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False Unities: Brexit in the New Year

By Binoy Kampmark
January 2, 2017

London.

The pile of detritus in Tooting had been growing ahead of the New Year's Eve gatherings. The pubs were initiating their usual trick of closure and charging for tickets in the hope of getting some ruddy cash ahead of 2017. In parts of London, an air of dark pessimism lingered like a cold fog. Ominously, bad weather threatened Heathrow at points with grounded flights and cancellations.

With the celebratory fireworks in London, the city's mayor had come out with the rather feeble remark that the city was 'open'. (For what? Business, or perhaps defiantly open in the face of another round of renewed security threats.)

The Prime Minister, Theresa May, was even less convincing. Another year would usher in the crude realities of a Brexit negotiation process her servants are ill-prepared for. It is a point she wishes to keep from discussion in Parliament. The Labour Party's Jeremy Corbyn has even accused May of being an autocrat akin to Henry VIII. If so, she is at best a confused one.

Across the various departments, and in the interest of austerity, the Brexit section charged with engineering Britain's departure from the European Union has been rapacious and unrepentant in its demands.

The minister overseeing that side of government business, David Davis, has not impressed his European counterparts with either his negotiating stance, or management. German MEP Manfred Weber, chairman of the centre-right European People's Party, wondered whether Davis and May were even on the same, confused page.

In November, Weber tut tutted any idea that Britain could stay in the single market and continue to 'have very close cooperation in legal issues.' Brexit, after all, meant Brexit, necessitating a pruning 'back on our relationships.'

May has entertained the British public with a vast array of inanities to soften the effects of Europe's threatening hammer. She has proposals, so he claim, for a 'truly global Britain', a poor assertion suggesting that it was not global to begin with. Her new year message was a patchwork of similar comments in an effort to claim that Britons were not as divided as thought.

'If 2016 was the year you voted for that change, this is the year we start to make it happen.' The referendum, however, had 'laid bare some further divisions in our country.' The June referendum had been 'divisive at times. I know, of course, that not everyone shared the same point of view or voted in the same way. But I know too that, as we face the opportunities ahead of us, our shared interests and ambitions can bring us together.'

Before the European negotiators, she has promised ample visions of jam and richness, claiming that 'the right deal' will be forthcoming for all – including the shell shocked remainers. 'This is the year we need to pull down these barriers that hold people back, securing a better deal at home for ordinary, working people.'

The 'ordinary working people' as a concept is, at best, a rickety one. In the European zone, citizens have been crossing borders, inhabiting and enriching various economies with their subsidizing industrious presence. Germany has two million Poles; France 650,000 Portuguese, and Spain over a million Romanians.

What made the British case before Brexit odd was how Europeans were made an object of swamping terror, a shift of sorts from traditional targets of racial opprobrium (Africa, the subcontinent, the Caribbean).

This was fed by the customary manipulation of the working class vote, ever vulnerable to concepts of loss and privation in a changing economy. The British problem here is a broader one of internal organisation of a lopsided labour market rather than external one of uncontrollable borders.

Britain, after all, has shortages in health workers, not to mention areas that require such personnel as painters, carpenters, electricians and plumbers. That is not a point being made by the Davis-May team.

What The Independent envisaged was a gloomy attack on Britain's estranged working classes if discrimination against European citizens was to go ahead. 'That massive blow to the material economy would be far more damaging to Britain's working class than allowing Lithuanians to pull leeks from Lincolnshire fields in freezing weather.'

As for broader sentiments of unity, very little of that liquor is available for consumption, especially with May behind the bar. 'This is the year', suggested William Keegan rather grumpily in The Guardian, 'when our politicians and the so-called "people" – all 28 percent of the population who voted to leave the European Union – will reap what they have sown.'

So, as the booze inflicted headaches wear off this morning, Britain remains fractured and disillusioned, marked by a government of enormous confusion and inconsistencies. As this continues, the biggest barker in favour Brexit, Nigel Farage, continues to draw an EU salary. A most compromised political attack dog, if ever there was one.