POPULISM, DEMOCRACY AND 'BREXIT'

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WHAT IS POPULISM?

- The term is widely used and widely interpreted. The term is so broadly interpreted that some question whether the term means anything at all.

- Academic definition suggested by Cas Mudde: A *style* or a *mode* of political activity not a 'thick' ideology- right wing as well as left wing populism.

- Populism: it attempts to mobilise 'the people', assumed to be a homogeneous mass, against powerful establishment 'elites' that have been ignoring their legitimate concerns.

- Demagoguery: it is the most common perception of populism and very often the two terms are used interchangeably.

- Demagogues attempt to attract votes by dubious means such as making unrealistic and unachievable promises to the electorate or making emotional appeals to popular prejudices and fears.

- **POPULISM IS EVER PRESENT- WE ONLY NOTICE IT WHEN IT SUCCEEDS! Two questions!**

POPULISM: Legitimacy?

"Government of the people, by the people for the people"

The ultimate source of political power in a democracy lies with 'the people'. There is nothing to stop 'the people' from giving political power to populists and demagogues.

Democracy is about 'the people' having the **right** to make decisions; not about 'the people' making the **right** decisions.

Voters whether young or old, enlightened or prejudiced, tolerant or intolerant, informed or ignorant, clever or stupid, their vote is of equal value in a democracy. The electoral outcome never illegitimate

 Is there no limit to the legitimacy of populism? Is there no defence against populism?

"You can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time but you cannot fool all the people all the time"

The dis-enfranchised cannot tolerate **empty promises** for ever.

Another defence is preventing populists from gaining power through **centre** politics.

POPULISM: A Threat?

- The threat is that populists may use democratic means to achieve political power and undemocratic means of remaining in power.

- The nature of the threat varies from country to country (Latin America, USA, Europe) and historical period (now and the inter-war period)

- Are today's 'populists' tomorrow's fascists?

- It depends on whether we face a phenomenon of right-wing populism or right-wing extremism.

POPULISM AND 'BREXIT'

Is 'populism' responsible for 'Brexit'? Was the unexpected electoral outcome of the UK referendum on continued EU membership due to the 'populist' tactics employed by the 'leave' campaign?

Many elements and features during the 'Brexit' campaign fit in well with the narrative that 'populism' played a pivotal part in producing the unexpected 'Brexit' result. It fulfilled many of the preconditions for the emergence of a 'populist' campaign.

- One issue election- 'in' or 'out' referendum.

- Angry voters- their concerns ignored by 'liberal elites', anti-establishment sentiment.

- Demagoguery- lies, deceptions, over-simplifications combined with scapegoating, appeals to nationalism and nativism.

- Economic insecurity- generating anti-immigration sentiment in working class communities. Low wages, housing shortages, problems in health care and education blamed on the 'influx' of migrants.

- Immigration: The 'leave' campaign, however, claimed, above all, to be articulating the concerns of 'the people' about unrestricted EU migration, successfully shifting the debate away from the economic uncertainties of 'Brexit' to the certainty of re-gaining control of national borders.

IMMIGRATION AND 'BREXIT'

- The story of two conversations:
- Gordon Brown with Mrs Duffy-The 'bigoted woman' incident- 2010
- Enoch Powel with a constituent-The 'rivers of blood' speech- 1968

  Stop the inflow and promote the maximum outflow of immigrants.

- Failure to implement this policy urgently was like watching a nation "busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre". Looking ahead, Mr Powel was filled with foreboding like the Roman who saw "the river Tiber foaming with much blood".

- Powel was dismissed, his views widely condemned, politically marginalised; but his views resonated with the public at large according to opinion polls.

IMMIGRATION: RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA

- Following Enoch Powel's 'rivers of blood' speech, a political consensus emerged in the UK whereby these popular concerns about immigration were addressed and debated without using inflammatory language like: "the black man will have the whip hand over the white man" or that it is 'madness' not to stop the inflow and maximise the outflow of immigrants.

- Although overtly racist and xenophobic discussion of immigration was virtually confined to the extreme right-wing fringe of politics, nevertheless a certain degree of uneasiness was still present in public discussions about immigration.

- There was always apprehension that expressing an anti-immigration view could be linked to racism, xenophobia and prejudice.

- The significance of the 2016 referendum was that, for the first time in a national election, this link appears to have been decisively broken. In 2016 voters like Mrs Duffy could express opposition to immigration without being described as bigots.

BROKEN LINK

- The 'leave' campaign presented a political demand on immigration that aimed at putting an end to unlimited free movement of people from the EU to the UK.

- The 'leave' campaign insisted that this demand was not based either on prejudice or ignorance.

- It was **not** directed against EU immigrants *per se,* but against unrestricted, unlimited and uncontrolled EU immigration.

- It was also **not** based on a failure to understand and acknowledge the valuable contribution of immigration, past present and future, to the UK economy and society.

- It was a rational, no-racist and patriotic demand that a sovereign nation state should be able to enjoy the benefits of immigration without subscribing to unlimited free movement of people.

- It was up to the 'remain' campaign to provide a credible alternative narrative on immigration and a convincing justification as to why free movement of people was indeed a good idea.

