



Commentary

The populist right sweeps aside the left

The beginning of wisdom is that populism can be beaten only from the hard centre

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DECEMBER 1, 2016

Ugly nationalism is not the sole property of the right. One of the assertions of the Brexiters during the EU referendum campaign was that Britain's cherished but creaking National Health Service faced being overrun by tens of millions of mainly Turkish migrants. The claim, untrue, was made by Gisela Stuart, the Labour MP who chaired Vote Leave.

Dog-whistle racism and disregard for truth are the familiar calling cards of populist movements. What gives them force is a fusion of right and left. Today's nationalists have tapped into the economic, social and cultural grievances of working-class voters left behind by globalisation. Much of Europe's old political left is being swept away by the tide.

The Brexit-promoting UK Independence party started by outflanking the Conservatives on the right. Nigel Farage's party claimed its first victory by forcing a Tory government to offer a referendum on EU membership. But this year's vote was won by the Brexiters only because an anti-establishment, anti-immigrant nationalism drew in the support of a large number of Labour voters.

This week Mr Farage, basking in his much-publicised friendship with Donald Trump, his fellow populist and US president-elect, bowed out from the Ukip leadership. Paul Nuttall, his successor, sees the party's future as the voice of angry Labour supporters in the rust-belt areas of northern England.

France's centre-right Republican party has chosen François Fillon as its candidate for next year's presidential election. Mr Fillon, a cultural conservative and economic liberal, is seen by many as the candidate best able to deflect the challenge from Marine Le Pen's hard-right, Islamophobic National Front. This may prove true. What is striking, though, is the success Ms Le Pen has had in appealing to working-class voters. She wants to frame the presidential choice as between Mr Fillon's "Thatcherite" liberalism and the state welfarism of the FN.

The traditional left is nowhere to be seen. France has a socialist president but if François Hollande insists on seeking a second term it will not have much of a Socialist party. The president's approval ratings have sunk to low single figures, well behind Emmanuel Macron, his centrist former economy minister. As things stand, Ms Le Pen and Mr Fillon are set to face each other in the run-off. For the EU, the threat is existential. Brexit is a blow. France's embrace of the FN would be fatal.

In the US, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but lost her party's traditional supporters in rust-belt states that were assumed to be solidly Democrat. Rage against the elites, unabashed nativism and economic protectionism might have appalled affluent, educated Americans and offended many minorities, but the election outcome reflected the same cry of blue-collar pain that is bundling Britain out of the EU.

Across Europe parties of the centre-left have been stranded by the populist narrative of an indigenous dispossessed. Matteo Renzi, Italy's prime minister, may be unseated by Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement, a party that lauds the belligerent nationalism that is Trumpism. Germany has escaped the worst of the populist excesses, but if there is a threat to the chancellorship of Angela Merkel next year it comes from the far right rather than the Social Democrats. Austria may elect as president the leader of a party founded by former Nazis.

Some on the left think the answer is to shift, well, further left. Those who supported Bernie Sanders against Mrs Clinton in the Democratic primary race say he would have had a better chance of defeating Mr Trump. There is no evidence to support the supposition.

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True, the extreme right and hard left share a statist, protectionist view of the economy. Ms Le Pen's views on global capitalism are not too distant from those of Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of Britain's Labour party. There is also a mutual admiration for "strongman" leaders such as Russia's Vladimir Putin. But in any contest, the populist right can always outflank the left by playing up the issues of identity and culture that have helped drive the anti-establishment backlash.

The proof is found in the failure of politicians such as Mr Corbyn, who this week felt moved to praise the achievements of the late Fidel Castro, former president of Cuba. Theresa May's Tory government is caught in the mire of Brexit. Ministers are at war with each other, the pound has fallen and the economy is slowing. Yet it is Mr Corbyn who is sinking in the opinion polls. The beginning of wisdom for parties of the left — and, for that matter, of the moderate right — is that populism can be beaten only from what is best called the hard centre. Globalisation cannot be wished away but nor can it continue to distribute all its gains to the richest. Closing borders will impoverish everyone but communities need help to cushion the social upheaval. Patriotism is to be celebrated but not allowed to bleed into xenophobia. Global corporations must pay taxes, and boardrooms curb the excesses of executive pay.

Oft-drawn parallels with the 1930s are at once inexact and unnerving. Too many people have lost faith in the system. And something has gone seriously wrong when voters in the rich democracies consistently report that they expect their children will be worse off. Populists feed on such pessimism. What politics needs is the optimism of a muscular centre.

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