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Progressive Politics in a Populist Era

Text of Tony Blair's speech at the British Academy on progressive politics in a populist era.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I want to make the case today for progressive politics rejecting a populism of the left as the answer to the populism of the right, and instead embracing a unifying economic and social message driven from the centre.

But, at this moment, it would be bizarre not to start with the issue which has so divided our nation: Brexit.

I begin by praising the Prime Minister. She has striven hard; from good intention; with a poor hand; a Party divided, disputatious and dogmatic in equal degrees; which then gave her a circle impossible to square: a frictionless border in Ireland; exit of the UK from the European Single Market and Customs Union; and yet Northern Ireland in the same relationship to Europe as the rest of the UK.

This literally and technically cannot be done.

I sympathise.

But nothing can disguise the nature of the deal she has chosen, if reports of it are true.

It isn't a compromise but a capitulation.

The withdrawal agreement will keep us tied to EU trade policy until there is an end established by 'joint consent'. i.e. the EU has a veto. It is coated in heavy fudge but that is the inedible biscuit beneath the coating.

As for future arrangements that is essentially the Chequers proposal which leaves us accepting existing EU rules and agreeing to abide by future ones.

This is Brexit in theory but still tied to Europe in reality, thus making a mockery of the reason for leaving. Whatever people voted for, it wasn't this!

How did we arrive here?

Because Theresa May wanted to unify the country after Brexit had so bitterly divided it.

This is the right ambition, even a noble one.

But the route she chose – stay in step with Europe's rules whilst leaving its political structures of decision-making - is a dead-end.

It hasn't united the two sides of the Brexit debate except in opposition to it.

Remainers like me and Leavers like Boris Johnson are now in unholy alliance: we agree this is a pointless Brexit in name only which is not the best of a bad job but the worst of both worlds.

In the cause of 'taking back control' we lose the control we had.

And, it won't end the argument; it will perpetuate disunity, dragging us past March 2019 into a blind alley strewn with further and further rounds of negotiation, when we will have lost whatever bargaining leverage we had, and with the battle still being waged by those who want to stay close to Europe in the hope of one day re-joining and those who want to break from Europe and forge a new future.

This is the time for Remainers and Leavers to come together and to understand there is only one way of ending the argument and re-uniting the country.

The only route to unity is clarity; and the only route to clarity is through the People.

Parliament must ask the British people to resolve the matter. To reconsider. To clarify their mandate. To do so in a vote which is accepted by all sides as conclusive. To give each side a chance to remake their case on the basis not of claim and counter claim but of the experience of the past 30 months. To give Europe a chance to reconsider their offer to the British people after 30 months which

has seen the politics of Europe changed dramatically particularly on the issue of immigration.

I know it is said a new vote of the people will also divide. But a reconsideration in the light of all we now know, accepted by all as the final word, especially if accompanied by a new willingness on the part of Europe's leadership and Britain's to deal with the reasons for the Brexit decision, is the only hope of unity in the future. And it is frankly gut-wrenching that this call is not being led by Labour as it should be.

But Brexit is but one example of how populism is all the rage.

Not only in Europe, as with Poland or Hungary and in the surge of outsider populist parties from Italy to Germany; just look at Brazil; or the Philippines or indeed the USA.

By contrast, according to the prevailing political wisdom, the politics of the progressive centre has gone out of fashion.

But it never was a fashion. It was a philosophy. And it remains as relevant as it was and as it always will be.

Of course, the philosophy must be applied today differently for radically different times.

But when people say it has been rejected, the truth is – at least here in the UK – it has not recently been on offer.

Furthermore, it has been systematically assaulted not only from the right but from the left. The denigration of the Labour Party record in Government and its designation by the far left as 'neo-liberal' is one of the most absurd and self defeating caricatures of modern political history.

The excellent pamphlet published by Glen O'Hara this morning, analysing the record of the last Labour Government, demonstrates this conclusively.

FEATURED ARTICLE

UNITED KINGDOM

New Labour's Domestic Policies: Neoliberal, Social Democratic or a Unique Blend?

