

THINK PIECE
#87

Cosmopolitans, Communitarians and the new Fault-Line: how to renew the traditional Labour alliance

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September 2017

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Published September 2017 by Compass
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Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality.

We are founded on the belief that no single issue, organisation or political party can make a Good Society a reality by themselves so we have to work together to make it happen. Compass is a place where people come together to create the visions, alliances and actions to be the change we wish to see in the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Edgar is a playwright and a member of Compass. He writes regularly for the Guardian and the London Review of Books.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

In the past few decades, we have seen a sharp polarisation between communitarian and cosmopolitan concerns. While recognising cultural and material differences between different sections of society, Compass is keen to explore what unites and binds people and how we manage the tensions between the paradox of our need to conserve and our need modernise. David Edgar helps us locate ourselves in that debate. This **Think Piece** is based on draft paper by David that was then discussed at a seminar in Westminster in July. Lisa Nandy and Jon Cruddas responded to the original piece and then there were contributors from people such as Ruth Lister, Francesca Klug and others. David then reviewed his draft based on the comments at the seminar into this publication.

We are keen to keep exploring these key issues and would welcome any comments or ideas about how.

Compass **Think Pieces** are shorter, sharper and more immediate responses to key issues. They can cover any topic that helps us understand better what a good society should or could look like and how we might get there. We welcome suggestions for future publications, especially from women and any groups or people in society who are under-represented in the field of political thought and action.

Please contact frances@compassonline.org.uk in the first instance.

I first noticed the change in political geology in Ukraine. The 2004 Orange Revolution was a protest against a fraudulent Presidential election. The protestors in Kiev's main square were very recognisable to me. They were the kind of people I'd met visiting Eastern Europe in the 80s and the 90s: highly educated, interested in the arts, socially liberal, largely irreligious, internationalist, pro human rights. The only major thing which distinguished them from me was that, sooner or later, they'd ask me what I had against that wonderful woman Margaret Thatcher.

What I realised in 2004 was that there was a mirror image of the socially and economically liberal Orange people: the Blue-coded people in the east. Opponents of the revolution, they were socially conservative, opposed to gay and abortion rights, suspicious of the arts and hostile to the west. But they also wanted to defend the industrial subsidies, social services and pensions on which they and their parents depended.

The Orange Revolution was thus fought along a fault-line at right-angles to the one that I and we were used to, where the right combined free market liberalism with social conservatism, and the left was socially liberal, but economically interventionist and egalitarian. This new divide concerned me because it placed two political positions I believe in (social liberalism and economic justice) in opposite political camps. It thereby threatened the alliance which brought about almost all the great progressive achievements of the 20th century. These included the international movements in support of the Spanish Republic and against colonialism, the prewar New Deal in America and the postwar welfare state in Europe, and the civil rights movement, which united white, often Jewish students with largely Christian black activists in the American south.

In this country, the achievements of this coalition included the postwar settlement (nationalisation of fuel and transport, the welfare state) and the social reforms of the 1960s (abolishing capital punishment, legalising abortion and homosexuality, liberalising divorce, criminalising racial discrimination and establishing – albeit patchily – equal pay for women). I'd add to that list the peace movement of the late 50s, the campaign against the National Front in the late 70s, the urban left alliance with the miners during the 1984-5 strike, and many of the economic and social reforms of the early Blair government, from equalisation of the age of consent and abolition of Section 28 to the windfall tax and the minimum wage.

The new faultline, which split that alliance and set its constituencies against each other, has been increasingly visible in Eastern Europe but also in places like Thailand and Iran. In the United States, it had already recast the battle-lines of American politics, by persuading a significant fraction of the Democratic working class to defect to the Republicans in the Reagan years. But in western Europe, the old fault-line – and the alliances it separated and preserved – remained intact, sedimented into the traditions and positions of the leading parties.

And as most elections are decided on the economy, working-class reservations about social-democracy's cultural and social agenda were trumped by their economic aspirations. As psephologists put it, issues like gender rights, civil liberties and even immigration were – come the crunch – less salient than wages, pensions and housing.

What changed this was the demographic decline of the manufacturing working-class, which created a perceived majority opposed to the left's traditional economic agenda

(notably, nationalisation, but also cradle-to-grave welfare). This led to the abandonment of most of that agenda by social-democrats in Europe, Blair's Britain and Clinton's America.

In its absence, the social issues that had played second fiddle in many working-class voters' minds became salient. In the last decade the triple crises of the banking system, the Euro and international population movement led to a new fault-line – echoing those already dividing voters in the middle east, Thailand and the former Soviet bloc – being expressed politically in the west.

