**Dangerous Myths in the post-Brexit Narrative**

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The legacy of any major political event depends not on what actually happened but on how it is remembered. Two interpretations are currently shaping the developing narrative of the EU referendum and its political dimensions. One is the claim that the Brexit victory was decided by politically alienated and ‘left behind’, often Northern, working class voters. The other assumption is that Brexit’s instigators and leading supporters had no clear idea of what economic arrangements would replace EU membership. Both of these inferences are mistaken and alternative interpretations indicate the need for political strategies that deal with a more complex but disturbing future outside the EU.

The ‘revenge of the (working class) losers’ thesis is contradicted by Danny Dorling’s datum that less-skilled working class voters (occupational groups D and E) provided no more than 24% of the total Leave vote1; a figure representing the whole country not just the apocryphal, economically depressed, de-industrialised ‘north’. These voters amount to 4.2 million but the total population in the D-E classes is around 16 million. So only a quarter voted Leave. A majority of the D-E group simply abstained and probably make up the bulk of the 13 million registered voters who did not vote. In fact, the higher the proportion of D/E voters in an area the *lower* was the turnout2. The passive or detached role of such citizens towards the referendum is underlined by the composition of the 7.1 million *not* registered to vote. A 2014 analysis showed that most of these unregistered voters have3 either ethnic minority or youth status, or suffer from insecure housing and higher levels of social deprivation4. As three of these characteristics correlate closely with D-E class membership it is highly likely that a large majority of the combined 20 million non-voters were working class. Many may simply have not believed that the binary choice offered by the referendum was one able to help change the real problems of their lives. In any case, 59% of those who voted for Brexit were from social classes A, B and C1. Disillusioned as many working class people may have been, they were not responsible for Brexit.

At the other, ‘elite’, end of the social spectrum, Brexit’s instigators and backers were not only active architects of their aims, they had a clear idea of the economic model to replace EU membership. The charge that these groups were offering only ‘only a leap in the dark’ out of the sunny pastures of EU membership might have been a plausible campaigning gambit by the Remain camp but it is substantially inaccurate. Key ‘leave’ figures have a coherent economic ideology which translates into fairly precise policy models. In this, neo-liberal, paradigm state activity and social regulation should be minimised. Market systems should be expanded to meet all needs and public support for strugglers should be replaced by the promotion of individual self-reliance. From this point of view the EU imposes unnecessary regulations on firms and markets and complicates the global free-trade market which is their Holy Grail. Free of such EU restraints they envisage the UK establishing open market deals with a range of other economies. In the post-Referendum view of ex-Thatcherite Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson, Brexit is an: ‘opportunity to … finish … the job which Margaret Thatcher started ’5.Lawson’s academic alter-ego, Thatcher-era policy adviser, Patrick Minford, represents the extreme end of this camp. Champion of consumer charging for the NHS, Minford has urged a post-Brexit removal of trade ‘protection … particularly to the car industry and other manufacturing industries inside the protective wall … to run it down. It will be in your interests to do it, just as in the same way we ran down the coal and steel industries.6’

Obviously, such a trenchant view was best side-lined during the referendum campaign. It is also unlikely to impress the political and business leaders negotiating alternatives to the present, EU-oriented trade system. However, suitably re-jigged for the realities of a corporate-dominated economy, it will not be far from the more *realpolitik* vision of the new Trade minister Liam Fox - the previous head of the Atlantic Bridge ‘charity’; for whom Minford was a trustee. Until its charitable pretensions were discredited by the Charity Commission, Atlantic Bridge was closely linked to US multinational corporations, neo-liberal politicians and the American Legislative Council (motto: ‘Limited government, free markets, federalism’)7. Dr Fox may well activate such contacts as he seeks trade pacts which resemble the, currently stymied, Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) deal between the EU and the USA. As George Monbiot has shown, multiple, mini-TTIP deals could realise key features of the neo-liberal alternative to the EU: opening up public services to corporate bids and hefty financial compensation if public bodies disallow them. The social welfare and social democratic strands of the EU, which culminated in the Social Chapter initiatives of Commission President Jacques Delors, have significantly atrophied in recent years. Nevertheless the left, from the Liberal Democrats and Labour to the SNP and the Greens need to ditch the ‘leap in the dark’ narrative about Brexit and start to expose and campaign against the neo-liberal schemes which the Brexiteers are energetically honing. They should also abandon the narrative of a predominantly nationalistic working class and re-focus on the employment insecurity, privatized public services –including the totemic NHS – and generally lowered social and working standards, which neo-liberal models will again impose on these long-suffering, but still-to-be mobilized strata.

The educated and mobile young who did vote were attracted to the wider ideals and opportunities of EU membership. However, neither the Remain nor Leave vote offered a convincingly better future to even more disadvantaged groups. In particular austerity has affected less well-off social groups proportionately more than the ‘higher’ and richest strata. The less well-off may not name this system of enhanced inequality as ‘neo-liberalism’ but they have reason to know it very well at the harsh level of experience. Pro-EU big business and political elites apart, the two less obvious losers from the Referendum outcome were firstly, the Labour Party – from the internal splits precipitated by the result - and secondly, the perennial victims of neo-liberalism: the least affluent strata. Mainly located amongst the non-voters, but also amongst both ‘Remain’ and Leave’ voters these groups will again suffer disproportionately in any new neo-liberal policies launched by the Brexit governing factions. The juxtaposition of these two ‘losers’ suggest an obvious solution to both Labour’s disorientation and the likely renewal of economic abuse of the deprived classes: unity in a political campaign to halt or reverse Brexitised neo-liberalism. On either side of the Labour leadership battles there are signs that such a focus is emerging. The question is whether an electoral revival on a platform of social and economic reform, with egalitarian and democratic measures (see Jones and O’Donnell, forthcoming8) can be put together by Labour before the next election. Both the odds and the stakes in such re-orientation are high. But if the party can both re-connect not only with its traditional base but deepen its growing links, exemplified by the Momentum movement, with the many recently disadvantaged young people, the referendum aftermath could start the long-overdue rolling back of neo-liberal social and economic hegemony.

NOTES

1. Dorling, D. (2016) ‘Brexit: the decision of a divided country’, *British Medical Journal* , BMJ 2016; 354:i3697; <http://www.bmj.com/content/354/bmj.i3697>

2. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/24/how-did-turnout-affect-the-eu-referendum-result/>

3. All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Democratic Participation, [Missing Millions](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8L8l8Sw8aKVRHJPQ19EQVZiTTQ/view?pref=2&pli=1).

Toby James, (2016) Getting the ‘missing millions’ on to the electoral register A vision for voter registrationreform in the UK*, Bite The Ballot****,*** ClearView Research/APPG

4. Monbiot, G (2016) ’Billionaires bought Brexit – they are controlling our venal political system’

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5. BBC 5th July; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36717050>).

6. TUC, ‘Minford view on Brexit and exports lacks credibility’ 27 April 2016

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/international-issues/europe/eu-referendum/minford-view-brexit-and-exports-lacks-credibility-says-tuc?render=overlay>

7. Doward, J. ‘Liam Fox's Atlantic Bridge linked top Tories and Tea Party activists, *Observer,*

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8. Jones, B. and O’Donnell, M. (forthcoming), *Alternatives to Neo-Liberalism: Policies for Equality and Democracy,* Bristol: Polity Press.