GLEN O'HARA

The Labour Party has paid, but more importantly the country has paid, a heavy price for this stupidity. It has undermined the achievements of the Party in Government. It has weakened the Labour Party's ability to win by depriving it of a unifying message which can reach the centre ground and led to the abject refusal of the Labour leadership to lead the country out of the Brexit nightmare.

But what is true is that if progressive centrist politics is to be revived as the answer to populism, it requires change.

Defining populism is hard. We feel we know it when we see it, though it is important not describe everything that is popular as populist.

As the recent paper of my Institute shows, however, there are some shared characteristics. It is politics pitched as outsiders taking on an elite; it claims to be the only authentic voice of the people; it does not simply cause division, it exalts in it; and its policies are foremost designed for emotional rather than rational appeal. Opposition to its politics is seen not as democratic disagreement but as treachery.

Disentangling the causes of populism is tricky. In Western politics, the most obvious explanation seems the combination of stagnating incomes post financial crisis and cultural alienation through immigration.

Social media with its attachment to hyperbole, its tendency to conspiracy theory, and debate by headline, provides a platform of engagement for messages of anger. The fragmentation of conventional media plays its part as traditional media outlets decide their best hope of commercial salvation lies in identifying a constituency and keeping it in a permanent echo chamber of outrage.

In non-Western countries, populism seems to be an explosion of anger at the inability of the established politicians to deliver change and at corruption.

But in all cases the common factors are the insistence things must change and the belief that it requires a strongly disruptive force to achieve the change.

Progressive parties associated with the status quo fare badly.

To that extent the leftist critique of 'moderate' social democracy is correct. Such parties seem hopelessly out of tune with the sounds of the age.

So, go round Europe and it is a sorry story for conventional social democrats. The French Socialist Party, having won an election and the Presidency in 2012, is now almost defunct. The German SPD is at its lowest ever level. Moderate centre left Governments were put out of power in Italy, Holland, Sweden and Austria. Spain's Socialist Party is in Government, but it is yet to win an election. Portugal offers a ray of satisfaction but overall the picture is bleak.

This has opened the door to a renaissance of the far left. This takes the form either – as with the British Labour Party – of a takeover of a mainstream Party; or as with Podemos in Spain and Melenchon in France of new or renewed radical leftist movements.

This is the Sanders strain of thinking in the Democrat Party in the USA.

Candidates are standing in American politics as 'socialists' a word that was literally anathema for any would-be USA politician twenty years ago.

There are certain common themes in this new wave of old leftism. Back in vogue is a bigger state, promises of things like University education for free, higher taxes on the wealthy, disdain for much of the business community, especially in the financial sector, a more isolationist foreign policy combined with a scepticism if not renunciation of traditional Western alliances.

There is support for the new environmental politics though to be fair that is across the spectrum of progressive thinking.

And then there is a new devotion to the causes of what is sometimes called identity politics – strong support for minorities, LGBT, Transgender issues and a willingness to embrace the politics of protest in a way which is full on and unequivocal.

This mirrors a profound change in the sociological make-up of Western society, throwing up new coalitions of political support.

‘Identity’ politics is displacing the politics of class.

The right wing populism proclaims that national identity is under threat principally from immigration but also from what it calls ‘political correctness’ and the left’s embrace of minority rights.

Thus, there is a new right wing coalition of lower income people who used to vote left on economic issues and higher income people who hate Government, favour deregulation and voted right on economic issues. This is the Trump/Brexit/Salvini coalition. Steve Bannon is the ideological guru of it and its intellectual coherence is not to be under-estimated.

On the other hand, the disposition of the electorate to entertain leftist policies is probably greater today than for decades. In insecure times, the State seems a better protector of the people. A large public sector knows it is under siege from austerity and reform.

And the left’s own version of identity politics reflects a modern day belief that an individual’s identity, whether around gender, sexuality or ethnicity is the most important thing to them and defines their place in society.

This leads to a left coalition of older people attached to traditional leftist positions around the State, tax and spending, Government control of business etc. and younger people who feel oppressed by society’s conventional norms and power relationships.