First, far-right parties spotted that social-democracy's abandonment of the interventionist/equality agenda had created a vacuum, and self-consciously set out to fill it, by amending their economic platforms so not to put off working voters hostile to social liberalism in general and immigration in particular. So the Austrian Freedom Party, once hostile to welfare spending and in favour of raising the retirement age, reversed those positions. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Dutch Freedom Party converted itself from free-market antistatism to promoting workers' rights and the minimum wage. In France, Marine le Pen positioned the Front National to the left of President Hollande on nationalisation. While, noting that 81% of its supporters thought that "big business takes advantage of ordinary people", UKIP declared itself opposed both to big business and banking, came out against the bedroom tax, and dropped its earlier (and well documented) reservations about the NHS.

Then, some mainstream political parties decided to position themselves on the same side of the new faultline, ranging from hitherto left parties like the social-democratic party of Slovakia to the erstwhile liberal centrist Fidesz party of

Hungary, which now combines a policy of banning refugees with repressing the media and nationalising banks, under the proudly declared banner of the "illiberal" state. Theresa May's Red Toryism combines a nationalist hard Brexit policy with criticisms of corporate greed, proposals to put workers on the boards of companies and as-yet-undefined politics to protect them from the gig economy. While the US Republicans picked Donald Trump as their presidential candidate, based on a populist cocktail of nativism and a programme of public works unmatched since the New Deal.

Last year it seemed as if the new right-populist front was carrying all before it.

This year, things look different. Already, full-fat right-populists in Austria, Holland and France significantly underperformed, Theresa May lost rather than gained seats in our general election, and UKIP flamed out. Interestingly, the parties which did particularly badly were those who had lavishly praised, or been lavishly praised by, Donald Trump. As Rafael Behr of the Guardian noted, even right-wing Europeans appeared to see Trump not as an inspiring parable but as a cautionary tale.

The populist retreat raises three questions. Do these set-backs represent a sea-change, or just a temporary blip? And, if the former, had the movement and the new fault-line which allowed it been exaggerated all along?

Because it wasn't bound by the traditional party contours, Brexit is deemed to have exposed the geology of the new fault-line particularly starkly. The big story of the referendum is supposed to have been the mass defection of core Labour voters to Leave.

Since 2001, the Labour core vote has remained pretty consistent: 9.5m in 2005, 8.6m in 2010 and 9.3m in 2015 (lest we forget, Ed Miliband gained more English votes losing in 2015 than Tony Blair gained winning in 2005). Only 37% of the 2015 Labour core voted Leave, around 3.5m people, 20% of the total. (In fact, Labour delivered only one percent fewer of its 2015 voters to Remain than the SNP). And even if you add the half million 2010 Labour voters who voted UKIP in 2015 that still only gets you up to 23%. So, fewer than a quarter of Leave voters were core Labour.

By contrast, 68% of 2015 Conservative voters defied their party leader to vote Leave. Most of them live in southern England. (Similarly, the vast majority of Trump voters were traditional Republicans in traditional Republican places. Primary Trump voters were poorer than Cruz or Kasich voters but richer than either Sanders or Clinton supporters. Trump actually proved more attractive to registered Republicans - 90% voted for him - than Clinton to registered Democrats. The three-time married pussy-groper gained 81% of evangelicals, a crucial component of the Republican coalition).

But even so, it's clear that many deprived areas, particularly outside cities, voted Leave. Doesn't the new fault-line represent political reality? Isn't the political world now divided between what liberals call open and closed politics, and populists describe as the struggle between the decent conservative majority and the globalised liberal elite? Doesn't Brexit demonstrate both the importance and the reach of socially-conservative values?

In fact, the big story of the last 30 years has not been a swing to traditional values, but the reverse. Lord Ashcroft's much quoted (and misquoted) survey of Leave voters only serves to demonstrate

that – on all issues except immigration – more Leavers saw socially progressive phenomena – including feminism and social liberalism itself – as forces for good than ill. The much-touted correlation between Leave voting and belief in the death penalty is surely less significant than the fact that support for its restoration declined from 75% of the population in 1983 to under 50% today. Ironically, David Goodhart's antiliberal *The Road to Somewhere* provides voluminous evidence for the extraordinary liberalisation in attitudes towards homosexuality, inter-racial marriage and extramarital sex (and the narrowing of the gap between the views of graduates and non-graduates on these issues). Published since the election, the latest British Social Attitudes survey confirms that support for same sex relationships has shifted from 47% in 2012 to almost two thirds now. But the really important thing the new BSA survey tells us is about attitudes to tax, spending and welfare.

So, support for raising taxes and expenditure, 32% in 2010, is now 48%. Support for more cuts has declined from 35% ten years ago to 29% today. The belief that benefit claimants are on the fiddle has dropped from 35% to 22% in two years.

Which brings us to the 2017 general election. Labour is properly cautious about World War Two analogies, but two spring to mind. Like Britain in 1944, Labour gained a significant bridgehead in formerly hostile territory (the educationally and economically privileged), from which further gains can be made. But the most significant analogy is with 1940. Churchill said of Dunkirk "we should not apply to this deliverance the attributes of a victory". In 2017, too, all that happened is that an expected catastrophe didn't occur. But, as in the subsequent Battle of Britain itself, we were never going to win this

time. The important thing was not to be destroyed.

