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The British General Election of 2015 and the Rise of the Meritocracy

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Abstract
Many on the left hoped that the 2015 general election in Britain would prove a social democratic moment. Instead, it proved a nationalist moment, since the only parties radically to increase their vote were UKIP and the SNP. This mirrored trends on the Continent, where nationalist parties on the right and the left have been the beneficiaries of the financial collapse of 2008. These parties exploit a new social cleavage between those who benefit from globalisation and those left behind. The new parties exploit issues of identity rather than economics, and these issues—whether Britain remains in the European Union, whether mass immigration continues and whether Scotland remains in the United Kingdom—are likely to dominate the 2015 parliament.

Keywords: election, populism, European Union, UKIP, nationalism, meritocracy

The Conservatives, to the surprise of most commentators, won the 2015 general election with a small overall majority of twelve—the first majority Conservative government to be returned by the voters since the general election of 1992. But, of the four component parts of the United Kingdom, the Conservatives won a majority of the seats only in England. For the first time in British history, there are different majorities in each part of the United Kingdom. In Wales, Labour is the majority party, and the Conservatives won 27 per cent of the vote. In Scotland, the SNP is the majority party, and the Conservatives gained just 15 per cent of the vote and one MP. These are the lowest percentages of the vote in Wales and Scotland of any governing party since the war. In Northern Ireland, the majority party is the Democratic Unionist Party, and the Conservatives, as well as Labour and the Liberal Democrats, are unrepresented.

These different majorities in different parts of the United Kingdom show that Britain is now a multinational state. In the past, most English people, at least, regarded the United Kingdom as the home of a single nation, the British nation. Now, it is coming to be seen as a union of nations, each with its own identity and institutions. And in this multinational and quasi-federal state, Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own party systems quite distinct from that in England. For this reason alone, Britain is unlikely to return in the foreseeable future to the pattern of two-party competition of the 1950s and 1960s. The multinational state will continue to be reflected in the Commons by a multiparty system.

The most striking feature of the advent of multiparty politics in the non-English parts of the United Kingdom was of course the rise of the SNP, which gained fifty seats in the election, winning fifty-six of Scotland's fifty-nine seats, albeit on just 50 per cent of the Scottish vote. Under a proportional system, the SNP would have won just thirty of Scotland's fifty-nine seats. In England, too, there was striking evidence of a grass-roots insurgency in the rise of UKIP, which won 12.6 per cent of the total United Kingdom vote, an increase of 9.5 per cent over its 2010 result. UKIP, however, unlike the SNP, was a victim of the electoral system rather than a beneficiary, winning just one seat in the Commons for one-eighth of the vote. Under a proportional system, UKIP would have won 83 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons. The rise of UKIP is striking evidence of the growth of multiparty politics in

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England as well as in the non-English parts of the United Kingdom. UKIP's support is in fact far greater in England than in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. But, in England, while multiparty politics clearly exists at the electoral level, the Commons has not yet felt its full impact.

The general election of 2010 had yielded the lowest combined percentage support for the two major parties since the 1920s—65 per cent. One-third of the voters supported parties other than Labour or the Conservatives. In 2015, the figure for the two major parties was slightly higher—67 per cent. But the composition of the remaining third of the vote was quite different.

In 2010, most of the vote which did not go to the two main parties went to the Liberal Democrats, who secured 23 per cent of the vote. In both 2010 and 2015, the Liberal Democrats called upon the voters to support them as a moderate force between two extremes. In 2010, the voters responded to this call, but in 2015 they did not. Indeed, the Liberal Democrat vote collapsed from 23 to 7.9 per cent, and it lost forty-nine of its fifty-seven seats. Coalition with the Conservatives proved fatal to the Liberal Democrats, as it had done to Liberals in the past. The 1918 Lloyd George coalition destroyed the Liberals as a party of government; the 1931 National Government destroyed the Liberals as a party of opposition; the 2010 coalition destroyed the Liberal Democrats as a third party, both in the Commons, where they were superseded by the SNP, and in the country, where they were superseded by UKIP. The bulk of the vote which did not go to the two main parties went in 2015 not to the Liberal Democrats, pleading for moderation, but to parties which the Liberal Democrats might well regard as extreme—UKIP and the SNP.