Parts of the left resemble the populist right. They too demonise opponents. They too consider themselves the true representatives of ‘the people’ waging war against the elites who are only interested in preserving their power.

All this is causing a deep fissure across progressive politics. The ‘moderates’ suffer from moderation. They seem flabby in the face

of the scale of social injustice, always temporising and compromising.

The leftists sweep them aside and, in an age where noise and clamour easily overwhelm quiet persuasion, seem much more relevant and particularly to the youth, more attractive.

But note that in nearly all cases the populism which wins power to govern is from the right. There are populist parties available on the left – not least the Corbyn Labour Party – but they seldom win power. Greece and possibly Mexico are the only examples and even they need heavy qualification.

So, when we come to analyse the correct strategy to counter the populism, we should recognise one stark reality. Virtually everywhere in the West progressive politics is in opposition. Even the mid term elections in the USA, though they yielded big Democrat advance in the House and in certain states, did not deliver the resounding rejection of the President which according to the critique of Donald Trump should have happened. This is a President subject to a more coruscating onslaught than any in living memory. Yet pose the question: could he win again in 2020 and few say he couldn't. That's not to say he will. Just to point out he could.

In Britain, we have a Government which is in complete disarray making a mess of the most significant decision this country has taken since the War. Yet the Labour Party is barely ahead in the polls and its leadership's ratings languish well behind those of the Prime Minister who herself faces daily speculation about her position and is highly unlikely to lead them into the next election.

Of course, there is Macron. But in a sense that is my point. He won precisely by not being from the conventional left.

So, the challenge is that neither strain of traditional progressive politics – the more 'moderate' sort or that much further to the left looks capable of defeating the populist right.

And the risk for 'moderate' progressive politics is that in the ensuing tug of war with the far left, it is dragged to strategic no man's land.

However, the two new coalitions do not represent everyone.

There is another coalition in the making. This is of people who are socially liberal, believe in social justice, believe enterprise is an important engine of economic progress and who want a State which supports, nurtures and empowers the individual, with an especial concentration on the most disadvantaged.

This group – the progressive centre - instinctively dislikes identity politics of left or right, abhors the divisive rhetoric and reaches instead for a unifying social and economic message.

Contemporary conventional wisdom says this coalition can't prevail. But it is wrong.

Right wing populism does not offer an answer to an inter-dependent world, neither in its targeting of immigrants nor in its isolationism nor most of all in its divisiveness which over time pulls a country apart and no country is stronger when divided in this way.

The leftist populism – as well as the obvious point that it is not a path to winning – will ultimately lead to disillusion because though it often raises the right questions, it gives answers that have been tried and failed in the past. And it also divides and de-legitimises opposition.

Both forms of populism in the end do not equip people to deal with change but offer the false prospectus that change can be avoided.

Both, however, do have one major element of appeal. Both recognise the widespread feeling that people have lost control of their future, that it is being determined by forces they have never consented to, culturally and economically.

Therefore, to win, the progressive centre must build out from its core support to peel off voters from the other two. Its starting point is dealing with the anxieties fuelling the populism. To recognise the anger as genuine. To acknowledge the grievances as legitimate. Not to dismiss them as invalid. To meet people halfway at least.

For example, we should willingly advocate immigration controls, not to 'pander' to anti immigration sentiment, but recognising that you don't have to be anti-immigrant to be worried if there are no effective rules controlling who has a right to be in our country. We need greater restrictions on European freedom of movement in the

light of our experience of it; a new electronic form of identity card to restore faith in our migration system; and credible mechanisms to control Europe's borders. All these things are not inconsistent with progressive values but necessary to protect them.

We should support measures of social liberalism, but if we pursue the politics of identity with intolerance towards those who are struggling with our interpretation of it, don't be surprised if they look for defenders of their views who are equally intolerant.

Likewise, if Europe ignores the desire of European people to keep their own identity as nations even as they freely cooperate for the common good, European leaders will lose support, mistaking such attitudes as reactionary when they express only a natural sense of belonging.