Clearly, the big story of the night was Conservative gains among the poor and unqualified, while Labour scooped up urban graduates. But the subplot was the failure of the promised nuclear winter - reported by Labour MPs from doorsteps up and down the land - to arrive.

Overall, Labour won 88% of its 2015 vote. Apart from the north east, every English region saw swings from Conservative to Labour (on top of the million extra votes which Labour gained in England in 2015). The party gained 900,000 votes from the Conservatives, against Conservative gains from Labour of around 650,000. Labour also gained about 700,000 Liberal Democrat votes and over 600,000 from UKIP. If you add all those votes together, you get around 10.3m, 2.5 fewer than Labour's total. Some of these extra votes will have come from the SNP, Plaid and the Greens. But most were new.

But the most significant statistic in terms of the fault line is that Labour won the young working class. Overall, Labour's 4% lead among under 30s (in 2015) was transformed into a 40% lead on 8 June. But they weren't just - or even predominantly - urban cosmopolitans. Labour won 70% of DEs aged between 18-34, 62% of C2s and 58% of C1s. In the 35-54 age range Labour won 55% of the DEs, 44% of C2s (as against 40% for the Conservatives) and 43% of C1s (against 38%).

In all these those age cohorts Labour did better among C2s and DEs than among ABs and C1s. Indeed, under 55, the only category in which Conservatives did better than Labour was 35-55 year old ABs, partly because of a higher-than-average vote for the Liberal Democrats.

All the above is calculated from Ipsos Mori, who didn't ask voters about their employment. YouGov did. Labour won students, part time workers, full time workers and non-workers of working age. It lost the retired.

The issue was never primarily class, and only values insofar as conservative values - along with not having been to university, owning your own house and not working - are a function of age. The crossover age between majority Labour and majority Conservative is now 47. If the franchise was limited to people of working age Jeremy Corbyn would have won handsomely.

The result was positive for Labour, but even better for the prospects of a progressive alliance. In 2015, the Conservatives and UKIP won half a million more votes than all the progressive parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats, Nationalists and Greens) combined. This time, the progressive parties were two million votes ahead.

Why? In America, Trump won by winning over a sliver of young working class voters in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, who had voted for the ultra-liberal Obama in 2012, not because of his stance on gay marriage, but because he had saved the automobile industry, while his opponent had called for Detroit to go bankrupt. In 2016 - for better or worse - the same group felt that their economic future was safer with Donald Trump.

The 18-55 cohort in Britain includes millions of people who are either going or want to become graduates, are saddled with debt, can't buy a house, and know they are will remain worse off than people a decade older. There and here, it was the economy, stupid.

The new BSA report demonstrates that - at last - public opinion seems to be moving towards both the social-liberal

and the economically interventionist agenda *at the same time*. Now is time to reinvigorate the Labour alliance, not abandon it.

To do so we need to challenge three narratives.

The first is that socially-liberal opinions make you part of, or sympathetic to, the global elite. It's an excellent thing when software billionaires espouse socially liberal causes, but that doesn't mean that if you're a feminist activist or you're married to someone of your own sex or you campaign for refugee rights, then you must own a hedge fund or winter in Davos. Millions of people, including millions of working class people, hold these opinions and do these things because they're right.

The second questionable narrative is a prologue to the first. It goes like this. For all its counter-cultural energy, the social movements of the 1960s were essentially about pleasure and individual self-expression. Thus, when the revolutionary We Decade of the 60s morphed into the hedonistic Me Decade of the 70s, the counter-culture revealed the true colours in which it would march into the neoliberal 80s. David Goodhart argues that economic and social liberalism are close cousins. Others claim they are indivisibly linked, two sides of the same coin.

In fact, what was important and enduring about the movements which blossomed in the 60s – for women's, gay and black liberation – was not their support for but their hostility to the emerging market state. They were born in collective struggle and battled against economic as well as cultural disadvantage. Yes, they brought about the emancipation of individuals. But that emancipation would not have occurred without protest, community and solidarity.

But, thirdly, those of us who defend the social-liberal agenda need to get the chronology right. If post-war Labour was a marriage between the liberal intelligensia and the working-class, then it was New Labour who filed for divorce. It wasn't the embrace of social liberalism but the abandonment of egalitarianism and social justice which led to the perilous decline of Labour's vote after 2001.

How can Labour renew the coalition that enabled its greatest and proudest postwar achievements? One strategy is promoting cooperation beyond itself, with other parties opposed to what Ken Spours has described as the Regressive Alliance of May's Conservatives and the DUP (with UKIP and the tabloid press cheering on from the wings). Another is promoting solidarity across the generations. Young people have parents and grandparents frightened of the crisis in social care. Old people have children and grandchildren who want to go to University, live free from student debt, and own a house before they're 40. They may even want to marry people of their own sex or a different race. The new fault-line divides the generations; a renewal of the old alliance could bring them back together.