UKIP and the SNP were the only parties which radically increased their vote. In 2010, UKIP gained nearly one million votes, by far the largest vote secured by a minor party since the twenty-six counties of Ireland seceded from the United Kingdom in 1922. The 12.6 per cent vote gained by UKIP in 2015 was quite unprecedented and indicates, like the increase in support for the SNP, that there has been a genuine grass-roots insurgency in British politics. No doubt the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader in September 2015 indicates something similar.

UKIP and the SNP have this in common: that they seek to replace the politics of ideology with the politics of identity. They are not easy to place on the left/right spectrum of politics. It is possible to be a left-wing supporter of British exit from the European Union or a right-wing supporter of exit. UKIP argues not that David Cameron is insufficiently right-wing but that he is insufficiently British. In Scotland, it is possible to be a left-wing supporter of independence or a right-wing supporter. The SNP says not only that Labour is insufficiently left-wing but that it is insufficiently Scottish. UKIP and the SNP base themselves less on issues concerning the distribution of income and resources or the economic matters which constitute the main elements on the political agenda for the other parties than on questions of belonging. Is being European compatible with being British? Is mass immigration compatible with preserving Britishness? Is remaining British compatible with being Scottish? These questions—whether Britain should remain in the EU, whether Scotland should remain in the UK, and if so on what terms—look likely to dominate the 2015 parliament. Populist parties seek to cut across the debate between moderate left and moderate right, between Labour on the left and Conservatives on the right. That debate centred on economics. In the immediate postwar years, it was concerned primarily with the role of the state, and, in particular, with the appropriate degree of public control of industry. Today, it is primarily concerned with the distribution of income and of capital. Populist parties of left and right, by contrast, are concerned as much with values as with economics, and, in particular, with the value of national identity. In Britain, as in much of Europe, the politics of ideology is coming to be replaced by the politics of identity.

During the election campaign, David Cameron warned that a vote for UKIP could cost the Conservatives seats and give Ed Miliband the key to Downing Street. Miliband warned that a vote for the SNP could cost Labour seats and allow Cameron to remain in Downing Street. But those who

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voted for UKIP or the SNP could respond that the Conservatives and Labour were all too similar. UKIP leaders pointed out that the major parties, together with the Liberal Democrats, agreed on Britain remaining in the EU, and that neither the Labour government from 1997 to 2010 nor the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition from 2010 to 2015 had succeeded in checking mass immigration. UKIP leaders claimed that, if only Britain were to leave the European Union, the problem of immigration would be resolved. The SNP reminded the Scots that the major parties agreed on the need for austerity and on retaining the Trident independent nuclear deterrent. SNP leaders claimed that, if only Scotland were to leave the United Kingdom, she would not have to endure austerity. In the view of the UKIP and SNP leaders, therefore, it made little difference whether Britain was governed by Labour or by the Conservatives. Both parties, in their view, represented a discredited political class, unable to articulate the concerns of voters in language which they could understand. It was for this reason, so they argued, that many voters felt unrepresented by the major parties.

UKIP and the SNP have therefore highlighted new and distinctive values in British politics. These values are held particularly strongly in England by male blue-collar workers and by older people. UKIP indeed represents a distinctive social base: 'groups in British Society which have been written out of the political debate' by 'the relentless growth of the highly educated middle classes'.[1]

Until the publication in 2014 of the seminal book by Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*,[2] it was generally believed that the typical UKIP supporter was Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells, a disillusioned but stereotypical Conservative —perhaps a retired army officer or comfortable widow, spluttering over the loss of nationhood. But support for UKIP appears to come primarily not from the well-heeled, but from the disadvantaged and insecure. Ford and Goodwin show that support for UKIP and the SNP is strongest among the victims of social and economic change, alienated from a meritocratic political establishment—and, in particular, among the elderly white semi-skilled or unskilled working class; indeed, UKIP's social base is more working-class than that of any of the major parties.[3] The typical UKIP supporter, it has been said, has a white skin, a blue collar and grey hair. He—and men are more likely to support UKIP than women—confirms George Orwell's view of the working class as very patriotic and conservative in their habits.

