with a party that has their own established, if contested and publicly denied, confidence and supply arrangement in place with loyalist paramilitaries.

Brexit and the border

In the June 2016 European referendum, when NI voted to remain (54-46 per cent), the DUP were the main party that supported Brexit. They were thus part of the wider Brexit victory, although in the minority on the issue in Ulster.⁴ The prospect of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and of the UK leaving the single market and customs union, has made its own contribution to a hardening of attitudes. SF and others (including the SDLP and some Irish political parties) have argued that the only way to resist the threat of a hard border is through holding a border poll and the reunification of Ireland; or, short of that (and as a stepping stone to it in SF thinking), they have called for a 'special status' for NI so that it can remain (to some degree) a member of the EU (perhaps as part of the customs union) while remaining part of a post-Brexit UK. ('The reverse Greenland' option is one of a number of creative constitutional-legal models being discussed in NI in the wake of Brexit.) This is something that is resisted by the DUP and other unionist parties since it may mean the border shifting from where it is now - between NI and the Republic - to a divide marked by the Irish Sea i.e. between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. Such a new (administrative)

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border would be regarded by unionists as weakening the link between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and thus undermining Northern Ireland's Britishness.

A soft border, on the other hand, might lessen support for a border poll. So the DUP may press the UK government for more progress on a soft border, some kind of bespoke arrangements for NI (but without calling it 'special designated status'), and, above all, a NI seat or strong voice at the Brexit negotiating table.

SF's political calculation after the Westminster election, and in the negotiations to re-establish the NI power-sharing executive, may well be focused on what will best position them as leading a renewed reunification campaign. So, while the DUP are keen that Brexit does not undermine NI's position as an integral and equal part of the UK, SF are moving in the diametrically opposite direction, seeing Brexit as an opportunity to pursue the reunification of Ireland.

Conclusion

As Giovanni Sartori wrote: 'If you reward divisions and divisiveness ... you increase and eventually heighten divisions and divisiveness.'

Do the elections of 2017 mark staging posts along the way from a multi-party to a two-party system, and an 'end game' in which a face-off between the 'two communities' is staged in democratic elections instead of through force? The direction of travel certainly displays for all to see the outworkings of our peace process (increasingly a 'frozen' or 'negative peace') and its associated institutional arrangements. Meanwhile loyalist paramilitaries kill people in open daylight in shopping centres and continue to prey on working-class communities, fuel poverty is the highest in the UK, the problems in our health system mean that people suffer and die needlessly, and the epidemic of young male suicide continues.

Do the two elections, coupled with the current instability and uncertainty generated both by Brexit and the non-functioning of the power-sharing Executive, mean that the peace process is threatened, or that NI is on the path back to war? No. Do the results of these elections increase the hold this 'frozen peace' has in Northern Ireland? Maybe - though the answer is definitely yes if NI is in for a period of prolonged direct rule.

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Long after the English media has tired of lampooning the DUP and their views (who knew the UKIP-shaped hole in British politics could be filled so quickly?), the best hope for Northern Ireland will continue to be the ‘slow boring of hard boards’, as the great German sociologist Max Weber described liberal democratic politics. And we might one day turn away from a politics that orientates itself around Brexit, border polls and maintaining Northern Ireland’s Britishness, rather than local ‘bread and butter issues’. Regrettable as the current situation may be, jaw jaw is better than war, war, as Churchill so wisely noted.

Even so, this frozen peace, presided over, created and reflected by these two parties, means that, almost two decades after the Good Friday Agreement, there is still no agreement about NI’s present (and certainly no agreement over its troubled past), and no shared vision about its future (as opposed to the ‘shared out’ version jointly promoted by SF and the DUP). Jaw jaw is better than war, but ‘where there is no vision, there the people perish’. So, to a frozen peace we can add a visionless peace.

With a side order of ‘confidence and supply’, DUP-style.

Notes

1. Consociational models seek to promote democracy in segmented societies by power-sharing through a grand coalition of all political parties.
2. The other seat was held by Independent unionist Sylvia Herman, who originally held the seat as a member of the UUP.
3. www.newsletter.co.uk/news/uda-work-with-us-but-uvf-aren-t-in-a-good-place-says-dup-mp-1-7500689.
4. A further insight into NI-style confidence and supply arrangements could be seen in the DUP’s decision to spend the bulk of a £435,000 donation from the Constitutional Research Council (a secretive group of pro-union business people led by a Conservative Party member) on purchasing newspaper advertising space for the Leave campaign - in England. Under NI electoral rules political parties are not required to publicise donor names, and the DUP only revealed this information after considerable media pressure.

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THE CORBYN EFFECT



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