

(Another!) Brexit Bombshell

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It was always going to be impossible to avoid blogging about the Internal Market Bill this week. I believe that was always the government's intention. Not *this* blog specifically, but rather to precipitate a reaction.

The government's plans to deliberately and knowingly break international law continue to provoke outrage and derision from many quarters. My personal view is that this is the point. None of this is really about the EU: it is purely domestic politics and it is what the current leadership (Johnson, Cummings and others) are particularly good at.

Specifically, what matters to Johnson's team is assembling a winning coalition of voters. That need not be (and, in fact, isn't) a majority of the electorate. Rather, it is a rather specific subset of the voting public.

Much has been made of the so-called "red wall" – a motley collection of constituencies that have hitherto returned Labour MPs for a generation or more. Whilst some of the media hyperbole overstates their significance as an electoral asset, they are totemic of a wider shift.

In many regards, Johnson's appeal to the "red wall" can be regarded as the British analogue of Nixon's 1968 "southern strategy". In both cases, what's more important is not the appeal to a particular geography (although that is an important element) but rather its appeal to a certain demographic group.

The dynamics of political realignment in the US south are more subtle than is sometimes appreciated on this side of the Atlantic. 1968 (like 2016) might have been a watershed moment, but only because it crystalized longer-term electoral dynamics.

Yet the demographic group that swung the "red wall" are present elsewhere. As a group they are deeply culturally conservative.

Typically, this is characterised by a very particular form of patriotism, the holding of certain values and beliefs and a focus on what is often termed “law & order”[\[1\]](#).

Multiculturalism is viewed with distrust and is often seen as a failure. Inward migration is viewed with hostility. This group see also tend to see Britain as having “got worse” or “gone in the wrong direction over the past 50 years.

Crucially, this group overlaps strongly with those who are most committed to leaving the EU. It is easy to see why: the EU acts as a genuine constraint on the exercise of certain aspects of sovereignty. It has a strong commitment to human rights (witness the provisions in the Lisbon Treaty). Membership of the EU also commits member states to permitting free movement of labour within the bloc.

To be sure, this group are a minority of Britons, but they represent a very substantial number. Moreover, they are overrepresented amongst voters. On average they are older than the median Briton and are more likely to be members of the “white British” ethnic group – both groups who are more likely to vote.

Their spatial distribution also matters. The young and ethnic minorities are quite heavily concentrated in major cities and university towns. In contrast, the cultural conservative is spread more efficiently (from the perspective of electoral arithmetic) across England.

This group, then, will deliver sufficient votes to swing a large number of seats to (or away from) the Conservative Party. However, these voters are not always reflexive Tories. Indeed, they do not divide easily in terms of their economic preferences.

Many are not instinctively in favour of small government, often combining cultural conservatism with a strong preference for greater spending on healthcare and education. Their continued support needs to be won.

An appeal to patriotism, accompanied by a loud argument with those who implacably oppose their values achieves this nicely. It allows the government to argue that it “stands up for Britain”, with the obvious subtext that its opponents wouldn’t.

It reminds such voters why they voted for this government in the first place. Precipitating an argument of this nature makes it very easy to portray the opposition as sneering “remainers” who look down their noses at good, traditional “salt of the earth” Britons. No array of legal argument, no matter how well-founded, will change this perception.

Moreover, there are a great many more people who share *part* of this cultural conservatism. They might be mildly concerned about government adherence to treaty obligations but ultimately will back a government that they trust to “control” migration.

Worse, from the perspective of the opposition Labour Party, is that this is asymmetric. This argument will not lead to a similar number of culturally liberal voters in swing seats switching away from the Conservative Party.

All of this explains the desire of the current administration to refocus attention on various facets of Brexit. It follows the same pattern as a host of other cultural (non)-issues brought up over the summer, from graffiti on statues of Churchill to what should be sung at the last night of the Proms.

It also explains the steadfast refusal of Keir Starmer to get embroiled in any of these rows, but instead focus ruthlessly on policy and questions of competence. Thus far, 2020 has been an *annus horribilis* for the government with a Covid death toll that’s amongst the highest in Europe, botched A-level results and recurrent problems with testing and tracing.

Yet the current Bill is a high-risk strategy. It risks further accelerating the demise of the UK as a single state, damages international relations and risks an economic rupture with the EU when a substantial majority of the population favour quite a close economic relationship with our largest trading partner. These are nervous times.

[1] In fact, this is something of a misnomer: concern over the law and its enforcement is universal. What is distinct about this demographic group is their perception of what the law should look like. Typically this group feel that human rights legislation is too extensive. They strongly oppose voting rights for prisoners, feel aggrieved by the provision of legal aid to those guilty of serious crimes and feel that there are too

many constraints on the state's ability to take actions such as deporting criminals or asylum seekers. Similarly, they wish tough punishment for misdemeanours (often being in favour of the death penalties) and have a general dislike of any disorder, being more willing to accept greater restrictions on protest if needed to prevent disorder.