

# This general election is a choice between the end of democracy or the end of neoliberalism



*In this general election, Britain faces a paradigm shift, argues [Abby Innes](#): the essential choice is between a government of the economic hard right that will complete the already-failed supply-side revolution of the last forty years, and a government willing to implement a Green New Deal that in turn will end the era of Neoliberalism. She writes that we should be under no illusion as to which road offers a future worth having and which a dystopia.*

Given the dismal empirical record of forty years of pro-market reforms, the only way this Conservative Government can create the low tax, low regulation, law and order state of Neoliberal fever dreams is under the cover of other projects. Brexit offers a unique opportunity: it allows a government of economic extremists to manipulate our cultural identity to endorse a rewriting of the entire institutional rule-book. The recent assertion by Michael Gove that Brexit offers no lesser a liberating moment than the fall of the Berlin Wall is exactly wrong. Electoral success for the Conservatives will complete the capture of state authority by private business actors and consolidate the Conservative Party as a self-serving broker, first and foremost, between the residual powers of the state and the now largely unrestrained economic power of large private business and increasingly extractive financial interests.

As we see in Russia, Hungary, Turkey and the US, such developments require the authoritarian redirection and suppression of social anger. Lest we be in any doubt, these techniques are already with us in the pre-election campaigning of the Conservative Party and its open deployment of the Bannonite playbook: a representative parliament is prorogued; only those journalists who act as transmission belts for the government message are granted access; opposition parties and the most senior judges in the country are ruled illegitimate players; the electorate in one of the most unequal societies in Europe is referred to as a single, undifferentiated whole, and flattered with the imagery of a 'caged lion'.

The Conservatives have placed a landmine under the British constitution that they will detonate if gifted with a majority. It is there in the manifesto, where it says that 'After Brexit we also need to take a look at the broader aspects of our constitution: the relationship between the government, parliament and the courts, the functioning of the Royal Prerogative...'. It is there in black and white that they intend to change the rules of the democratic game and by saying it here they can later claim this as an open mandate. The result will be the institutionalisation of a monologue of executive power. And while this should alarm us, it should certainly not surprise us, because this is a Cabinet that subscribes, as no other Conservative British Cabinet before it, to the doctrine of full blown economic libertarianism.

Contrary to what the name implies, economic libertarians are not democrats. Their most important thinkers, from James Buchanan to Friedrich Hayek, concluded that economic liberty must supersede all other forms. Democracy as we have historically understood it is rejected by libertarians as a sham: as a block on the freedom of the private individual and the private corporation to roam unhindered in the global commodity space. As the Chicago economist and Nobel Laureate George Stigler put it quite openly:

The alternative [to radically shrinking the state] is to abandon total acceptance of present day democratic institutions. I must hasten to say that this is not to argue for totalitarianism in any form. Indeed, some alternative political systems that would insure a substantial reduction in the government role could be even more democratic in the sense that public policies could be closer to the desires of individual citizens.

Not totalitarian then, so long as you are happy to accept unquestioning belief in the primacy of corporate rights over your legal, political, and social rights for the rest of your life, without the opportunity to change your mind.

So this is an important election, in case you were in any doubt. It is ideological 'twist or bust'.

What is invaluable in liberal democracy by contrast is its institutionalised understanding that society is both imperfect and imperfect-able. It is in liberal democracy alone that we are allowed to learn from our inevitable mistakes. Today's Conservative government in the meantime is demonstrably willing to up-end the hard-won institutional structures of liberal democracy for the sake of a future that can only ever exist in the reactionary economic utopias of the Chicago and Virginia schools and in the preferences of the obscenely rich.

UK governments since 1979 have induced an extraordinary set of political economic outcomes under their bipartisan acceptance of neoclassical economics as 'science'. As a predominantly mathematics-driven, hypothetical-deductive body of work, its empirical basis was always astonishingly weak, and weakest of all in the 'first-best-world' variation beloved of the libertarians. It has followed then that no imaginable conspirator, of the libertarian right who wanted to dismantle the state and see all but its powers of law and order rescinded, or of the revolutionary Marxist left could ever have masterminded such an elaborate and comprehensive cock-up as that which becomes apparent in the UK political economy today.

This is not to say that enthusiastic conspirators didn't exist: they did and still do. But for all their efforts you and I still have a choice, and a free one for now. But this is the point: if the history of communism teaches us anything, it is that you can force entire societies to bow under fully totalitarian control and ideas that cannot possibly work still won't. We can explore this grotesque experiment to its bitter end, but it is no more likely to redeem itself than Soviet Communism was in 1989. Libertarianism is based on a neoclassical conception of the economy as an isolated system that operates independently of all others systems, including the biosphere. In the light of the climate emergency, any 'ultimate' victory for this diehard group of free market fantasists will prove the most Pyrrhic in all time.

It is the peculiar curse of supply-side doctrine, as it was with Leninism, that even in the face of ever more dire social consequences, the circularity of its doctrine – the understanding of the economy as a closed system machine driven by dependable laws of economic motion – invites the doubling down on the revolution in rhetorical and practical terms. The circularity of the belief system creates the reasoning that, if not now, it must be at the point of completion that the total validity of the programme will be shown. As a result, the energy of these doctrines only becomes fully unspooled once the disorder they create has spread to every corner of the polity: when the entropy is total. The more completely the doctrine is followed in practice, the greater the distortions and social dysfunction of the real institutions of capitalism will become. With this comes the growing detachment of public political language from social reality, another process on which we are already clearly embarked.

