

The Brexit debate highlights two deep ideological divisions affecting the contemporary British Labour Party. One division concerns the ideological divide within the party between liberals and socialists. The other concerns the divide between the leadership of the party and the many working class voters in England, who are neither liberal nor socialist. The latter division is the more significant, because it suggests that whatever the result of the upcoming referendum, the electoral prospects of the Labour Party in England are exceedingly grim.

An increasingly alienated working class

If one event captures the problem facing the Labour Party, it is the encounter that took place in April 2010 between then Prime Minister Gordon Brown and a working class Labour voter called [Gillian Duffy](#), who complained to him about too many people claiming welfare benefits and “all these eastern Europeans... coming in”. Brown was later captured on tape describing Duffy as a “bigoted woman”.

The Labour Party was very slow to wake up to the electoral threat posed by a working class alienated by the Party's policies on welfare and immigration. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was thought to pose more of a threat to the Tories than to Labour. In some respect, the Labour Party's negligence was forgivable. UKIP received only 3% of the vote in 2010. It was not until 2013 that the Labour leadership realized that UKIP was making inroads into Labour's core working class constituencies. Even so, it was a shock when UKIP outpolled the Labour Party (27% to 24%) in [the European elections in 2014](#); and shock turned to horror in May 2015, when UKIP captured enough voters in marginal constituencies (and 13% of the overall vote) [to contribute to Labour's defeat in the election](#).

More troubling still, some of Labour's post-mortem analyses revealed that former Labour but now UKIP voters complained that the Labour Party no longer represented their values. They wanted welfare benefits (including housing, health, and education) restricted to long-term fellow citizens; they were against immigration; and they wanted out of the European Union (EU). In a word, they were nationalists—English nationalists. Indeed, [“people who defined themselves as English were twice as likely to support UKIP as those who said they were British.”](#)

If Gillian Duffy was the unfortunate symbol of Labour's defeat in May 2010; Emily Thornberry was the no less unfortunate symbol of its May 2015 defeat. While campaigning in a working

class area, Thornberry, a Labour MP and Shadow Minister—and formerly a wealthy barrister—[tweeted a picture](#) of a [voter's home](#) draped in the St. George's Cross (the English national flag) with a large white van parked outside. ("[White Van Man](#)" is a derisive stereotype of a working class tradesman, typically with tattoos, who drives a white van and is prone to road rage). [Critics](#)—including the then Labour leader, Ed Miliband—took the picture to imply mocking condescension of the voter's class origins and nationalist views. Thornberry was forced to resign.

While the Labour Party was running into difficulties with English nationalists, it had hit a brick wall with Scottish nationalists. The May 2015 election saw the Labour Party all but wiped out in Scotland. Between 2010 and 2015, Labour's vote in Scotland fell from 42% to 24%; and they now have only one MP, while the Scottish National Party has 56. Labour's collapse in Scotland presents the Party with a difficult challenge: it must either win back Scotland or vastly increase its vote share in England and Wales. Furthermore, it must do this while negotiating the tricky terrain of Scottish and English nationalism. According to the 2011 Census, 50% of the Scots think of themselves as Scottish and not British.

Labour nationalism?

Anyone who thinks hard about the problems facing the Labour Party quickly realizes that any solution will involve a re-thinking of Britain's current relationship with Europe. Given the hostility of many working class voters (the social class that British pollsters refer to as C2DEs—semi-skilled and unskilled workers, in other words) to immigration and the extension of welfare benefits to recent European arrivals, it is surprising that so few Labour MPs actually favour Brexit. ([At the last count](#), 10 were open supporters of Brexit, although many more—including Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour leader—are known to be anti-EU). One of the few to defend Brexit is Frank Field, who also sees clearly the difficulty EU membership poses for a Party that needs to respond to UKIP.

Field's basic solution is to rebrand the Party as the English Labour Party and "[to position itself as a defender of the English nation](#)". He thinks that the Labour Party has been too willing to concede the appeal to English nationalism to UKIP and calls upon the party "to act upon voters' sense of national identity". He agrees with those voters who worry about large-scale European immigration. Not only does the arrival of so many immigrants "restrict our own poorest citizens' access to housing, healthcare, and places at decent schools". But immigrants undermine two central components of national identity: "a common set of memories and shared experiences". Field supports Brexit, because he fears that being pro-EU

will simply drive another tranche of Labour voters into the clutches of UKIP. He wants the Labour Party to reform welfare “to ensure our own people are at the front of the queue”. And he wants the Labour party to become the English Labour party that pushes for a devolved English Parliament with similar powers to the Scottish Parliament.

