

Populism, Nationalism, and the Elite: A Weekend at Cumberland Lodge



MSc student **Rob Macquarie** reflects on the **Department of Government's** annual visit to **Cumberland Lodge** from the 28-30 April 2017, with the theme '*The Rise of Populism? Resurgent Nationalism in an Internationalised World*'.

Whatever one's position on the political spectrum, it's undeniable that the past 12 months have been a turbulent time for intellectuals. The debate on contemporary politics has been made all the more frantic by a prevailing sense of identity crisis, among Western elites in particular. What role should an urbane, mostly liberal intelligentsia play in a Europe or a United States seemingly divided along nativist and chauvinistic lines? The role of 'experts,' when prominent figures and leading pundits openly **pour scorn** on their authority, is increasingly uncertain.

It was in this spirit of introspection that the LSE Government Department held its annual trip to the beautiful **Cumberland Lodge** – an open forum with a range of speakers from both policy and academia – at the end of April. Indeed, the weekend, themed on 'The Rise of Populism: Resurgent Nationalism,' was billed as a chance 'to discuss globally relevant issues, in dialogue with world experts.' The subtext for this sort of thing isn't hard to spot: when things go wrong, what can we, as young researchers and a future elite, possibly do about it?

The discussion got underway with an added tinge of humility. Political scientists have been handed a fairly raw deal of late. Though they have never really tasted – wrongly or rightly – the professional prestige enjoyed by economists, on-going political contortions in Western democracies might be thought of as their global financial crisis. Not that the field lacks explanations. Experts on the British constitution and its contradictions **saw** the UK referendum on EU membership on 23 June 2016 as the consequence of tensions that were decades, if not centuries in the making. Political economists studying inequality or the labour market point to a strong correlation between economic vulnerability and extremism in Europe. And **work** on the capture of the US Government by corporate interests has donned a new shade of irony after the tragicomedy of Trump's '**drain the swamp**' pledge.



Not all explanations have economic grounds. Perhaps one of the most heated contemporary divisions among intellectuals concerns the role of ‘culture’ as an explanation for Brexit, Trump, and (almost) Le Pen. Those of a social democratic persuasion see an opportunity to reverse the rolling back of the welfare state, and address the unacceptably high cost to socioeconomic equality wrought by globalisation. Yet the right, roughly speaking, focuses on what it sees as a legitimate anxiety among Western natives over cultural dislocation and a loss of identity. And different assumptions about causes produce very different conclusions about remedies.

This split speaks to what several speakers agreed was the most pressing question of the current period: what role should the left play in all this? Most traditional European social democratic parties have failed to arouse popular passions since the crisis. US Democrats suffer from a similarly complacent liberal haze. But how can these parties better incorporate emotion and psychology into their platforms? At Cumberland Lodge, the craving for an answer to this question was tangible. It is no simple task. Modern intellectuals have an uneasy relationship with the sort of nationalist mythology so dominant in today’s symbolic politics. Evidently, despite the **facts of economic underperformance**, constructing a narrative that voters buy into is beyond the ken of many leftist leaders.

Needless to say, with so many students and researchers in one room, methodological issues weren’t far down the agenda. Here too, the socioeconomic/cultural divide applies. Does cultural conflict demand a sort of ‘ethnographic’ research that delves into local communities to understand the sources of discontent? Can national- or regional-level statistics teach us about the same problems? Should opinion data take respondents at their word, or should we assume a degree of bias in their responses? More and more, theories that posit a disconnect between what the macro data show and people’s experience of their own lives may need to affect how we conduct research.

One thing everyone present could agree on was the debilitating effect of overly technocratic and secretive governance. Yet a former royal residence and country lodge (even one as peaceful as Cumberland) was a bemusing choice of venue for a weekend spent discussing the perils of an elite alienated from the wider population. Happily, the irony of this was not lost on the bulk of students present. If anything good comes out of the current political upheaval that might well be it: a youthful cohort better attuned to the duties of outreach, engagement, and mutual understanding. The weekend was a fantastic start to a healthy dialogue. But we must go further than dialogue. Populism and nationalism challenge the very nature of scholars’ public status – a challenge that demands new solutions.



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*Note: this article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the **LSE Department of Government**, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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