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‘Progressives need their own story of national renewal’

Labour MP Liam Byrne on dealing with right-wing populism, national identity and the idea of a radical centre

Labour won a historic victory in 2024, yet Reform UK has continued to gain ground. In your book *Why Populists Are Winning And How to Beat Them*, you argue that populism thrives when people feel the system is rigged. Has Labour done enough to change that system — or has it offered too much continuity?

There has been a big change in the British electorate over the last 10 to 15 years. It is now essentially split into a left bloc and a right bloc. On the right, Reform is consolidating that bloc and destroying the Conservative Party in the process. On the left, meanwhile, the progressive vote has splintered. I call this ‘asymmetric fragmentation’: fragmentation on the left, consolidation on the right. In a first-past-the-post system, that often means Reform comes out ahead.

But I think Labour’s strategy is now changing. Andy Burnham has certainly realised that it has to change. We are beginning to see Labour put progressive values much more clearly up front, and the progressive bloc on the left is beginning to come back together.

One of the ideas in your book is the ‘radical centre’. Your answer to populism is therefore not simply moderation, but in a sense the radicalisation of the centre. What does that mean in practice?

For me, the radical centre is quite radical about power, but realistic about money. It is not the kind of populism that we see on the far left in the UK or among the Greens, where there is sometimes a belief that you can simply tax and spend your way to the promised land. I think that is difficult when debt-to-GDP is nearly 100 per cent, as it is in the UK. You have to be realistic about money.

But you can be quite radical about how you restructure things. The richest one per cent in Britain have multiplied their wealth dramatically compared with everybody else over the last 10 to 15

years. Yet someone like Rishi Sunak, earning £2 million a year, can be paying an effective tax rate of around 22 per cent. The way we tax wealth and work has got out of balance, and we need to fix that. That could release resources for things such as defence spending, but also for a working-class tax cut, investment in infrastructure and other things we need for economic growth.

You also mention the need for 'national renewal'. Why do progressive parties need a story about national identity?

We did a study of populist rhetoric, looking at what populist leaders actually say and what language they use. We found three very consistent themes. The first is national renewal, but it is often drenched in an ethno-civilisational argument. You see that with the AfD, but also with Trump, Farage, Le Pen and Meloni. Second, they talk in very nostalgic terms about things that have supposedly been lost. And third, there is always an emergency, a crisis or a struggle that can only be solved by a strong leader.

Progressives need a strategy that can match and defeat that. And it has to start with our own story of national renewal. But ours should be based on patriotism for our best ideals: the rule of law, tolerance and pluralism. These are also the conditions from which innovation and economic growth emerge. We have to be much more ambitious and imaginative about the new kinds of freedom that are possible in the 21st century. We need to talk about the freedom to thrive and flourish in the future.

And we need to explain why we believe we can get there more effectively if we pull together. That contrasts with the divide-and-rule approach that populists often take. But it also means becoming much more self-confident about naming opponents. There are vested interests that hold our countries back: companies that do not pay workers fairly, businesses that rip consumers off, or foreign actors whose behaviour is simply not in our interests. Progressives need to become more confident about identifying the enemies of progress – and about taking them on.

That debate about patriotism is particularly difficult in Germany for historical reasons. Germany's football coach Jürgen Klopp recently said that he wanted to 'take back the flag' from the AfD: Germany belongs to all its 83 million people and its diversity should be a source of pride. How does that resonate from a British perspective?

It is a really important debate. We began our own project of taking back the flag for progressive patriotism in the days of Tony Blair. I was in Downing Street when Blair came into office – I worked for him

back then – and everybody was waving little Union Jacks. You saw something similar when Keir Starmer became Labour leader: the flag was everywhere. The point is that you cannot allow national symbols to be stolen and monopolised by people with extreme views.

But a flag alone is not enough. You also need a story about why you love your country, what you believe your country is capable of, where it may have taken wrong turns, and which forces are stopping it from making progress. Unless you have that well-rounded story, it is very difficult to build a political narrative clear enough to cut through the digital smog that engulfs all of us in our daily lives.

Germany has tried to contain the AfD through a political 'firewall', particularly by ruling out coalitions and cooperation. Has Britain had a similar debate, and what lessons do you draw from it?

It is a debate on the right in the UK. And the argument among parts of the British right is that a firewall makes sense because once you begin collaborating with extremists, they start eating your support. They eat your donors, then your policy people, then your voters — and they do not stop until you are gone.

Politicians on the right should learn from what happened in the United States. Once Donald Trump entered the Republican ecosystem, he did not stop until he had consumed virtually everything. Today it is very difficult for mainstream Republicans even to get selected to run for office. So it is a difficult decision, but the lesson that moderate conservatives and Christian Democrats should draw is that collaboration can be a recipe for disaster.

In Germany, however, the firewall has sometimes meant more than refusing coalitions. It can also mean isolating the AfD — treating it as outside the democratic mainstream. Critics argue that this allows the party to portray itself as the victim of the political establishment. With the AfD now much stronger than it was a decade ago, can that kind of isolation become counterproductive?

I do not think the narrative of victimhood explains the political progress of the far right. The bigger problem is the centre's failure to connect with people's day-to-day concerns and to tell a more effective story about the future. That is the fundamental political problem.

At the same time, we need to be cautious. If you look at the transformation of the populist right in America, you can see how it is now metastasising not only politically, but culturally and financially. Large amounts of money are flowing into these organisations from the crypto industry, the Christian right and parts of the financial-services industry that are interested in less regulation.

So you have to be careful that by normalising extreme views, you do not open up new sources of oxygen for them. But ultimately there is no substitute for defeating the far right politically: by having a better story, a better strategy and a more compelling account of the future. And that has to be characterised by a different kind of strength.

We live in very uncertain times. The future is unpredictable, and politicians can write as many plans as they like. People do not necessarily believe those plans because they know how uncertain the world is. So what can they rely on? They have to be able to rely on your strength, your character and your motivations. That means the political centre, on both the left and the right, has to do a much better job of explaining its values: where those values come from, how they were shaped by its traditions and history, and why they equip it to navigate an uncertain future. That is what is missing from much of Western democracy today.

This interview was conducted by Philipp Kaupert.



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