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# After Brexit, it's open season for xenophobia

## Even though the UK has technically left the EU, 'Brexit' has escalated into a culture war over immigration

Two million people saw it live and at least six million have watched it on 'social media': last week on the BBC's prime-time political show, Question Time, an audience member launched a passionate tirade against immigration, littered with hatred and falsehoods.

'We should completely close the borders,' she said. 'You've got people flooding into this country that cannot speak English ... In the NHS everything's written in different languages ... You arrive on a plane, you get free service, you can have your babies ...'

None of the claims was factual — and nobody was surprised when, within 24 hours, the woman was revealed to be an active supporter of the English far-right leader 'Tommy Robinson'. Members of the discussion panel tried to set her straight — but as a moment in British politics it will be hard to forget.

It shows that, within three weeks of the chauvinist jamboree that was Brexit night (31 January), Britain's xenophobic right is unassuaged. Even as the candidates for Labour's leadership succession are trying to assure pro-Brexit working-class voters that 'the argument is over', the argument actually continues.

## Clearest signal

Those on the English plebeian right don't just want to leave the European Union — they want all trace of the UK's multi-ethnic and globalised society eradicated. Also last week, Boris Johnson's government gave the clearest possible signal that it will go on stirring up their anger against all the old targets in the Brexit debate.

In a speech in Brussels, the UK's lead Brexit negotiator, David Frost, warned the EU that Britain was prepared to walk away from any

meaningful trade dialogue if it could not get a Canada-style trade deal by December, when the transition period ends.

The UK intends to undercut the EU on food standards, labour-market rules and financial regulation, rejecting demands for common standards in favour of what Frost called 'sovereignty'. And if it can't get permission to do so through a trade deal, it will do it anyway.

## Sharing rejected

Rejecting the entire basis of the multilateral global system, where sovereignty is effectively shared through trade treaties which can be adjudicated in common courts, Frost warned: 'We take the opposite view. We believe sovereignty is meaningful and what it enables us to do is to set our rules for our own benefit.'

I expect this stance to be moderated by diplomats when the UK presents its negotiating document to the European Commission this week, but not by much. It is an ultimatum, designed as much for the consumption of the racist woman on Question Time — and her equivalents in every one of the EU27 — as for the commission.

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For weeks British commentators have been asking: how will the fiscally tight Conservative Party, which does not believe in state intervention or redistribution, ever deliver to the poverty-stricken towns where voters switched from Labour to deliver Johnson's victory on 12 December?

But it's the wrong question. Frost's speech showed that what Johnson intends to deliver to those towns is an intensified culture war, in which the EU and its institutions are depicted as the external, and migrants the internal, threat.

## Draconian law

Simultaneously with the EU negotiating gambit, the UK government has unveiled a proposal for a draconian new immigration law, which will kick in the moment the transition period ends. It would not only end freedom of movement; it attacks the whole way free movement has worked since

the accession of eight mainly east-European member states in 2004.

To gain a temporary work visa in the UK, European citizens will have to be English speakers with a job offer at a salary above £22,000 in a high-skilled occupation. The law is specifically designed to deter low-skilled immigration — of the kind on which the entire hospitality and elder-care sectors in the UK depends. The home secretary, Priti Patel, told employers' groups, aghast at the proposal, that they should pay higher wages or invest in automation.

Even if they wanted to end free movement demonstratively, for political reasons, the Conservatives could have drawn up a points-based system favouring the existing patterns of migration. Instead they have designed what Theresa May when at the Home Office dubbed a 'hostile environment' — and the commission, and individual member states, will be tempted to consider retaliation in kind.

During the election I met voters who fantasised that the UK government would one day round up Romanian and Polish workers for deportation, just as it rounds up convicted drug-dealers from Jamaica. Patel's envisaged law brings the prospect of a deportation flight to Europe out of right-wing fantasy into the real world.

It is easy, then, to predict how the next ten months of British politics will be scripted: there will be a confrontation with the EU over 'sovereignty', accompanied by strident rhetoric against Labour, the Scottish nationalists and the Liberal Democrats as they oppose the new immigration legislation.

## Not well equipped

Unfortunately, Labour — still reeling from its election defeat — does not look well equipped for this fight. Since Jeremy Corbyn's party lost the election, its hard left, incapable of facing up to its own failures to connect with working-class voters, has heaped all blame on Labour's pro-European wing (and implicitly the 80 per cent or so of its members and voters opposed to Brexit).

Rather than resisting this blame game, two of the three remaining contenders to succeed Corbyn have gone along with it. Lisa Nandy — an MP for an ex-mining constituency — and Rebecca Long-Bailey have suggested it was the fault of the pro-Remain left, and its figurehead, Keir Starmer, that Labour couldn't connect with elderly, English-nationalist voters.

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Starmer — who looks set to win the leadership contest — has responded by assuring everyone that the Brexit debate is over, though he will go on fighting for a close relationship with Europe during the coming talks.

What much of the Labour left does not want to recognise is that the debate over Brexit has simply transmuted into a debate over sovereignty and immigration. The purpose of Johnson's rhetoric is not to bounce Europe into a deal — it is, as it was before, to provide a casus belli for a no-deal Brexit in December, and tar Labour and its allies with the brush of cosmopolitanism.

## Moral collapse

In an atmosphere where parts of the British left are frantically trying to renew their nationalist economic credentials, to 'reconnect' with the towns Labour lost, there is a real danger that the party will morally collapse in the face of Johnson's anti-European propaganda.

The principled course of action is clear: to oppose the UK negotiating position, as set out, in Parliament; to hold out the prospect of a new, strategically close relationship with the EU; to vote down the new immigration rules, and to build solidarity with the three million EU citizens already in the UK.

Of the three Labour leadership contenders, only Starmer has committed to fight for the principle of free movement. The only way to honour that principle would be to seek to amend the immigration bill in a way that gives extra points to EU citizens, removes language restrictions and gives EU workers already in the country full citizenship rights in the UK, including the right to vote.

The racism factor

And it's time to be clear about what the British left is facing. I understand why politicians are reticent to say this, but it's very clear that, for some of the 900,000 habitual Labour voters who switched to the Tories, racism was a factor. Certainly Corbyn's reputational suicide played a part, as did concerns over Labour's ultra-radical economic programme. But Johnson

is the first Tory leader since Thatcher who has played on Empire-nostalgic racism.

We either fight this morally and politically, or we accept it. On the Question Time programme, the young Asian left academic Ash Sarkar waged that moral fight magnificently. She told the racist woman: 'The facts don't care about your feelings.' And she defended migration, not just on grounds of economic functionality: 'It is a human story that's got worth and cannot be measured in GDP.'

The encounter crystallised a cultural conflict which is set to continue. The British left needs to get ready for that conflict — not duck out of it.

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