Where all the post-war political economic doctrines were built on the acceptance of radical uncertainty and inescapable human flaws in both states and markets, Neoliberalism, no less than Leninism promised to relieve us of our ethical duty as citizens to think about what might be prudent, practical, and socially just, as distinct from automatically 'true' or allegedly inescapable within the terms of [non-existent] 'natural' economic or historical laws.

Where the reality of Soviet Communism was one of continuous repression, the social division caused by an unmediated capitalism requires brutal authoritarianism like that of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, and the greater the drive to complete this revolution the greater the repression and misdirection must be. We are currently living under a government that in truth has nothing left to offer beyond a purely instrumental, populist approach to sustaining the orthodoxy of unrestrained corporate rights. However, the more pure the doctrine of free markets that any government attempts to institute the more the pathologies of markets will be left to play out unmediated: towards monopoly, human and ecological exploitation, and financial extraction instead of innovation or enterprise in any socially coherent, productive or sustainable sense.

The supply-side revolution has turned out to be a process of setting fires under the hard-won institutions of democracy but with economic gains that accrue only to an ever-shrinking group of winners. The most potent justification for radical reform in the 1980s was that the state by the late 1970s was in the throes of a 'crisis of ungovernability', but the supply-side revolution has induced a political-economic crisis far more complete than the original. Not only have the long decades of bi-partisan consensus over economic liberalisation aggravated the emerging social divisions of deindustrialisation, they have literally dis-integrated the historically high-functioning and economically comparatively disinterested state that went before. As a matter of urgency then we need a government that is willing to rebuild the capacity of the local and central state and the wider ecosystem of civic institutions in such a way that these can enable the heavy lifting of transition to a zero-carbon economy. At this point in the climate emergency it is only the state that can mobilise the full institutional and policy toolkit to enable public, civic, business, financial and private effort that is now so essential. The democratic state is the historical source of systemic treatments for the evolutionary crises of capitalism. Now would be quite a good time to remember that.

If instead we choose to become caught up within this utopian/religious mindset, the words of our opponents are necessarily no longer accepted as motivated by anything as reasonable as empirical facts, or experience, or analytical expertise in any given arena. Complaints are necessarily disregarded as a false consciousness. It has been a standard Neoliberal catch-all for forty years to insist, for example, that any form of public servant who defends public institutions has mistaken their self-interest for their principles, so that nothing but the preferred market values and the hopelessly inadequate governmental toolkit of quantification can survive.

This temptation to dismiss your critics without reflecting on their arguments is a risk in any ideological position. But it is an unusually powerful tendency in any ideology that claims to be 'scientific', as Neoliberalism claims to be, and most assuredly is not in any serious, i.e. empirical sense. But this is the problem with materialist utopias of left or right. Sooner rather than later, any political language that builds itself on a doctrine of human perfectability is doomed to create a culture of lies: in Boris Johnson we have its most apt exponent. But be in no doubt that such a culture can be institutionalised in turn. Indeed, what other option do political forces of the economic hard right now have for their project to survive?

So at what point is enacting this doctrine in good faith or bad, by whatever means, no longer acceptable? How much more divided, angry, and unwell are we prepared to allow our society to become? How much more asset stripped our economy? At what point do we acknowledge that this, the sixth historical mass extinction event and the first caused by man, has already started to include us? How much damage should a body of ideas originally cut and paste from Newtonian mechanics and built on metaphors impossible to re-attach to the actual economy be allowed to inflict before it is rejected as empirically unfounded and morally indefensible? Neoliberalism breaches every real natural limit of our resilience: psychologically and ecologically, but just as the citizens under communism turned out not to be the compliant, distracted, exhausted masses of the Communist Party's cynical hopes, neither should we be.

A paradigm shift is coming, but which future are we going to choose? Will it be the urgently required transition to a zero carbon economy that is compelled by the scientific method as properly understood, internationally agreed, and confirmed every day by ever more terrifying proof of nature's ultimate sovereignty? Will we really gift control of the entire constitutional framework that took our forebears centuries to build, to this Cabinet of people as deaf to factual evidence as they are to self-doubt, so that it may be dismantled within a matter of months in further pursuit of a fantasy whose destructive, divisive reality we already live with daily? Will we really hand such an extraordinary degree of power to this self-appointed vanguard of the preposterously wealthy, who at best must believe that they alone have solved the riddle of history and found the one true path to a perfect social order in which all true-born Englishmen may prosper: where nature itself will be made to conform to their genius?

The father of sociology Max Weber warned that "The charismatic leader gains and maintains authority solely by proving his strength in life. If he wants to be a prophet he must perform miracles... Above all, however, his divine mission must 'prove' itself in that those who faithfully surrender to him must fare well. If they do not fare well, he is obviously not the master sent by the gods." The problem for us of course is that by the time that reality confirms that no miracles are in fact about to follow the election of Boris Johnson it will be too late to change our minds. The constitution will have been changed and the state more completely captured by those powerful few who have a great deal of wealth and interest to lose by the final rejection of this most profitable and unholy of theologies.

## About the Author



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