THE DANGERS OF 'SEMI-DETACHMENT'

- The EU is not just an economic union but also a political project as well. It is generally known as the 'European Project'.

- The UK's attitude towards the 'European Project' was mostly problematic. It was at best ambivalent and at worst openly hostile.

- Even after becoming a full member, under both labour and conservative governments, the UK's attitude towards the 'European Project' remained decidedly lukewarm and un-enthusiastic.

- This attitude of 'semi-detachment' took the form of various opt-outs negotiated by successive UK governments from developments perceived to be pushing the EU towards greater political integration such as the single currency and the abolition of borders through the Schengen agreement.

- Eventually, the UK's position of 'semi-detachment' from Europe was formalised when David Cameron negotiated in 2016, prior to the referendum, an opt-out from the requirement to participate in the creation of 'an ever-closer union'.

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- If 'an ever-closer union' is a bad idea why is 'free movement of people' a good idea?

- The European Single Market requires its members to adhere to the so called 'four freedoms'. What is the reasoning behind this supposedly non-negotiable and inviolable rule?

- Economists argue that the economic benefits from the free flow of goods, services and capital can only be **fully** achieved if there is also free movement of labour.

- There is also a political justification for the 'four freedoms', however, which is arguably more significant than the economic one.

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- Within a national market people can move freely from one part to another without been considered as migrants while using a single currency for all transactions.

- This does not necessarily mean that the creation of a single market of several sovereign nation states in Europe must replicate the way a single market operates within a nation state.

- Yet this is effectively what the European political leaders who signed in 1992 the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), also known as the Maastricht Treaty, decided to do.

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- The TEU laid the foundations for the current system of governance of the EU and the single market.

- The two most important and far reaching decisions of the TEU were first, the establishment of European Citizenship and second, the establishment of the completion of Economic and Monetary Union as a formal objective of the EU.

- The first decision established the principle of the 'free movement of people' within the EU. The second led to the creation of a 'single currency'.

- Both are usual features of a single market within a nation state but they are not essential for the functioning of a single market between sovereign nation states.

- The introduction of 'free movement of people' and a 'single currency' had more to do with politics than economics. It related to the vision of a politically united Europe.

'Damned if you do and damned if you don't'

- During the campaign the passionate anti-Europeanism of the 'leave' side was not matched by an equally passionate and enthusiastic pro-European stance by the 'remain' side.

- The pro- European side could not provide a credible and principled defence of the central issue of the campaign concerning the 'free movement of people' because a large majority of the 'remain' side never fully subscribed to the ideal of a politically united Europe- an ideal upon which the concept of European citizenship was based.

- The Eurosceptic opposition to an 'ever-closer union' was consistent with *rejecting* 'unrestricted' migration; the opposition to an 'ever closer union' by the 'remain' side was not consistent with *accepting* 'unrestricted' EU migration.

- The 'remain' side must, therefore, accept its share of responsibility for the 'Brexit' electoral outcome. Decades of 'semi-detachment' from the European Project by the pro-European side in the UK had its consequences.

EU: AN 'IMPLICIT' FEDERATION

- The current EU 'status quo' is an informal/implicit federation governed by a system of inter-governmental decision-making: A compromise between nationalism and supra-nationalism.

- The EU system of governance is that of an indirect democracy whereby democratically elected political leaders of EU sovereign nation states make decisions, in a spirit of co-operation and solidarity that affect all the citizens of the EU.

- This transformation of Europe since 1957 from a common market to an informal federation, took place without any *direct* popular consent or a clear indication of when and how this *implicit* federalist structure was to become an *explicit* or a completed political union.

- Many of the current problems that threaten the stability and the very existence of the EU, such as free unrestricted movement of labour or fiscal transfers, *would not be so intensely divisive issues in a federal political system.*

- In this sense an 'ever closer union' is part of the solution and not- as the 'leave' campaign passionately argued -part of the problem with EU membership.

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- From the outset European political leaders were aware that their vision of a politically united, federal Europe did not command wide popular support; so the idea was never seriously debated, openly promoted or a popular mandate directly sought for what has come to be known as the 'European project' though some partial consent was sought in the plebiscites on the proposed 2005 constitution.

- This, however, has created, over time, a kind of 'vicious circle' whereby there was no serious debate about the creation of a federal political system in Europe because the idea was unpopular; and the idea remained unpopular, in part, because there was no serious debate about it. The unpopularity of a politically united Europe has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

- It is also the source of the current turmoil in the EU.

  Ideally:

- POLITICAL UNION- FISCAL UNION- SINGLE MARKET AND FREE MOVEMENT- MONETARY UNION

- Current EU System is moving backwards:

- SINGLE MARKET, FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE AND MONETARY UNION- FISCAL AND BANKING UNION- POLITICAL UNION

IS THERE A DEMOCRATIC MAJORITY FOR A 'HARD BREXIT'?

- The intense and polarised debate that preceded the EU referendum in the UK did not end with the announcement of the referendum result. Two related questions continue to be intensely debated in post-referendum UK.

