

'Back to the Future?' Brexit, elitism, and the British Political Tradition

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*Following the referendum, British politics is about to enter into a process of de-Europeanisation. **Danny Fitzpatrick** and **Dave Richards** warn that Brexit – an outcome unanticipated and perhaps even unwanted by many on the Leave campaign – should not be used as a justification for preserving the elitism that has characterised the British Political Tradition.*



With a record national turnout of 72.2 per cent, the EU referendum represented a seismic event in the history of British democracy. It is also set to expose a key irony in contemporary British politics: the shock of the result may prove instrumental in bolstering a top-down approach to governing that continues to limit the opportunities for democratic participation.



The British Political Tradition is one that has always prioritised an elitist approach to governing and an electoral system that effectively excludes large swathes of the population: the British version of representative democracy has successfully insulated the political class against forms of deliberative or participatory democracy since the 19th century. Incremental reforms that granted the extension of the franchise and instituted a professional and meritocratic bureaucracy, successfully appeased enough of the middle and working class agitators, while retaining the core elitist values and principles of the pre-democratic era. The emergence and then consolidation of the two-party system in the 20th century led to a 'power-hoarding' approach based on the centralisation of power in Westminster and the supposed passivity of the electorate.



A political system based on weak, limited principles of representation and an electoral system that privileges stability over proportionality has steadily devalued participation. Shorn of any previous opportunity to play a meaningful role in Westminster's traditional arena politics, some relished the chance to cast a decisive vote on 23 June 2016.

Before the EU referendum, all but two of the polls predicted a win for Remain. What proved crucial was that the Leave campaign was successful in attracting the bulk of support from the 2.8 million people who had either never voted or had not done so since the 1980s – a group both the commentariat and politicians increasingly now often bluntly refer to as the 'left behind'.

While impressive in aggregative terms, there was little else to commend the EU referendum campaigns. Both sides' approach was characterised by polarising, hyperbolic rhetoric, as well as by some outright falsehoods. It was an unedifying spectacle and when apportioning blame, the lion's share unfortunately has to be placed at the door of those leading the campaigns. Democratic politics was the real loser. Indeed, where once it was the case with war, a revised version of Samuel Johnson's aphorism may well in future be invoked acknowledging that 'truth is the first casualty in a referendum'.

While it would be somewhat glib to call it a '[working class revolt](#)', the referendum result is going to prove to be a vote for disruption. For some, it was a conscious choice to shake up the established way of doing politics, or more crudely, a two-fingered salute to an often-elusive Establishment. On the surface, it seems to have had the desired effect: resignations and motions of no confidence have thrown both main parties into leadership crises, though predictably the Conservatives have resolved their little local difficulty post-haste, unlike Labour. This tumult in party politics has been depicted as a cathartic replacement of a '[stale leadership class](#)'. But although new actors are seizing the opportunity to stake their claim to power, are they offering anything novel?

Since 23 June there has been little articulation of a new vision for British politics. Michael Gove – long seen as a

radical by his Tory peers – and the lone UKIP MP Douglas Carswell have spoken of a need to forge a ‘new politics’. But they are on the margins. Jeremy Corbyn has also regularly invoked such language, but has failed to establish a coherent narrative of reform. Labour remains in the midst of a painful existential crisis rendering it impotent in contributing anything meaningful to the current Brexit debate or British politics more generally.

Elsewhere, the scant contributions by Theresa May in the lead-up to her coronation as Prime Minister setting out her vision for the future of the British Parliamentary State does nothing to suggest that the present Brexit process is conceived of as anything beyond a technocratic exercise to be negotiated in the private corridors of Whitehall and Brussels. Her Cabinet appointments reveal the degree to which Whitehall will undergo a sizeable makeover. Yet the newly created Cabinet Office Brexit Unit under the wise-counsel of an old Home Office lag Olly Robbins and a Brexit Department headed by another seasoned ministerial hand David Davis, have a mammoth task on their hands in de-Europeanising British politics over the next few years.

The paradox here is that in such times of turbulence, government seeks out sanctuary and certainty by enveloping itself in the comfort blanket afforded by the traditional rules and conventions of Westminster and Whitehall. Theresa May’s swift anointment as Prime Minister is symbolic of a political class wishing to send out a firm message of an immediate return to business-as-usual.

Once the normal rules of Westminster are re-enacted and reinforced, then the ‘Left Behind’ will again be effectively ignored by a political system that is largely premised on their non-participation. Where, in such a state of affairs, will the opportunity present itself to debate the more pressing, yet fundamental issue of what Britain’s strategic place in the world should now be? This most crucial of questions received scant attention during the campaign itself, as campaigners on both sides of the debate extolled most of their efforts in picking over hypothetical claims concerning the funding of the NHS, tax cuts, mortgage rate increases, immigration numbers, etc! What is certain is that as Britain starts to re-position itself in geo-political terms, the public will rarely, if at all, be consulted.

Yet, in a rising climate of anti-politics, the demos needs to be provided with the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way to what may certainly prove to be some of the most crucial political decisions this union of nations will face during the course of the twenty-first century. It will not be achieved by a political class reverting to type and appealing to an out-dated, top-down mode of governing offered by the Westminster model. Its roots were planted in the nineteenth century, where they should have remained. Now, is not the time to go back to the future!

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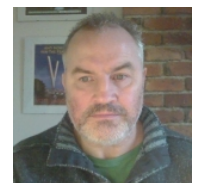


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