Whatever one thinks of the philosophical merits of Field’s position, the political implications are bracing. Field concedes that Labour cannot recover Scotland and is willing to abandon both Wales and Scotland in an effort to win back England. The big problem with this proposal is that in an effort to capture the traditional working class voter, Field’s proposal is likely to alienate the middle class and professional voters, who will balk at seeing their party rebranded in this way. In short, a Labour party that embraces English nationalism will lose a lot of liberals and socialists in the Party, who, for better or worse, share all the disdain for St. George’s Cross as that expressed by Emily Thornberry in her infamous tweet.

Constitutionalism vs. socialism

A more philosophically astute case for Brexit comes from [the Harvard political theorist Richard Tuck](#). Unlike Field, Tuck’s position does not depend upon an appeal to English nationalism, nor does it fixate on immigration. Tuck is an old-style lefty, who fears that the EU is incompatible with democratic socialism. He is particularly exercised by the way that the EU locks member states into a broader constitutional structure—defined by a difficult to change Treaty—that constrains the policy options of Europe’s individual nation-states. On this point, democratic socialists share common ground with English Tories like [Ambrose Evans-Pritchard](#), who view parliamentary sovereignty as the essential feature of Britain as a nation.

If socialism requires a protectionist trade policy, high tariff walls, and state-aid for favoured national industries, then the EU is unquestionably incompatible with socialism. But this, as they say, is a feature rather than a bug. Few would want to return Britain to the pre-Thatcherite gloom of the 1970s. A Labour Party that dusted-off [the economic program of that era](#)—the era before the modernizing efforts of Neil Kinnock, Gordon Brown, and Tony Blair—would never secure, thankfully, an electoral majority in England, Scotland, Wales, or anywhere else.

The more interesting feature of Tuck’s argument is the attack on the institutional rigidity of the EU. “The point of constitutional structures such as the EU,” he argues, “is almost always to enshrine and make permanent the political and social assumptions of their moment of creation”. These constitutional structures are incompatible with the idea of an

“omnicompetent democratic legislature”, and—lamentably so in Tuck’s view—prevent the left from implementing radical policies merely by grabbing a bare parliamentary majority. Tuck is unquestionably correct about this. The EU does act as a constraining constitutional structure: its Courts and its various rights-based Charters all act as a check on the power of national democratic majorities. In a Europe of 28 member states, it is increasingly difficult to reform the core Treaties. And after David Cameron’s recent difficulties, no European government is going to call for a national referendum anytime soon.

The merits of a constraining constitutional structure cannot, however, be gauged merely on the basis of its conduciveness to a partisan political agenda. Ideally, [we should assess constitutional structures on the basis of their fairness to people of fundamentally different but reasonable political creeds](#). Now of course, not all political creeds are “reasonable”—a term that can serve as a proxy for a willingness to accept basic liberal, democratic norms and procedures. Europe is a bestiary of “unreasonable” creeds: the ethnic exclusivism of “[Britain First](#)”—one of whose members murdered the Labour MP Jo Cox; the anti-semitism of Hungary’s Jobbik; the racism of Italy’s Lega Nord and many others. The fact that Europe’s constitutional structure puts a spoke in the wheel of their revolution is a positive not a negative feature of the EU. Indeed, one potent defence of the EU in its present form is that it acts as a prophylactic. It’s a Durex for a continent that often begets political monstrosities.

Jenkins’s heirs wanted

Perhaps this contraceptive defence of the EU is insufficiently inspiring. Perhaps what we need at the moment is a more full-throated defence not merely of the EU—an unlovely institution, even for its defenders—but of the very idea of European integration. One of the many depressing features of the Brexit debate is the relative silence of liberals in the Labour Party willing to defend the European Project. There is no descendant of Roy Jenkins, the reforming liberal defender of individual rights, the advocate of a Britain at the centre of Europe, the proponent of a Europe at the centre of global politics. This observation takes us back to a point made at the start of this essay. There remains a deep ideological divide between liberals and socialists in the Party. At the moment, the socialists—under their new eurosceptic leader Jeremy Corbyn—are in the ascendancy. Above and beyond their advocacy of Remain, the liberals have been reluctant to speak up and defend the project of European Integration.

If they were to get over their reticence, this is what they could say. The aim of the EU is to nobble the nationalists who have caused so much trouble in Europe’s recent past. Europe at

its best contains a commitment to the Enlightenment values of individuality, creativity, and scepticism. These values are currently under threat, whether from Putin's Russia, Turkey's Erdogan or—perish the thought—Trump's America. But even in the absence of this unfavourable geopolitics, these values need to be protected by a political entity strong enough to project its power abroad. Europe needs to become more not less unified, as a condition of playing an effective role in world politics. The liberal wing of the British Labour Party, the descendants of Roy Jenkins, need to make this point.

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