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Farewell to the United Kingdom Let It Bleed

by TARIQ ALI

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The British General election was dramatic. On the superficial level because three party leaders—Miliband (Labour), Nick Clegg (Liberal-Democrat) and Nigel Farage (UKIP—a racist, right-wing populist outfit)...resigned on the day following the Conservative victory. On a more fundamental level because the Scottish National Party took virtually all the Scottish seats (56 of 59) wiping out Labour as a political force in the region where it had dominated politics for over a century. Scotland was where the Labour Party was founded. Scotland it was that gave Labour its first leaders and Prime Minister (as well as the last one). Scottish working class culture was in most cases much more radical than its English equivalent.

It was Labour's 1945 victory and social-democratic reforms that had made Home Rule, leave alone independence, an abstraction. It was Margaret Thatcher's triumph in 1979 that was the first nail in the coffin of the United Kingdom, not because she stigmatized the Scots as some of her successors have done but because the majority of Scots loathed her and everything she stood for. She boasted of putting the 'Great' back into Britain, not realizing that the unintended consequences of her policies would be the 'break-up of Britain' as the title of the ultra-prescient Tom Nairn's book had suggested even before her election triumph.

A large majority of Scots never voted for her. They reached breaking point under Tony Blair and New Labour. It was the proudly vaunted Thatcherite politics of Blair, Brown and their Scottish

toadies that accelerated the rise of civic nationalism and fuelled desertions from Labour to the SNP that realized the only way to defeat

Blairite Tories was by positioning themselves to the left of Labour on every major issue: the SNP opposed the Iraq war, defended the welfare state, demanded the removal of nuclear weapons from Scottish soil and slowly began to build up support. Labour remained in denial. The first tremors were ignored. The tectonic plates shifted last week and has destroyed them. It will take time but Scottish independence is now assured and a damn good thing too as it will weaken the neo-imperial and military pretensions of the UK state and could open a real debate (not the fakery witnessed on the BBC and other networks) in England leading to constitutional reform (including a written constitution and a democratic electoral system) and the emergence of a radical alliance in England, an insurgent force that breaks with the decaying Labourism that has crippled the Left for a century, first the official Communists and later their Trotskyist offspring. Remnants of both ended up in New Labour (the thuggish Stalinist John (now Lord) Reid and the creepy Alan Milburn who as Health Secretary opened the doors to privatization and is now a well-paid consultant of private health firms and a virtual Tory. There are others.

As I've argued at length in *The Extreme Centre: A Warning*, this is a Europe-wide phenomenon. There are NO fundamental differences between centre-right and centre-left parties anywhere. In parts of Catholic Europe (Spain and France) gay marriage proved divisive. Not so much in Britain. The notion that a Labour government at Westminster could have reversed the neo-liberal course of capitalism is nonsense. It might have made it more palatable through statistical chicanery and sweet talk. Nothing more. So those on the Left unable to break the Labourist addiction should be happy. Their illusions could not be betrayed.

The tasks facing radicals and socialists in Scotland and England are very different. In Scotland the young people who dominated Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) played an exemplary role in the referendum and the recent elections. Broad-minded, non-sectarian, realizing what was at stake and focusing all their energies to defeat the common foe. The results have vindicated their approach. They now need to assemble the forces that want a radical Scotland to represent them in the Scottish parliament that will be elected in 2016. This means a constructive left opposition that carries on the tradition of RIC but this time in Parliament preparing the ground for a

Scotland that is both independent and different.

In England the third party in terms of number of votes cast is UKIP. It gained votes from both Labour and Conservatives, but its 4 million votes (12.6 percent) obtained just a single seat in Parliament. The Greens with over a million also have a single MP. The absurdity of an electoral system that gives the Conservatives an overall majority (331 seats) with 36.9 percent of the votes cast, Labour (232 seats) with 30.4 percent reducing the other English parties to nothingness is clearly long past its sell by date. A serious campaign for a proportional system is needed. The first-past-the-post, winner-takes all system is a malignant cancer that needs to be extracted from the body politic.

What of English radicalism? It's not a pure accident that a right-wing party like UKIP has become the third force. The effective collaboration between the major trades unions and the Labour leadership meant that building social movements to challenge privatizations and demanding public ownership for utilities, more public housing, local democracy, and the renationalization of the railways fell by the wayside. No other force was capable of organizing an extra-parliamentary base for a rejection and reversal of extreme centre policies. This is the challenge that now confronts all those who want a strategic break with the Thatcher-Blair consensus in England. Not an easy task. Possibilities, however, exist but they require forces on the ground to help create a new movement that speaks for the oppressed and exploited.

The Labour leadership contest is a no-hoper for the Left. The names being touted are worse than useless. What would help a great deal is if early in the new parliament, the handful of left MPs effectively broke from Labour and established a new, radical caucus to link up with forces outside. I doubt that they will and here the Bennite tradition is, to put it at its mildest, unhelpful. Its attachment to Labour at a time when the party broke with its own social-democratic past and opted for a full-blown capitalism was wrong-headed and led to an impasse. Ken Livingstone, who defeated Blairism as an independent candidate for the Mayoralty of London then reneged, made his peace with Downing Street and returned to the fold, in the process defending the City of London and deregulated finance capitalism as well as Scotland Yard and its public execution of the Brazilian electrician Jean Menezes (mistaken for a Muslim). Livingstone was one of the few popular leaders produced by Labour who could have played a part now to build something new.

We need an alliance of all radical forces to build an anti-capitalist movement in England. A movement that is both new but also prepared to search the past for help: the Grand Remonstrance of the 17th century, the Chartist rebellions of the 19th century, the more recent developments in South America, Greece and Spain also offer a way forward. As for the Labour Party, I think we should let it bleed. Here the Scottish route offers hope.