

Adieu UK, and your increasingly European political crisis

By Ferry Biedermann, freelance journalist working both in the UK and in Europe. He has contributed to the Financial Times, CNBC, the Washington Post, Trouw newspaper in the Netherlands and many others. He is also a former correspondent in the Middle East for the FT and Dutch newspaper de Volkskrant.

Days before the vote, it's time to make up the balance sheet. As the election campaigns have trudged on, it's become increasingly muddled for many voters whether the UK is actually facing a Brexit election. Is it instead all about Corbyn, or about trust, or the early release of extremists or about whether or not to appear on Andrew Neil?

So, it may be useful to signal some larger trends and the most glaring one is that while the UK is preparing to leave the EU, its politics are becoming ever more European. Some of these developments are global but many are specific to the European context. Almost everywhere on the continent, mainstream parties have tried to survive by adopting some of the ideas of their fringe challengers.

This has been particularly true on the issue of migration and pushback against the EU's human rights centred domestic agenda, with Eastern European countries leading the way but the likes of Italy and Austria not far behind. This has now also happened in the UK, where there is no longer a need for either UKIP or the Brexit Party because the Tories have taken their ideas on board almost wholesale. Why has this been successful in the UK while some of the old parties on the continent are still languishing? Partly because of the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system but also to a degree because the Conservatives have displayed as much zeal, if not more, as the originals in implementing their fringe ideas.

So, well done Messrs. Johnson, Gove and Cummings, for getting your country to abandon its long tradition of relative moderation (I know, Thatcher and all that) and rush headlong into the most foolhardy of enterprises.

Then there's the death spiral of Labour, another very European development. The left has lost the plot but for a while this was harder to pinpoint in the UK than elsewhere in Europe. The turn towards the right in Britain felt more like the natural reaction following the longish Labour rule in the nineties and noughties, Third Way fatigue and Iraq war outrage.

Corbyn's 2017 snatching defeat from the jaws of humiliation gave a temporary boost to the brand, and again the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system means there's not that much to choose from. But make no mistake: despite "the most radical manifesto", Labour, like its co-ideologists on the continent, has no convincing alternative vision. We all know we're stuck with capitalism and now the argument is how to make it more efficient, either as a moneymaking machine for the rich or as a way of making society work for the many.

This gives the impression that the right has already won half the argument and it doesn't need much to convince most voters that logically, capitalism should be left largely alone to do the job. No progressive party in Europe, including Corbyn's Labour, has been able to set out convincingly that the organising principle of the economy should be the wellbeing of as many people as possible and of society as a whole, and that capitalism is merely a tool to achieve that.

There's a task! Remarkably, among all this, is the relative silence on migration, after an initial internal party dust-up. It's also a Europe-wide phenomenon that the left is divided between its progressive values and the concerns among its natural electorate over migration. If this is not resolved, the traditional left will remain in permanent decline.

And finally there's political sectarianism, to call it what it is. The rhetoric involving racism and anti-Semitism (yes, I make a distinction) has been one of the defining characteristics of this campaign, again in a way that could have been taken straight out of the East-European, e.g. Hungary, playbook.

Discourses once spouted overtly only on the extreme-right or –left fringes of politics have now taken centre-stage. A Labour candidate for Prime Minister who will not give a straightforward answer to the question of whether "Rothschilds Zionists run Israel and world

governments” is anti-Semitic, should be beyond the pale. A Conservative Prime Minister who in the recent past ridiculed a group of Muslims, i.e. burka-wearing women, has no business being in that position. Whatever we think of Israel and whatever we think of burka-wearing.

I’m foolishly, naively, hoping that a time will come when even over pints, among mates in the pub, this kind of talk will at the very least be tsk, tsk-ed. Among leading politicians, it should be utterly unthinkable. Again, this is a Europe-wide phenomenon, where parts of the left are so blinded by their anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist fervour that they make common cause with anti-Semitic undercurrents (no need to talk about the extreme right in this case, it’s understood that it’s anti-Semitic).

And where the far-right’s anti-Muslim poison has crept into the centre-right mainstream. The increasingly aggressive and intolerant political discourse, now coming into common usage, or at least being tolerated, at the highest levels of politics, leads to polarisation and actual violence, remember Jo Cox? Attacks on Jews, Muslims and progressive politicians in Germany, France, Poland and other countries have made clear the danger of this development.

But let’s not pretend sectarian violence comes exclusively from the right, or has even started there. In the Netherlands, for example, left-wing and Muslim radicals did the killing, respectively of populist politician Pim Fortuyn and intellectual provocateur Theo van Gogh way back in the noughties. There’s no shortage of examples around the world that show that stoking the fires of sectarianism for political gain, tends to turn out very badly indeed.

So, what has this all to do with Brexit? All the above points come together in Brexit: A fringe idea taking over the political mainstream, caused to a large extent by socio-economic angst and the inability of the left to offer a plausible alternative, fanned from a spark into a firestorm by ugly sectarian politics.

None of the three UK-wide governing parties, Tories, Labour, Lib-Dem, should be in power. They have utterly failed, on almost all counts, to set out a credible vision for a way forward on any of the main issues affecting the UK, its European partners and the world.

But disillusionment with politics is another European phenomenon. Not voting or being involved, will only make things worse. As I said before, I'm glad I'm not a UK voter.

Good luck come Thursday!