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On the wrong side of Britain's history

Last week has shown that the Tories' liberal wing was destroyed by Brexit and that fascism — disguised as neoliberal nationalism — is on the rise

Dirk Campbell, a 72-year-old composer and climate activist, was dragged off the podium of the 'National Conservativism' conference in London last week, for trying to warn the delegates about fascism. He was right, because that is where the new grouping — instantly dubbed the 'Nat-Cs' — are headed.

The conference gave a platform not just to the British home secretary, Suella Braverman, but also the Tory backbenchers Danny Kruger and Miriam Cates. Braverman, who is of Asian descent, assured the mainly old, white audience that 'white people do not exist in a special state of sin or collective guilt'.

Cates said a low birth-rate was the 'one overarching threat' to 'the whole of western society'. Kruger (educated at Eton and Oxford) railed against the 'intelligentsia, the globalised elite' and claimed marriage between a man and a woman was the 'only basis for a safe and successful society'.

Throughout the two-day conference, which also featured climate deniers, there was constant emphasis on a return to 'tradition' and love of country. 'Conservatism is order,' Braverman said, 'or it is nothing.'

Modernising fascism

The conference marked the arrival of a strain of neoliberal nationalism on the right wing of the Conservative Party. Inspired by the former United States president, Donald Trump, it looks well placed to tear the party apart once it too loses office.

In my book *How To Stop Fascism*, I explored five pillars of the architecture of modern fascist thought:

- the 'great replacement' theory, which presents in-migration to

western countries as a form of genocide against white Christians;
- the stigmatisation of liberalism: lawyers become demonised for defending the human rights of refugees, feminists for purportedly depressing fertility;
- the notion of 'cultural Marxism', linked with the claim that the 'permissive society' was a conspiracy by the post-war Frankfurt School to undermine western society;
- a meta-politics of constant repetition of conspiracy theories and untruths, creating so much confusion in the minds of the desperate that, as Hannah Arendt once wrote, they 'do not believe their eyes and ears but only their imaginations', and
- 'Day X'—the fantasy of a coming global, ethnic civil war, which will see the world reordered into ethnically homogeneous super-states and the end of modernity itself.

Of these five themes, only the last was missing from the NatCs' conference. All the others were implicitly, sometimes explicitly, promoted.

The movement is not fascist. But as in America, where National Conservatism was born (a right-wing US think-tank organised the event), the ideology of modern fascism — clearly articulated in the works of Aleksandr Dugin, Guillaume Faye, Richard Spencer — has begun to structure the thinking of this new Conservative right.

By placing open racists and climate deniers on a platform alongside a serving home secretary, by using the anti-Semitic trope of 'cultural Marxism' and by accommodating to the mental architecture of the far right, the NatCs have indicated where they are leaning.

The 'incels', the teenage boys in jail for downloading manuals on violent attacks, the people who scrawl Zs on public buildings and swastikas on Jewish graves might not have been welcome in the hall. But you can bet they were watching and waiting for the moves Braverman and her ilk will make once the Tory party is kicked out.

A rise of neoliberal nationalism

'Brexit' was never going to be enough for this faction of the British right. Having 'otherised' three million European Union citizens in the country, and convinced a slim majority of the electorate to destroy its trade relationships with its largest, neighbouring partner, they now want to stigmatise the Filipina nurses, the Sudanese doctors and the families of Indian postgraduates studying in Britain.

Braverman, serving in a government which has pinned much of its growth and deficit-reduction plans on the arrival of a million legal, economic migrants per year, rails against the very concept of migration. She claims that, if only Britain can get rid of its non-European migrants, alongside those from the EU, wages will rise.

Yet the suppression of real wages is the policy of the government in which she serves. And the high-value jobs she promises cannot be created, because Brexit has left business investment flatlining. So wages are falling even while the UK is short of 50,000 heavy-goods-vehicle drivers, 43,000 nurses and 165,000 social-care workers.

To save the rich and leave the poor to starve — the UK has a record 177 billionaires and around 2,500 food banks — is what the Tory government is doing right now.

There is no economic logic to the NatCs' demands, but there doesn't need to be. What they are doing is creating a movement, to disorganise and degrade British democracy and provide a permanent wellspring — amplified by the right-wing talk channels GB News and TalkTV — of racism, misogyny and homophobia.

As with Trump, the former Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, the (still) Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, and their imitators, the NatCs are neoliberal nationalists. They reject globalisation but they don't reject the relentless imposition of market forces on social life.

To save the rich and leave the poor to starve — the UK has a record 177 billionaires and around 2,500 food banks — is what the Tory government is doing right now. Which requires that democracy, human rights and media diversity be eroded while authoritarian nationalism and racism are normalised.

The NatCs are doomed — but dangerous

This will however fail. Yesterday a liberal Conservative, culture minister under David Cameron's premiership, accused the NatCs of a 'refusal to face reality', warning them: 'You actually have to like the country in which you live, and want to make it better, in order for the public to want to back you.' Most British people love the society they really inhabit — with its gay-pride parades and its drag acts and its dating apps and its public drunkenness and its rail strikes.

True, it's a mess, because of 13 years of austerity and economic

mismanagement, and the self-inflicted wound of Brexit. But the British victims of neoliberalism, back to its originator, Margaret Thatcher, have had multi-generational experience of capitalist chaos. They are able to live 'despite' it — and in pub gardens at football time and nightclubs which would truly shock the NatCs, British people have developed a highly resilient culture of survival.

Young people know that, thanks to the Tories — and regardless of whether they form a heterosexual nuclear family — their chances of joining Britain's fabled 'property ladder' are negligible. They know that, no matter how many refugees Braverman ships to Rwanda and how many work visas she blocks, their own wages cannot rise and only their debts will proliferate.

They know that the only breaks they ever get within this system are when they stick together — as with the railway workers and nurses striking for higher pay. And being products of the UK education system, which has always rehearsed the real Nazi newsreel in the post-war period, they know fascism when they see it. That is why, amid all the failed historians and racist pundits at last week's conference, there were so few working-class voices and, among the young, only the internet grifters.

The liberal wing of conservatism was all but destroyed by Brexit.

The NatCs, in short, are doomed — but dangerous. Once the Conservative Party loses power they will bid for leadership on the full Trump agenda — and it is not lost on the national-security community that this perfectly aligns with that of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

The liberal wing of conservatism was all but destroyed by Brexit. The pro-Brexit but socially liberal wing associated with the former prime minister Boris Johnson is reputationally damaged. All the Tories have left to counterpose to Bravermanism is embodied in the current premier, Rishi Sunak, best encapsulated as technocracy minus competence.

It was striking how out of touch the language of the NatCs last week was with that of the real UK. Thanks to decades of mass migration, most of which took place under the Conservatives, this is a strongly multi-ethnic and irreversibly multi-cultural society. Gays are not going back into the closet, women are not going back into the kitchen and schools — even private schools — are not going to start teaching that slavery had its good side.

Coincidentally, this month marks the centenary of the birth of British

fascism, when a few supporters of its Italian leader, Benito Mussolini, set up the 'British *Fascisti*'. This has been defeated in every decade of its existence since — and every faction of Conservatism that has aligned with it has been judged treacherous by history.

For all their obsession with the past, the new right wing of the Tory party seems incapable of learning from it.

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