The values espoused by UKIP seem to appeal most to those left behind by social and economic change in the areas of the first Industrial Revolution, marked by the decline of heavy industry—the north of England and parts of the Midlands—and also the decaying seaside towns and former docks of the east coast of England. Many of these 'left-behind' areas have never really recovered from industrial decline, and the consequential loss of jobs for the semi-skilled and unskilled. Fifty years ago, school-leavers were able to move immediately into a job, even without qualifications, and could reasonably hope that they would never be unemployed. But there are now many fewer jobs for the unskilled and the semi-skilled. There is a sharp cleavage between those who have the skills to benefit from globalisation and those who have not. Of those who vote Conservative or Labour, 40 per cent are graduates, while the figure for the Liberal Democrats and Greens is over 50 per cent. For UKIP, by contrast, the figure is under 20 per cent.[4] There is therefore a new and fundamental cleavage in British politics, or perhaps in English politics—it might be called a meritocratic cleavage.

UKIP voters, by contrast with the skilled, are neither socially nor geographically mobile. Many of the meritocrats move from the areas of heavy industry or decaying seaside towns to the great conurbations, and particularly to London. The less skilled by contrast are less to be found in London than in other parts of England. London, indeed, was the only region in England where, in the European Parliament elections of 2014, UKIP did not come first or second. In the 2015 general election, the Labour vote in London increased by 5.5 per cent, while in the South outside London it decreased by 0.4 per cent, and in Conservative/Labour

marginals it fell by 1.3%. Outside London, the Conservatives won more seats from Labour than Labour won from the Conservatives. In London, by contrast with much of the rest of the country, there seems to be strong support for Britain remaining in the European Union, and for immigration.

The SNP differs from UKIP in a number of important respects—it is, for example, stronger among the young than among the elderly, and in policy terms it is fervently europhile rather than eurosceptic. That, admittedly, is a comparatively recent development, for in the 1975 referendum the SNP was the only party in Scotland to advocate leaving the European Community, as the European Union then was. The worry then was that a constitutional crisis might be caused if England and the United Kingdom as a whole voted to stay, while Scotland voted to leave. Today, of course, the worry is the opposite: that England and the United Kingdom might vote to leave, while Scotland votes to stay.

The SNP is also a much more left-wing party than UKIP—indeed, it bears some resemblance to what the Labour party was like before it was 'modernised' by Tony Blair. But the SNP, like UKIP, is coming to appeal primarily to the constituency of the left-behind. That was apparent in the Scottish independence referendum in September 2014. Voters in the normally Labour-supporting west central belt of Scotland, around Glasgow, and in Labour Dundee voted for independence, while SNP voters in middle-class areas such as Aberdeenshire, Angus and Perthshire voted against it. Voters in West Dunbartonshire, which has one of the lowest life expectancies in Scotland, voted Yes to independence; voters in East Dunbartonshire, which has one of the highest, voted No. In the 2015 general election, Labour was the prime victim of the SNP's success, its safe seats in the west central belt of Scotland safe no longer.

The mainstream parties do not seem able to effectively represent those left behind by globalisation. The Labour party, in theory the natural home of the left-behind, was transformed in the 1990s by Tony Blair, re-emerging as New Labour, a party dominated by graduates, middle-class professionals and aspirationals—those who aspired to leave the working class. The Conservatives, under David Cameron, sought to distance themselves from the image of the 'nasty party', and to win over the same social groupings. Cameron, often mistakenly seen as a child of privilege, is, like Miliband and Clegg, a child of a meritocratic society, a product of academic success. All three party leaders belong to the exam-passing classes. This makes them ill equipped to understand those who have not passed exams. All three of the major parties have broadly welcomed globalisation, multiculturalism and neoliberal economics. That is not an agenda with much appeal to those left behind. The left-behind have therefore became politically, as well as socially and economically, marginalised, and they form the bedrock of UKIP and SNP support.

The development of what might be called a meritocratic cleavage was first predicted in 1958, in a brilliant satire by the British sociologist Michael Young, entitled *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Indeed, so subtle was the satire that many failed to appreciate that it was in fact a satire rather than a celebration of meritocracy. The rise of the meritocracy is now affecting the political system, and, as a result, traditional ideological conflicts seem to have lost much of their resonance. Long-established and traditional parties—Conservatives and Labour in Britain; Christian Democrats and Social Democrats on the continent—survive, but seem increasingly disconnected from their social roots. This has led to citizen disengagement and a decline in electoral turnout and party membership. In much of Europe, mass membership parties are in decline, as are the social organisations that sustained them, such as trade unions and churches.

