

# Lexit undermines the left – it will be no prize for Labour



*Brexit has been very divisive for the left in Britain. While some socialist intellectuals claim that it is a prize within reach for the Labour movement, it remains largely a neo-colonial project of a 'Global Britain', writes [Peter J. Verovšek](#). He argues that the case for Lexit ignores the right-wing roots of the EU referendum, and that it will be no prize for Labour.*

Much like support for Europe, Euroscepticism cuts across the political spectrum rather than through it. The rifts within the Conservative Party – whose members have to take decisions while in government – are obvious. However, Brexit is equally divisive for the Labour Party. While some took to the streets of Liverpool outside the party's conference calling for a ['people's vote'](#) to stop Brexit, Jeremy Corbyn has remained [conspicuously silent](#).

In contrast to the reticence of the Labour leadership, some socialist intellectuals have claimed – and [continue to claim](#) – that ['Brexit is a prize within reach for the British left'](#). The ['left case for Brexit'](#) is based on the idea that it [reempowers the democratic state](#), which these thinkers argue the left has historically been able to use to further its agenda. Noting the importance of nationalisation – which is prohibited under [EU laws against state aid](#) – as a tool of the left, the [principled argument](#) for Lexit notes that a [new socialist](#) agenda can only be achieved once the UK is free from the quasi-[constitutional](#) constraints of the EU.

While these arguments are compelling, they are also dangerous. First, the statist, nation-based character of Brexit betrays the internationalist principles that have grounded the left. Second, Lexit threatens to undermine the left's core beliefs by bringing it into a political coalition with [free market Tories](#), the [anti-immigrant UKIP](#), and [the Murdoch press](#), all of whom threaten to coopt the leftist project with their neo-colonial vision of a ['Global Britain'](#).

## The left is an international project

Since Marx, the left has been a self-consciously international movement that seeks to transcend both the nation and the state. As regards the former, the traditional left sees nationalism as an ideology that tricks workers into siding with local elites rather than questioning the power structures that oppress them. As a result, socialism seeks to ['bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality'](#). Given [Brexit's entanglement with English nationalism](#) and its [scapegoating of foreigners](#), it hardly seems an appropriate vehicle for the left.

Similarly, leftists are sceptical of the institution of the state. As [Marx](#) points out, the state 'is nothing more than the form of organization which the bourgeois necessarily adopt both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interests'. While it does in fact do more than just serve as a [committee of the bourgeoisie](#), the implications of the division of peoples into states is still clear: at the bottom, the institution of the state remains a mechanism for pitting individuals who should be working together for their common interests against each other.

It is true Marx believed that England – with its omnicompetent Parliament – is a place ['where the workers can attain their goal by peaceful means'](#). All the British left needs to do is to take over Parliament and it can achieve its objectives through the legal process. In this sense, the Lexiteers are right that the EU's constitutionalisation of the right to property – which prevents [nationalisation through expropriation](#) – is a fetter on socialism.

The [NHS](#) is the paradigmatic example of how the goals of socialism can be achieved through nationalisation. However, while I agree that this is a great achievement, it is unclear that the NHS sets a proper historical precedent, as it was created in an ['exceptional rather than representative'](#) moment following World War II. Additionally, fact that [Parliament's omnicompetence](#) allows for rapid and thorough transformation to occur legally also means that these changes are just as easily reversed after the next election.

Thus, although nationalisation is a powerful tool for the achievement of some of the short-term goals of socialism, [Engels notes](#) that 'is not the solution' since 'state ownership does not do away with the capitalistic nature of the productive forces'. If the left is to live up to its internationalist ideals, it should be fighting the [fetishism of the nation-state](#) – an opportunity that the supranational project of European integration at least potentially offers – rather than retrenching them by supporting a statist, nationalist initiative like Brexit.



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In addition to betraying the international principles of socialism, the left case for Brexit is also an example of bad political judgment. To start, it is unclear that EU regulations are the primary fetter on traditional socialism today. Many EU member-states manage to be much less [neoliberal than the UK](#), endorsing precisely the policies – including [virtually free university tuition](#) and [public control over rail](#) and other transport infrastructure – that the [Lexiteers desire](#) and which [European law does nothing to hinder](#).

Moreover, while the EU may frustrate some leftist initiatives, within the UK European regulations actually often serve leftist goals by protecting [consumers](#), [worker's rights](#), and [the environment](#). The situation is different in Greece, where the EU has indeed enforced [brutal market liberalisation](#). However, England is not Greece and the EU's effects differ depending on the national context. This explains why the majority of the UK's left-wing parties (Labour, Green, Scottish National, Plaid Cymru, SDLP, Sinn Féin and Left Unity) and trade unions not only [campaign](#) for Remain, but also continue to [oppose](#) Brexit.

Most importantly, the case for Lexit ignores the [right-wing roots of the EU referendum](#). It is true that the left case for Brexit is not based on the kinds of xenophobic, intolerant, anti-migrant rhetoric that exemplifies support for Britain's exit from the EU on the right. However, supporting the same policies as the far right means that Lexit can conceivably be coopted by these unsavoury elements.

This fear is not merely theoretical. The rapid transformation of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) from a Euroskeptic party focused on the [problems of the euro](#) into a [far movement](#) sets a worrying precedent. In arguing for the breakup of the Eurozone, the AfD quickly [attracted voters and support](#) from the ultra-nationalist right. As a result, a movement that started out making cogent economic arguments – [arguments many on the left share](#) – soon turned into a vehicle for ethnic hatred and nationalism as its leadership of academic economist was replaced by [supporters of the far right and anti-migrant protesters](#).

The same outcome threatens the British left if it abandons its international, cosmopolitan orientation. In trying to woo Brexit voters by promising [to limit immigration to the UK](#) the left also distracts from its actual diagnosis of the pathologies of the present. Insofar as Labour truly believes that an overreliance on market mechanisms – such as [deregulation and privatisation](#) – is to blame for the current situation, it needs to make this argument without scapegoating migrant workers in order to woo English nationalists.

## Conclusion

Does this mean that the EU is a social democratic paradise? By no means. Like many on the left, I oppose [European directives](#) requiring competition in the provision of public services, court [decisions](#) that imperil international collective bargaining, as well as its [suppression of Greek democracy](#). However, these are problems and policies that are best [opposed from within the EU](#).

Given the global nature of contemporary problems – including rising inequality, capital flight and tax avoidance, as well as global climate change – it is irresponsible to abandon supranational European political institutions that offer [some hope](#) for politics to ‘[catch up](#)’ with global markets. Instead of [counterproductively](#) supporting Brexit, the British left should push for [change within the EU](#) where it can make a real difference at the global, systemic level.

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*Note: This article first appeared at our sister site, [LSE Brexit](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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