- First, *why* a majority of voters, unexpectedly, voted for 'Brexit'? Second, *how* is the referendum decision to be implemented?

- It may, of course, be asked whether such a debate is at all necessary or indeed useful. After all, people voted to 'leave' the EU because they wanted to leave the EU and the process of leaving the EU is simply to leave the EU!

- Article 50- 'constitutional requirements'- 'negotiated exit'

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- A 'negotiated exit' means that the UK can, in principle, negotiate a 'soft', a 'hard' or an 'intermediate' 'Brexit'.

- Since this question was not on the ballot paper it can only be guessed what *type* of 'Brexit' the British people voted in the EU referendum and therefore what should be negotiated once article 50 is triggered.

- Most 'leave' supporters are in no doubt that the majority voted not only to exit the EU but also to put an end to uncontrolled EU migration and exit from the Single Market.

- This interpretation of the referendum result was endorsed by the Prime Minister in her Lancaster House speech on 17 January 2017. Mrs May claimed that after 'Brexit' the UK must also leave the Single Market and the Customs Union. To do otherwise would be undemocratic and contrary to what the British people voted in the referendum.

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- There was, indeed, a clear, democratically expressed view that the UK should 'leave' the EU.

- Was there a similar *majority view* about ending free movement of people and therefore exiting the Single Market?

- The 48% that voted 'remain' clearly accepted 'free movement' as a condition of EU membership and Single Market membership. To claim that the referendum result indicates that a majority of British voters is also opposed to free movement of people it must be *assumed* that all, or nearly all, of the 52% that voted 'leave' also wanted an end to the free movement of people from the EU into the UK.

- This may, of course, be a reasonable or even a realistic assumption. It is not possible, however, to claim *with certainty* that a democratic majority voted in favour of ending the free movement of people. It is entirely possible that some of the people who voted 'leave' were not opposed to a Norway-style relation with the EU.

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- What is presented by the government as the **'will of the people'** is simply the will of the majority of 'leave' voters, not necessarily the will of the majority of voters.

- Mrs May, in formulating and pursuing the government's strategy for the 'Brexit' negotiations, with the complicity of Parliament, is acting as if there was a *landslide* victory for the 'leave' side in the referendum.

- Instead of *assuming* that the British people voted for a 'hard Brexit' it would be more democratic to ask the people to decide about the terms of 'Brexit'. The referendum only settled the *whether* not the *how* question of Brexit.

- **Attempting to prevent 'Brexit' may be undemocratic but attempting to prevent a 'hard Brexit' is not.**

THE BREXIT NIGHTMARE. HOW WILL IT END?

The Nightmare

The UK, having decided to 'leave' the EU, appears to be doing its best to thwart the process.

Having taken nine months to trigger article 50, Prime Minister Theresa May, shortly afterwards, announced a snap general election with the declared aim of achieving a 'strong and stable' government but got instead a hung parliament.

It is as if the UK is mysteriously prevented from leaving the EU by some extraordinary, self-inflicted and largely avoidable obstacles and hurdles.

Many outside observers find the current Brexit saga rather comical. Even 'surreal'.

In Luis Bunuel's 1962 film *The Exterminating Angel,* the affluent guests at a dinner party in a luxurious mansion discover that for some inexplicable reason they are unable to leave. The UK appears to be in a similar 'surreal' position

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Brexit and the Exterminating Angel

It seems that the UK, having had an unnecessary referendum that produced a result now subject to conflicting interpretations, is now in a Bunuel-like nightmarish state of wanting to 'leave' but unable to decide when, how or even whether.

Nobody, including the British, appears to know these days what the British want from Brexit. In the film, there is no obvious explanation as to why the guests do not leave the party.

In fact, Bunuel begins his 'surrealist' masterpiece by stating that the best explanation is that, from the 'standpoint of pure reason', there is no explanation. Could not the same be said about the current 'surreal' state of the Brexit negotiations?

CONCLUSIONS

- The current Parliamentary arithmetic means that neither a second referendum nor a 'soft' Brexit, as proposed by the labour party, are on offer. For a second referendum before March 2019, to take place, Parliament must vote for a new referendum law. But if there was to be a Parliamentary majority for a second referendum it means that there would also be a majority for rejecting 'hard' Brexit.

- A 'soft' Brexit would be, in my view, preferable to a second referendum for three reasons.

- First, it complies with the 'will of the people' to 'leave' the EU. Remainers have been dealt a very bad hand because of David Cameron's (and Parliament's) disastrous miscalculation in calling a referendum on this issue.

- Second it puts the inappropriate referendum genie back into the bottle.

- Third, following the important shift in the labour party's position, *it does not preclude a reversal of Brexit.* At the end of the transition period the transitional arrangements could become permanent or even EU membership re-established if the issue of 'free movement of people' can be resolved.

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With a clearly differentiated position on the issue of 'how' the UK should leave the EU the people can then decide which political party's vision of Brexit they prefer.

The shift in the labour party position must be welcome by those who believe that only Parliament can resolve or minimise the damage created by the unnecessary and flawed Brexit referendum.

"To be alone in 1940 among the enemy was heroic; to be alone in 2017 among friends is absurd."