The cleavage between those who benefit from globalisation and those who are left behind poses perhaps a particular dilemma for social democrats. That dilemma was well summarized in 2004 by Dominque Strauss-Kahn, the then Managing Director of the IMF, and a former minister in the French socialist governments of Francois Mitterrand and Lionel Jospin:

> The success of post-war democracy rests on the equilibrium between production and redistribution, regulated by the state. With

> globalization, this equilibrium is broken. Capital has become mobile: production has moved beyond national borders, and thus outside the remit of state redistribution—Growth would oppose redistribution; the virtuous circle would become the vicious circle.[5]

Social democrats have not yet been able to escape from this vicious circle.

The rise of UKIP and the SNP, then, poses a long-term threat to the Labour party, whose historic task it has been to represent the disadvantaged, those left behind by industrial change. Because the disadvantaged tended to live in safe Labour seats, the party may have developed a sense of entitlement to their votes. There seemed no alternative. But there are now alternatives—UKIP and, in Scotland, the SNP.

The fact that London behaved so differently from the rest of the country may be one of the reasons why so many media commentators, based in London, missed what was happening in other parts of the country. London, after all, is the headquarters of liberal internationalism, the doctrine which went down to defeat in the general election. Ed Miliband had hoped that the financial crash of 2008 would lead to a fundamental change in attitudes to capitalism. He hoped that attitudes to the free market would alter and that there would be a powerful electoral constituency for greater regulation of markets and the banks and for redistributive taxation. He hoped that 2008 would be a social democratic moment. That has not turned out to be the case. Indeed, in Britain as in much of the Continent, social democracy finds itself in retreat.

The social profile of populist parties on the Continent—such as, for example, the Front National in France and the Sweden Democrats—is probably fairly similar to that of UKIP. Indeed, UKIP and the SNP are constitutional British versions of other new parties on the Continent, some of them very unpleasant: on the right, the Front National, the Sweden Democrats and Jobbik in Hungary; on the left, Syriza—which is in coalition with the Independent Greece Party, a far-right party which has been accused of racism and homophobia and is admired by the Front National leader, Marine Le Pen—and in Spain, Podemos, whose leader, Pablo Iglesias, paid tribute to Spain as a *patria* and spoke of pride in his country and the need to recover Spanish sovereignty in a speech in January 2015. That speech struck a new note on the Spanish Left.

What all these parties have in common—whether on the right or the left—is nationalism. 2008 has led not to a social democratic moment but to a nationalist one. In Europe, national feeling has been strengthened, while class feeling and social solidarity seem to have been weakened. The alienation and sense of disfranchisement which has arisen following the financial crisis of 2008 has on the whole benefited the right, except in the poorer Mediterranean member states of the European Union where it has on the whole benefited the left; but, where the financial crisis has benefited the right, it has tended to benefit parties of the radical right, and has given rise to a mood which is anything but conservative.

In September 2014, Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the IMF, drew a striking contrast between economic globalisation and political fragmentation. She said that she was 'particularly concerned about what she sees as a structural disconnect between economic and political structures'. The global economic system was becoming increasingly integrated, but the global political system was becoming fragmented thanks to a backlash against globalisation.

Lagarde's interlocutor, Gillian Tett of *The Financial Times*, responded that 'this makes for a dangerous cocktail, since it creates a world that is interconnected in the sense that shocks can spread quickly but nobody is actually in charge'. Lagarde nodded and her playful manner disappeared. 'It is not clear which of these trends will win. I am worried. Very worried. I don't want my children, my grandchildren, to grow up in a world which is disaggregated and fragmented.'[6]

What Lagarde had identified was a new conflict not only in Britain but in west European politics as a whole, between the mainstream parties and new populist parties, between the parties of the political class and its challengers. That conflict reflects a new social cleavage between those who have benefited from globalisation and those who have

not, and this new social cleavage is coming to overshadow the traditional policy differences between mainstream parties. In the elections for the European Parliament in May 2014, populist parties headed the poll in four countries—Britain, Denmark, Greece and Spain.

The policy differences between the mainstream parties and the new populist parties revolve largely around an internationalist/nationalist axis. The political class in Europe is broadly internationalist and liberal. It is sympathetic to European integration, immigration and multiculturalism. Many of Europe's voters, however, are not sympathetic to these things.

