

The Green Wave beyond the 2019 European Election

By Jay Rowe, PhD Student at Centre for Brexit Studies

This Wednesday 5th June is World Environment Day, an initiative created by the United Nations to raise awareness and to motivate action for the protection of the environment. This World Environment Day is particularly significant because it comes hot on the heels of the 'Green Wave' that swept through the European Union like a hurricane. The Green Party of England Wales gained four seats to send seven MEPs to Strasbourg in addition to a strong showing by their cousins the Scottish Green Party. Success for environmentally centred parties was not unique to the UK; across the continent, the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) gained seventeen seats to total sixty-nine members for this terms European Parliament.

Although the alliances of liberal parties and far-right parties also ate into the dominance of the two big blocs of the conservative EPP group and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, it was perhaps the Green party grouping that will prove the most significant in the long run. While liberals and populists are waging a war for the heart of Europe amidst Brexit and a general rise in populism across the continent, the Greens are fighting for something far more significant: the future of life on this planet.

The Green/EFA Alliance were committed to fighting climate change by advocating for the total phasing out of coal by 2030 and the eventual elimination of all fossil fuel based energy soon after. Although the rise of China as the most significant competitor to the United States has also seen it become the largest carbon emitter and air polluter in the world, the green movement sees it as imperative that Europe leads the way to a cleaner, renewable future for the planet. Industrial innovation does not occur in a vacuum; instead it requires years of rigorous research and investment in skills and infrastructure. A green economy would be no different. The alliance's advocacy of a European economic stimulus package, known as a Green New Deal, is an attempt to infuse the same entrepreneurial spirit into green industry.

The Green Party of England and Wales was among the coalition of UK parties advocating for a second referendum on European Union membership. It remains to be seen whether this factor helped the party to achieve its extraordinary result, and, to tell if the party can use this result as a springboard to add to its single Westminster parliamentarian and give a greater green presence to the House of Commons. The negative influence of Brexit on the economy might make it difficult for green voices to shape the agenda, but, without parliamentary representation, there will be a dearth of political actors in Westminster whom have a commitment to putting 'people and planet before profit'.

In addition to environmentally minded entrepreneurs and politicians, the green wave is also being fuelled by a new generation of youth activists. In November 2019, fifteen-year-old activist Greta Thunberg made headlines for initiating the 'school strike for climate' movement which attracted 1.4 million students across 112 countries. Thunberg has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, but her greatest achievement might have been her influence on policymakers and journalists in driving climate change to the forefront of the agenda.

As some of you may know, the Centre for Brexit Studies is based in Birmingham's City Centre. Among the various nicknames attributed to 'Brum' is the 'City of a Thousand Trades'; once the beating heart of Britain's industrial revolution, Birmingham has continued to adapt and to maintain its position as one of the most innovative cities in the world. Innovation is priceless, but it often comes at a cost to the environment. One of the most famous Brummies, J.R.R. Tolkien was acutely aware of this dilemma. Tolkien's love of nature was evident in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, but much of the darker imagery was said to be inspired by his immense distaste for the industrialisation of early twentieth Century Birmingham.

Across the road from Birmingham City University lies a construction site which is the redevelopment of the old Curzon Street which will, eventually, become the first phase of the London to West Midlands High Speed Rail network, or HS2. While this project has brought a number of high skilled jobs and training schemes to the city, the Green Party of England and Wales has become one of its chief critics. Back in February, party co-leader Jonathan Bartley argued that "HS2 is already inflicting environmental vandalism on our countryside and

woodlands.” Environmental impact assessments are ongoing but findings although such passionate rhetoric provokes a number of questions: will the environmental damage of HS2 be justified by the economic benefits? Is it the responsibility of business to safeguard the environment? Will you take the HS2 when it is built?

This World Environment Day gives us an opportunity to reflect on the importance of reversing climate change and protecting the environment from the myriad challenges facing our planet in the years to come. Brexit will present unprecedented economic challenges to the UK, but, in the midst of the negotiations and arguments, the environment remains the most important constituent for all Members of the Westminster and European Parliaments to consider.