

Cummings's techno-babble Brexit

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The main Brexit news of the past couple of weeks was no news at all. Reactions to the BBC interview with Vote Leave campaign architect Dominic Cummings focused on some supposedly shocking revelations about the toxic atmosphere inside Number 10 and, gasp, his admission that he had no clue whether Brexit was a good idea. What was largely overlooked, perhaps because it is indeed old news, were the brief glimpses into his right-wing, techno-libertarian and hence slightly unhinged political philosophy. Old news it may be but since he's not the only proponent of this extremist and essentially anti-democratic – under the guise of 'fixing' democracy – pseudo-ideology it goes to the heart of what we should all be vigilant about. The attempt to skew democracy for the benefit of a couple of tech-billionaires and their fellow travellers, as exemplified by Brexit and Trump, has only paused to catch its breath.

Cummings was deceptively open about his revolutionary zeal, "to build something, which can actually solve problems for people, outside the existing current power structures." This would obviously be "disrupting", yawn, established political practice and might involve, wait for it, "networked power". The ideological and logistical connection between, "A shadowy global operation involving big data, billionaire friends of Trump and the disparate forces of the Leave campaign," has already been brilliantly described in 2017 by the Guardian's Carole Cadwalladr.

If this sounds harsh, this is because it should be. I have slightly more tolerance for Leave voters than for Trump voters, given the latter's openly autocratic, racist and misogynist – did I mention corrupt, nepotistic and incompetent – actions and words. But they seem to me both on the same spectrum. The problem with writing about Cummings and his hare-brained excuses for carrying out his cyber-overlords' schemes, or at least being inspired by them, is that this is obviously exactly what he wants. From his own Vote Leave campaign and elections playbook, as well as from the American branch of the same style of politics, it's obvious that he uses the media against itself and the establishment, not that those two should necessarily be conflated. Whichever wind bears the nefarious seeds he plants is OK with him. First undermine the established order, and what an easy task that is in the UK, and then create the impression that there is an alternative within reach, just waiting around the corner, a brand new way of doing things, made possible by the internet gods. For this they obviously have to smile upon us, so we should worship at the altar of science and technology. This is not about reason and rationalism but merely about replacing one state religion with another, to serve a different master.

I will allow myself to write about it on this blog, probably visited, one hopes, by likeminded people. And yes, that sounds elitist. But it is a totally different form of elitism from that displayed by Cummings during the interview. His elitism is the worship of the unique and special individual, much like the Silicon Valley pantheon that includes, among others, Peter Thiel, the PayPal and Palantir billionaire who supported, and worked for, Trump and whose hostile views of the EU and its tech policies have only recently started to attenuate, one hopes. It may also include Bob Mercer, the American hedge fund manager and former principal investor in Cambridge Analytica.

Many tech billionaires do admirable things with their money, combat disease and poverty, support journalism or travel to the edge of space for no discernible reason, but they often seem to have an

outsized idea of their own achievements and the way that ordinary mortals should bend to their will. Or rather the way that politics should be reshaped in their own image, disrupted even. In the interview, Cummings displayed an oddly contradictory sort of elitism. Only he and his vaguely defined group of likeminded operatives, “a few dozen, maybe” were capable of a correct diagnosis of the political body: it is a walking corpse. And only he and his jolly band offered hope of coming up with a replacement: “At the moment I’m just talking to people and thinking about things.” Ominous words indeed.

On the other hand, he displayed faux humility by emphasizing that of course for the really complex stuff, such as Covid, say, or “productivity”, we’d need those magically endowed people who pop up fully formed out of nowhere, certainly not beholden to an education system or the long, hard slog of building a career step by tedious step. “We should very aggressively get [...] these very rare people who are times a hundred or times a thousand smarter and [more] able than the norm into those crucial positions,” was the way he put it. He also warned that regular politicians would not like this, as if blaming them for resisting the usurpation of their responsibilities by what would be a technocracy, presumably directly elected by the people in another referendum? Because that part remained vague. Who is going to appoint those geniuses and give them political direction? How would we instruct them in let’s say a direct, referendum-type democracy, if those problems are so far beyond our comprehension, much like EU membership was? In my understanding that’s why we have representative democracy, where we elect people and parties with whose line we overall agree and who we delegate to do the work of boning up on the nitty gritty for us.

Cummings, despite giving the impression of actually thinking about the answers that concerned himself and the Prime Minister, followed a carefully scripted tactic. Throughout the interview he undermined and derided the political system with words such as morons, duffers, clowns etc. He hammered home his view that the system was not fit for purpose, saying, for example, “the party system needs to be broken and opened up and the Whitehall system needs to be broken and opened up,” and words of similar intent. Then he sprinkled his answers with indications of how clever and rational he was, objective even, by appealing to science, technology and meritocratic ideas. One of his conditions for joining Johnson in Number 10 was that the PM was serious about a “science and technology agenda”. He was also careful to distance himself from the regular politicians, the ones who had lost our trust. “It doesn’t matter who you vote for if the next bunch of clowns come in, it’s the same old thing.” To set himself apart from them, he made clear that he had loftier things on his mind than what he said the PM expected of him: “I was spending my time on what I thought was important, not on politics, not on media and communication and campaigning stuff.” Instead, drumroll, he dealt with the greater philosophical questions of state: “I was spending my time on science stuff, on the defence review, on the intelligence services, procurement reform, all of those kind of things...” There it is again, science... and the scary thought of this starry eyed Silicon Valley acolyte being involved with national defence and the intelligence services anywhere. And procurement? That is where the money is.

At times it seemed as if Cummings was not merely fronting for what to all intents and purposes sounds like a right-wing high-tech cabal but was actually positioning himself for a future run at the top position, even talking about setting up a party, to end all parties of course. So, beware the coming of PM Trummings!