In the same way, we must give answers to the legitimate questions from the left, focusing policy and resources on those 'left behind' and satisfying the public insistence on changed corporate responsibility and governance, especially in areas like payment of taxes and treatment of the workforce.

Populism thrives on the politics of fear, always looking for someone or something to blame.

But the fear usually derives from a worry which is real.

So, we deal with it.

After that the task is to create a new policy agenda and new narrative which can replace fear about the future, with hope.

The spirit with which we approach this task is the same as it always been: a passion for social justice, and a belief that unless we act collectively together to provide it, inequality and inequity will persist and deepen.

These principles, we apply to a changing world.

So, what is the nature of the change?

All the traditional questions of macro and micro economics, of social welfare, public services, and security remain and there is much policy work to be done around them to re-shape policy in a way that produces fairness and prosperity.

But the key to understanding this world is the ongoing and accelerating technological revolution.

Progressive politics is missing the true significance of this revolution.

It is changing everything.

The first group of politicians to master its effects and weave its changes into a vision of how economy and society should best be transformed, will own the politics of the foreseeable future.

When I left office, technology was important, but it seemed to Government like just another issue – health, education, law and order, defence etc and then technology.

Today technology and the next set of changes – AI, automation, quantum computing – are going to mean disruption to every facet of our life.

For public services, there will be the opportunity to transform completely the way they work – diagnosis or treatment in healthcare, personalising education for each child.

The challenge for business will be digitalisation.

For example, driverless vehicles will change transport, reconfigure car ownership and of course remove jobs; and consequentially alter the car industry.

Virtually any job or any business could have a digital twin doing it differently.

There will be huge potential benefits, substantial changes in the Labour market, massive displacement of existing ways of working and many risks because of the vast issues around misuse of data, relationships between robotics and humans, responsibility and accountability.

The point is not to go through all the changes – my Institute has produced some great short primers explaining them.

The point is this is a revolution akin to the 19th C industrial revolution.

It is not simply material to politics; it is central.

Many of those jobs which have been lost over the past decades from communities 'left behind' were from technology not trade or immigration.

All of this will now greatly intensify.

The danger is of a 'techlash' where in the absence of a proper dialogue between change-makers and policy-makers we regulate badly, miss the opportunities and fail the challenges.

And to be noted to all Western politicians: China's advances in this area, especially AI, will pose an enormous challenge. Their ambitions are clearly set out and, in a sense, good luck to them. But it is up to us to make sure we are not laggards.

Meeting this challenge will require substantial re-design of the State – what it does, and how it does it; what it taxes and how it spends.

The way people live, their expectations around their lives, how they balance their work and recreation, what it means to have a career, what 'retirement' looks like - all of this will likely change in ways we cannot accurately predict but we can predict its impact will be transformative.

The risk is that some people will be qualified to handle this revolution; and some will be left stranded. This is the policy challenge for progressives.

To meet it, nations need a unifying economic and social narrative.

We don't need an 'identity' politics which divides.

We can be British and European. We can be from different ethnicities or faiths but share common aspirations for our future together.

Politics which polarises, which sets people against each other, which regards the other tribe as the 'enemy' is destructive of the unity vital to progress and success.

There is no doubt in my mind that there is support for a revived progressive centre.

Can it be done when the established Parties are increasingly occupied by vocal activists from the right and left who want to vacate the centre?

The Parties can be re-occupied. And this would be the simpler course.

If not, then as I have often said, the politically homeless are not lacking commitment or conviction and they will find a way of building a new home.

But this is a second order question.

The first is to agree what agenda and narrative can answer the appeal of the populism and govern the future.

The urgency of renewing progressive politics in a way which defeats populism rather than imitates it, is manifest.

Let me end optimistically. The progressive centre is not done! All over Europe today there is an energy coming from those who refuse to have our politics defined by division and hatred. In the USA, candidates in Florida and Texas showed how opinion can be moved by a message which unifies.

Populism is not yet in retreat. But the strategy to drive it there is becoming clearer. Now the question is whether progressive politicians are brave enough to stand up to those in our own ranks who want to fight the fire of populism with our own fire and say our job is not to burn but to build.