

## **Elites and Elitism**

**COSTAS LAPAVITSAS's** excellent article in *Jacobin*, 'Why They Left' asserts that, "It is undeniable that the majority of the poor and the working class in Britain have voted in favour of Leave." He basis this opinion on the findings of the Lord Ashcroft poll, and I have no reason to doubt the veracity of its findings. The strong leave vote was spread evenly across England in working class areas in both the north and the south of the country and in the deprived neighbourhoods of some of London's outer boroughs.

In complete contrast, the Remain vote was largely concentrated amongst the prosperous and well to do. So we can be reasonably confident that class relations played a big part in the decision made by over half the electorate to quit the European Union. Evidently, our sharp social divisions have at last taken some tangible electoral form – not for this or that political party – but in an expression of an inchoate, but nevertheless passionate verdict on the nature of contemporary capitalist development.

If I walk for twenty or twenty-five minutes north, or east from my smart apartment in Manchester's Northern Quarter I find myself passing from a buoyant, bustling place, to scenes of decay, catastrophic poverty, and gross neglect – a grim reality which always makes me scamper swiftly back to the prosperous, go-getting Britain of Tory rhetoric. This contrast is expressed even more sharply to my west in Salford, and is replicated in slightly different forms in North Devon where I spend a lot of time; towns like Bideford, or Torrington, for all their handsome architecture and picturesque settings, are scarred by social divisions and contrasts no less severe than those of Manchester or Birmingham.

Even in the midst of prosperous urban areas one would have to be blind not to notice flocks of Deliveroo 'self-employed' workers cycling about the place, and burgeoning numbers of homeless people slumped in sleeping bags on the pavements or in doorways; scenes of beggary and want, alcoholism, addiction, and incipient criminality, reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht at his most mordant.

Millions of people are suffering from the effect not simply of decades of technical innovation and deindustrialisation, but also from the other effects of globalisation, low wages, job insecurity, zero hours and part-time working, in which people are exposed on a daily basis to truly international competition in which employers are under constant pressure to drive down wage bills and related employment costs. The coincidence in the last decade of accelerated levels of immigration with the privatisation of services and wholesale cuts in public spending have created an almost perfect storm of resentment and desperate anger.

Faced with no clear political choice between mainstream political parties, the referendum provided the first real opportunity for millions of working people to express their deep hostility towards the hardship and neglect which they and their families have been suffering year after year, decade after decade.

This has provided a field day for right-wing pundits of conservative or conservative libertarian hue to leap to the defence of the Brexit vote by embattled sections of the working class. These extremely well heeled types – certainly as prosperous as most Remainers – have noted the contempt which the 'metropolitan elite' have for the great mass of ordinary people who voted for Brexit.

They are not wrong about this; I have recently been battling with a good friend of mine who is arguing for the introduction of IQ tests to determine whether people should be allowed to vote. Needless to say, she seems to assume that she would pass, as opposed to *hoy polloi* who've no right to take Britain

out of the EU because they are benighted, uneducated, and poor.

Alternatively, a relative of mine, a committed anti-European, argues tirelessly from resentment rather than evidence, and tells me that the reason that many Western European countries have better railway services than we do here in the UK is because Britain has been forced to pay for the construction of numerous high-speed lines in France, Germany, and Spain. Nothing said or argued can convince the man otherwise.

These ludicrous altercations are, in microcosm, expressive of the general malaise and intemperate absurdity that seems to have settled upon our politics. The populist posture of Brexit politicians appears to have been both a response and a stimulus to this loss of poise and rationality.

The most striking effect has been the promotion of the idea that a prosperous gang called the 'metropolitan elite' has, in league with the 'Brussels elite', and their friends, the 'international corporate elite', been sticking it to the poor bloody infantry. This has resulted in the bizarre spectacle of Brexit leaders educated at Eton and Balliol, who hail from the world of stock broking, high end journalism, and banking, attacking the 'elite' on behalf of the working class and the poor.

The deployment of 'elite' and 'elitism' by filthy rich right wing Tories, aided and abetted by well-off academics, journalists, and pundits (who by-the-way are often as 'metropolitan' as the 'metropolitan elite' that they spend their time attacking), helps to entrench ideas of conspiracy. Instead of promoting a thorough-going critique of capitalism attacks upon 'elites' and 'elitism' is strongly suggestive that the malign effects of the system are the result of the desire on the part of upper middle class professionals and bureaucrats to be beastly to the poor – to gang up on the workers to make them thoroughly miserable.

This is the stuff of populist politics in which people are encouraged to hate 'gentrification' and the latte

drinking classes, rather than housing policy or property developers, to blame immigrants for lousy local services, rather than the government, and Brussels bureaucrats for stifling local business, rather than global capital flows.

We are indeed ruled by what amounts to an oligarchy – an integrated network of well-placed wealthy individuals and institutions, who act in concert by pursuing policies and interests they find congenial, and consequently are deemed to be the interests of the nation as a whole. “What’s good for business is good for Britain”. However, the referendum brought long-term divisions over Europe sharply to a head, revealing a split in the oligarchy, and dividing this powerful milieu into temporary rival camps – leading the Leavers to denounce the Remainers as the defenders of unaccountable anti-democratic elites in London and Brussels.

This right wing populist turn, adopted by the Brexiteers and their hangers-on is now leading to millionaire politicians, the defenders of capitalism par excellence, committing themselves to the service of the working class in the struggle against elitism and big business. Consequently, Prime Minister Teresa May, now ‘we are all Brexiteers’, has vowed to place the Conservative Party and her government “completely, absolutely, unequivocally – at the service of working people.”

Meanwhile the millions who voted “to get their country back”, to regain “control of our borders”, to staunch the flow of migrants, and restore British democracy, unencumbered by EU regulation, have scant chance of having any of their aspirations fulfilled. This is because globalisation has fundamentally transformed our economy, and relocated heavy industry to new and more profitable regions of the world. When Bruce Springsteen sings of *My Hometown* . . .

Now Main Street's whitewashed windows and  
vacant stores  
Seems like there ain't nobody wants to come

down here no more  
They're closing down the textile mill across the  
railroad tracks  
Foreman says these jobs are going boys and  
they ain't coming back to your hometown

. . . it could be Rochdale, or Bradford, or any of our former industrial neighbourhoods. It could be Dagenham, or former production centres, like those for fishing, or shipbuilding, or mining and steelmaking, that have been replaced by vast warehousing and logistics complexes, by call centres, by shops and shopping, by sports centres and stadia, in which employment is often poorly paid, part-time, or insecure.

However, none of these developments, which have ripped the heart out of many traditional working class communities, is the work of some malign elite in Brussels or London. And, the profound sense of dislocation, of placelessness, of poverty and insecurity, is not going to be addressed by attacks upon 'elites' or 'elitism', metropolitan, continental or international. The problem that we face is how to develop a sustainable economy that can provide the mass of the population with high and reliable living standards.

I don't know how this is to be done, but I'm absolutely certain that neither wing of the Labour Party, the leading Brexiteers, nor Teresa May's Tory insurgency on behalf of the working class, are going to solve either the crisis of democracy, or address the needs of those communities blighted by inadequate investment and exposure to global competition.

We need to reject this nonsense about elites and concentrate our discussions on how to develop social and economic strategies capable of dealing with technological innovation and globalization without disastrous retreats into luddism, or trade protectionism aimed at preventing foreign workers from coming here, or the products made by foreign workers being sold here. We need to consider how best to undermine the ruling oligarchy – who are the fully integrated upper echelon of the capitalist class – with a trajectory of social development capable of deepening democratic engagement and promoting social solidarity.