BREXIT

A Green House Gas

by Andrew Pearmain

"This is the hour of the charlatans, of the confidence tricksters, of the grand promises that will never be fulfilled", Antonio Gramsci, 1919, on the onset of Fascism.

In a conversation with Green House luminary and MEP Molly Scott Cato shortly after the EU referendum, she observed that "the smart money in Europe is on a sterling crisis, where the pound falls so low that the IMF is forced to intervene, on condition that we stop all this Brexit nonsense and commit ourselves fully to Europe." This may or may not come to pass – it seems to me a relatively plausible scenario amongst all the others – but the crucial point is that it demonstrates the much deeper historical truth about Britain in the 21st century; that we have lost the capacity to govern ourselves. Like some ancient wandering tribe, we need an external higher power to come in and save us from ourselves, a good slap of reality. Things have got so bad, so much further into the "Break-up of Britain" Tom Nairn first announced in 1988, it's not even clear who 'we' are any more.

The shenanigans at Westminster are the least of it, the latest stage in the hollowing-out of electoral parliamentary politics and further proof of what a ridiculous place it is (whenever I've been there, always in the daytime, I've been staggered by how many MPs are plainly pissed). There is a kind of profound flippancy about these Brexit times, a foregrounding of the worst aspects of our national character, the jolly japes and high jinks, the silliness, the 'only 'avin' a larf'; and the suppression of the best, the aptitude for dialogue and compromise, the 'muddling through', the 'bodge and mend', the 'making the best of a bad job'. The fact is that we are not making the best of the latest bad job, which might go by the name of 'Brexit' but is really, fundamentally, about the loss of our historic imperial power, commercial swagger and industrial manufacturing base. Leaving the EU represents a further, possibly final nail in the coffin, giving up on the repeated (largely failed) project of 'modernisation' pursued by successive post-war governments. Britain is a fading offshore island with a range of intractable economic and social problems, which refuses to face up to its current condition. In comic terms – which is how our 'foreign friends' tend to see us – we are more Monty Python than Mister Bean, more surreal than slapstick.

Meanwhile, we are failing to provide for the most basic of human needs, shelter, with millions in inadequate housing or actually homeless, and the existing housing stock in shocking condition. Our old houses are crumbling and our new houses are rubbish (as a part-time handyman, I should know). Amongst the most insidious effects of the housing shortage is the deferred maturation of a whole generation of young people denied access to Thatcher's 'property owning democracy'; no wonder they find the reheated Bennism of Corbyn *et al* so appealing. Then there's our collapsing public services (from which I am recently retired), just about kept going on the frayed nerves of their front-line operatives and the combination of cold calculation and make-believe required of their managers. With universal credit, Britain ceases to be a welfare state in any meaningful sense of the term, and reverts to the historical vindictiveness of the Poor Law and the workhouse. Mutual solidarity, never securely

established in British social relations and popular mentalities, is crumbling before our eyes, most obviously in the permanent crisis of the NHS. People may tell pollsters that they support increased public spending, but only with other people's money. Most really don't give a toss about people poorer than themselves, and regard the professional compassion once embedded in the 'public service ethos' as perverse. As a recently retired social worker asked me, "Why would anyone want to spend their working lives wading around in human misery?"

All this 'austerity' is to reckon without the economic impact and historical meaning of Brexit, plainly the single most stupid political decision ever taken by this or possibly any other country, which we should be constantly reminding ourselves and our fellow citizens *has not yet happened*. Not so much because it might be reversed, which I don't think it will (again we lack the institutional nous and common sense), but because we can have no idea quite how bad it's going to get. There are some very powerful forces and factors determined to see it through come what may, including the inertia, apathy, passivity and wilful ignorance of a large chunk of the British population, most of whom have never felt truly European. It adds up to a peculiar kind of political S&M, with a deep undercurrent of self-loathing, whereby the hard-core Brexiteers wish to administer shock therapy to the British people, a majority of whom seem to think they thoroughly deserve it. This is of course the latest twist in the ideological dispensation of Thatcherism, the application of Hayek and Friedman first attempted forty-odd years ago in Pinochet's Chile.

I also keep reminding people that Labour dare not oppose Brexit, for the obvious careerist reason that 70 per cent of its MPs represent solidly Leave constituencies. This seems to come as a revelation to most young Corbynistas, remainers all, which I suppose is a tribute to the skills at dissimulation of Corbyn's side-kicks as well as the folly of youth. Labour's current ascendancy, based on one surprising general election and a surge in 'clicktivism', is entirely down to the ineptitude of the Conservative Party, itself undergoing a historic decline on a par with the nation-state. The strange personality cult of Corbynism is going nowhere, and electorally (which is what the Labour Party exists for) has so far gone nowhere at all. From a Gramscian perspective, Corbynmania has precisely zero 'hegemonic potential'; it is impossible to imagine a transformative or even effective left-wing Labour opposition, let alone government. If it didn't work in the early 1980s, it's not going to work now, for all the ageing Young Socialists back from the political dead with their lapel badges, banners and pamphlets, who actually make up the bulk of Corbynistas. Foremost amongst the betrayals perpetrated by my 'baby boomer' generation, and there are many, is the failure to transmit the benefit of our political experience, the hard-won wisdom that Labour leftism gets you nowhere.

If Brexit was won on hollow promises, they are as nothing compared to the chimera conjured by John McDonnell and friends, that some kind of socialist paradise can be squeezed out of a crumbling, isolationist national capitalism. If Labour wins an outright majority at the next general election, which I doubt, it will face a post-Brexit economic landscape which will make Greece look like Germany (which is of course what the eurozone tried and failed to do). Alexis Tsipras and Syriza, good Gramscians all, have a far broader strategic vision and popular reach than Labour, which - with the arguable exception of 1945/51 (and even that ended in tears) – has never been any good at steering a progressive course through times of austerity. Syriza are plainly struggling, in both senses of the word, to fix the mess created by

their own local elites and botched entry to the euro. Prime Minister Corbyn will face even tougher circumstances, not least because Labour is not prepared to challenge our delusions of imperial grandeur and 'great power' status, and all the arrant stupidity that comes with it.

So what's the best we can realistically hope for? In my view, a centrist political party that can negotiate re-entry to the European Union, in ten to fifteen years time, on much worse terms than current membership: taking the euro, no rebates or exemptions, submission to Franco/German hegemony *etcetera*. There would not even be any guarantee of admission to the northern 'inner core' which will by then be in firm charge of the European project. As I write this, I can hear the groans of the Green House readership, many of whom are quite sanguine about Brexit. A fair few I gather voted Leave, largely on a somewhat facile 'anti-establishment' basis (to be fair, very few people took the referendum seriously until it was over). But never mind that; let's concentrate on what Greens can hope to get out of the next ten to fifteen years of economic decay, political turmoil and social stagnation.

Well, there'll be less 'growth' for a start, with the environmental benefits that always come with economic depression. That's the easy bit. The bigger question, the type that Greens have (in my experience) always resisted addressing, is how to help the British people come to terms with our country's historic decline and start to build institutions, politics and popular mentalities suited to the modern world, perhaps even at long last feel properly European. There will be no shortage of 'facts' to publicise in support of this historic project, as the various chlorine-washed chickens of isolationism, xenophobia, technological and educational backwardness come home to roost. The risk is that the befuddled British people will continue to blame others – the EU, immigrants, left-wing judges, big-eyed bugs from Venus - for their self-inflicted misfortunes. The challenge is to offer more persuasive, constructive explanations.

Andrew Pearmain is currently writing a biography of Antonio Gramsci, to be published in 2018; he is also available for minor jobs around the house.

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