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BY PATRICK COCKBURN

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The Pursuit of National Liberty Should not be Handed Over to Toxic Populists and Demagogues



Photograph Source: Government of India – [GODL](#)

Sending the royal navy to Jersey to confront the French was a suitable overture to elections in Britain dominated by populist nationalism of differing variants. Boris Johnson promised “unwavering support” for the island’s government, a pledge it may find less than reassuring.

In Paris, President Macron was likewise beating the patriotic drum, using the bicentenary of the death of Napoleon to praise “the child from Ajaccio who became master of Europe”. In a crude grab for right-wing votes in the next presidential election, Macron

commended the life of the dictator, who left his country weaker and smaller than he found it, as “an ode to willpower”.

Johnson’s actions and Macron’s words have a phoney feel to them. But the fact that they do and say such things illustrates their recognition that re-energised nationalism has become the main vehicle for political, social, cultural, economic and ethnic beliefs. The proportion in which these ingredients mix together varies vastly from country to country, but in the last 10 years, populist nationalism has become a global brand that outsells everything else.

It is the zeitgeist – the spirit of the age – against which its opponents have struggled in vain to find a suitable antidote. Labour’s continuing failure to do so is demonstrated by the overwhelming Conservative victory in the Hartlepool by-election. Labour voters who deserted the party to support Brexit in 2016 have continued to defect. Even during the worst of Johnson’s misjudgements over Covid-19 last year, polling showed that the Leavers were not going back to Labour.

Try though Labour might to play down Brexit and avoid discussing what could be called “the national question” in British politics, the issue will not go away. It would have been much better for the party to have accepted that the search for national self-determination is one of the driving forces in the modern world and cannot be treated as an unlucky accident.

Communal identity is no longer rooted in class, in so far as it ever was, but is the product of the deepening divide between prospering metropolitan regions and those left behind; the geographical division partly coincides with growing confrontation between the educated and the uneducated and the young and the old.

Populist nationalism has plugged into these differences, but has also added other more poisonous ones to its political armoury. As a formula for winning and keeping power, it first began to take its final shape about 25 years ago, though its biggest triumphs are far more recent. I first saw it used successfully by Benjamin Netanyahu when he was elected Israeli prime minister in 1996, a job which he still holds despite a few interruptions and constant allegations of corruption.

The Israeli leader has had many emulators over the years, particularly in the last decade. From Brazil to the Philippines and from Turkey to India, politicians claim to be reasserting the power of their nation state. They portray it as under threat from myriad directions, often demonising a domestic minority such as the Palestinians in Israel, Muslims in France, Black people and immigrants in the US, Kurds in Turkey.

Usually, there is a cult of personality, with followers attributing magical powers to leaders like Donald Trump in the US, Narendra Modi in India, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey – the list is unfortunately too long to give all the names.

The phenomenon is sometimes called pluto-populism, because there is usually a core of plutocrats seeking to promote and exploit the success of the movement. Benefits to them come in the form of lower taxes, less regulation of business and profitable contracts, while the genuinely populist, socially radical part of their programme is marginalised and forgotten. Trump swiftly delivered to his wealthy supporters on taxes and regulations, but the rebuilding of American infrastructure and the return of well-paying industrial jobs never happened.

The upsurge of populist nationalism across the globe can give the impression that it is an unstoppable political steamroller. Yet the success of toxic leaders has often stemmed from spectacular incompetence and rancorous division on the part of their opponents. Donald Trump frequently declared that he would not have been elected without Hillary Clinton waging the worst presidential campaign in American history.

The British variant of populist nationalism may be less violent and shambolic than its counterparts elsewhere, but it shares many of their characteristics.

What sank Labour in Hartlepool and elsewhere was not primarily “Covid and Corbyn”, as the former minister under Tony Blair, Lord Mandelson, declared, but the long term consequences of Brexit that destroyed the progressive alliances on which Labour has depended. And Brexit was itself only a symptom of the extent to which every important political question now takes a national form or has an important national aspect. Voting for Brexit, and thus for a certain version of English nationalism, by former Labour voters in places such as the Welsh Valleys and the industrial northeast may have begun as a protest vote against the political and social status quo, but it swiftly became part of the identity of those voters. Reversing the referendum vote was never going to be feasible and attempts to do so only provoked a powerful counter-reaction.

The populist-nationalist trend is not irreversible but it will be difficult to achieve. Trump lost the White House, though only by a whisker, only because of his grotesque mishandling of the Covid-19 epidemic. By way of contrast, Johnson and the Conservatives benefit from dubiously claiming entire credit for the success of the vaccination programme, though this was more of a consequence of the quality of British science and of the NHS.

Labour – and other opponents of populist nationalism – have never really got to grips with its strengths and weaknesses in England and Scotland. It should never have been regarded as one of history's dirty tricks or as a damaging but temporary phase. The pursuit of national liberty and self-determination is one of the great progressive forces in the world and should never be handed over tamely to right-wing demagogues as a vehicle for their toxic beliefs.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).

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