There is a sense in which the conflict between nationalism and internationalism in Europe is nothing new. Indeed, it seemed to dominate European politics for much of the twentieth century. Perhaps the postwar years, the golden era, the years of the long boom, were an aberration in this regard as years when, in reaction to fascism and Nazism, nationalism was held in disrepute. Today, however, memories are fading.

Despite the growth of international trade and globalisation, the early years of the twentieth century were also marked by the conflict between nationalism and internationalism. In 1910, the English publicist Norman Angell published a book, *The Great Illusion*, in which he argued that the economies of Europe had become so closely integrated and interdependent that war had become unprofitable. The conclusion that many drew from this was that war had become obsolete. Indeed, Renoir took the title of his 1937 anti-war film, *La Grande Illusion*, from Norman Angell's book.

Angell may well have been right that war had become unprofitable, and so irrational. But, of course, man is not a wholly rational animal, and 1914 was to show that nationalism trumped economics. The title *La Grande Illusion* proved highly ironic. The Second World War broke out just two years after it was made.

At around the time of the publication of Norman Angell's book, Franz Kafka was asked to explain how he reconciled the growth of nationalism with the facts of economic integration. Kafka replied: 'That is precisely the proof of what I say. Men always strive for what they do not have. The technical advances which are common to all nations strip them more and more of their national characteristics. Therefore they become nationalist. Modern nationalism is a defensive movement against the crude encroachments of civilisation.'[7]

The values stressed by the mainstream parties—individual autonomy, self-realisation and internationalism—are values which appeal primarily to those who are broadly comfortable with globalisation and have benefited from social and economic change. Globalisation was welcomed by the neoliberals, who shared the view of social democrats and Marxists that economics was fundamental. In his book *The Road to Wigan Pier*, published in 1937, Orwell memorably accused socialists of having 'their eyes glued to economic facts' and proceeding 'on the assumption that man has no soul, and explicitly or implicitly they have set up the goal of a materialistic Utopia'. For nationalists, by contrast, it is politics that it is fundamental. And national feelings are felt most strongly by those with little to lose.

The populist parties emphasise such values as national identity, stability and community—values underplayed, if not ignored, by the liberal elite. The motto of the Eurosceptic populist parties could well be 'charity begins at home', and the populist parties of the right are hostile not only to the European Union but also to immigration and to multiculturalism. They argue that the welfare state rests on national solidarity and cohesion, and that those who belong to the community should be given priority for health and welfare over recent immigrants. Mass immigration, so they believe, undermines the communal values on which the welfare state rests.

Elections hold up a mirror to society, revealing as they do the relationship between the people and those who seek to represent them. The 2015 election resulted in a serious defeat for the ideologies of social democracy and liberalism, for believers in liberal internationalism, for those who believe in an open society. Labour, the party of social democracy, and the Liberal Democrats, the party of internationalism, enjoy a majority in the unelected House of Lords, the chamber of the elite, but not in the

elected House of Commons, the chamber of the people. But the cleavage between those who believe in an open society and those who do not is also present in the mainstream parties, and particularly within the Conservative party. David Cameron and George Osborne are liberal internationalists, yet many other Conservatives are not. The lines will be clearly drawn in the battle over whether Britain does or does not remain in the European Union.

Paradoxically, the rise of UKIP as a populist party of the right has made the British party system more like the multiparty systems on the Continent. Both UKIP and the SNP favour proportional representation for Westminster elections, which would make the British party system even more like those on the Continent. Those who want Britain to remain in the European Union have continually insisted that Britain must become more European. Perhaps they have succeeded all too well.

The general election of 2015 answered, fairly conclusively, the question of who is to govern the United Kingdom for the next five years. But it left fundamental questions still to be decided. It left open the question of whether there will still be a United Kingdom to be governed. It also left open the question of whether Britain will remain in the European Union, and it left open the question of whether the first-past-the-post system is appropriate for a multiparty and multinational state. These questions no doubt are interlinked, and the attempt to answer them will define the agenda of the parliament elected in 2015.

Notes

1 R. Ford and M. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*, London, Routledge, 2014, p. 10.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 152.
4 Ibid., p. 154.
5 D. Strauss-Kahn, 'What is a just society? For a radical reformism', in *Where Now for European Social Democracy*? London, Policy Network, 2004, pp. 14, 16.
6 *Financial Times*, 12 September 2014.
7 G. Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, 2nd edition, London, Andre Deutsch, 1971, p. 175.

