Evolution of the Welfare State: The Left-Right Divide

Waleed Yawer

Abstract

The evolution of political and economic thought has been guided by the interplay between right and left-wing politics across Europe. Since the Industrial Revolution and the ensuing division of classes, the concept of a welfare state has gained prominence. The essay briefly tracks the historical development of the welfare state, followed by its role in modern European societies in context of rising nationalism. It follows a qualitative approach to research, moving periodically from literary referencing to contemporary European politics. The constraints of time and space have not allowed the researcher to delve into details less relevant than those expounded on in the course of the research. Furthermore, identifying transitions in policy paradigms will help shape a policy framework. A suitable framework ought to focus on long-term vision for the European Union.

Keywords: Britain, Conservative, European Union, Labour, Welfare State

* Waleed Yawer is a Research Associate at the Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research. He has done his M.Phil. International Relations from the National Defence University, Islamabad.
Evolution of the Welfare State: John Maynard Keynes

No one epitomized the zeitgeist of the most turbulent years of the earlier half of the 20th century better than John Maynard Keynes. An economist, a statesman and a harbinger of the avant-garde, he embodied the spirit of the times. Post war Europe had only begun to institutionalise its economic and physical losses; which had brought tremendous losses to people throughout the continent.¹ Most importantly though, Keynes pioneered what came to be known as Keynesian economics, bringing to the fore, the concept of public spending to reinvigorate the economy. Though he was not the first to voice his predilection for public spending, he was the first to contextualise deficit spending as means to counter market mania induced recessions.² His theory, borne of a truly globalized recession, bridging classical economics with market socialism has worked its way into contemporary best forms of fiscal governance.³ The polarised spirit of modern times though, has not eluded his work for he has in the ad nauseam debate between left and right-wing economics, been reduced to a mere socialist. In fact, his is the theory that complements Irving Fisher’s groundbreaking work on mania induced recessions. A neoclassical economist, very much in tune with the American penchant for capitalist folklore, he offered a well rounded explanation of the occurrence of recessions which before him were thought and treated of as anomalies.

Market socialism, it ought to be noted, has managed to fill in the discrepancies in economic management that free market capitalism quintessentially espouses. Keynes, having groomed himself in the halls of Eton and Cambridge served in the British treasury, tasked with negotiating British interests at the Versailles Peace Conference 1919. His ability to reconcile his academic background and a distinct love for philosophy with official wartime policy manoeuvring earned him great repute as a left-wing economist. His rise

¹ Institutionalisation is in reference to the prominence of a post war state managed welfare mechanism in European societies as well as calls for a intra-European bloc of states to deter war and foster economic and political cooperation.

² It is important to note the contemporary relevance of deficit spending as a financial measure employed by most governments to date. Both, Italy, in light of its burgeoning public debt and the American Fed in its bid to reinstate jobs when American debt is high have reverted to deficit spending as means to spend their way out of a fiscal tightening. Public spending, as a tool for economic stimulation has been employed by the most conservative of governments, blurring the margin between liberal and conservative, left and right-wing economics.

³ The Great Depression of the 1930s.
to prominence as an economist came at a time when fiscal conservatism was ubiquitously, the method of success. His words, ‘nothing mattered except states of mind, chiefly our own’ is testament to his contribution to the debate of ideas pertinent to capitalism and socialism as modes of fiscal governance. 

Though Keynes is more notably an economic reformer, he was of the idea that those in society left stranded to their own devices, were to be assisted by the state through a redistributive mechanism. Empathy for part of the living population most affected by war including orphans, widows, handicapped and the elderly led to public benefit reforms in the wake of both World Wars. Keynes was a proponent of such reforms.

Evolution of the Welfare State: Literary Trends

Shifts in social trends measured through transition in literary paradigms are effective markers of the evolution of the state’s presence in articulating its economy. ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’ is one of literature’s most prized artefacts penned by one of English literature’s greatest novelists.

Transcending its literary value, the quote is indicative of a social phenomenon that related directly to the state’s treatment of its own citizens. Dickens, differing from his contemporaries in social thought wrote some of his fiction covering social aspects, most significantly that of equality in Victorian society. The Christmas Carol remains, in spirit, a derision of Victorian society; criticising the prospering of the elite at the expense of the poor. Contrarily

---

5 Keynes is a model in reconciling state and private management of capital and resources. It is in this context, that he has been considered a pioneer in modern economic practices.
6 Post World War 1 benefit reforms were introduced across Europe, in Britain, France, Italy, Austria, Ireland, Poland, Bulgaria, Germany, Yugoslavia and Norway to boost employment and production at times when economic strife summarized the European ethos. Such policies were not independently empathetic, but had pragmatic policy undertones to it aimed at economic stimulation through increased employment. Post World War 2 reforms were more benefit laden eventually leading up to the formation of the National Health Service.
8 The likes of which included John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle, advocates of an unregulated market, exponents of Thomas Robert Malthus’ law of population calling for state instruments receding from the public space.
9 It is indeed one of the great ironies of history that the reins of socialism/public welfare systems have been held by a certain individuals, at the very top of the very pinnacle of aristocratic wealth. Perhaps this is also a point of departure from the more radical communist notions of wealth management.
however, the book’s success has come to be estimated not by its impact on society, but the high numbers it was sold in; a lesson in how market forces trump sentiment.

It was a reflection of the Poor Law Amendment of 1834, whose relevance to this essay is to highlight the role it played in establishing a mechanised system of public welfare. Coincidently enough, it provides invaluable insight into the entrenchment of aristocracy and wealth accumulation in British society. The Poor Laws were to tangibly end in tandem with the conclusion to the thirty years of World Wars. Meant to effectively channel the redistribution of wealth from the top to the bottom, the Poor Law Amendment was passed to decrease the target population for the funds therein allocated for the most destitute, willing to toil in harsh working conditions in workhouses as the only means to be entitled to benefits from the state. In effect, the welfare system borne out of the Poor Laws limited access to even the most basic necessities to most in need rather than broadening its scope.

**Role of the State in Societal Reforms**

The role of the state in the public sphere has evolved gradually. Free market capitalism focused around individual liberty and freedom, juxtaposed with the socialist principle of equality maintained through state management, has had varied policy implications. The concept of unregulated power and influence concentrated among the few, has been relevant as long as the interplay of power dynamics between the gentry and the poor, landowners and tenants, feudal heads and serfs has been centred around attempts to wrest some semblance of control from the stronger party. Dickens himself was inspired for his socialist cause by The Chartists’ movement for universal suffrage following a strike at a cotton mill in England. The movement is representative of the symbiotic evolution of labour unions under industrial enterprise at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. It served as a counter narrative to the growing influence of the industry and the ensuing seclusion of the working class from it. It is this historical nature of being a reactionary ideology steeped inherently in changing

---


11 The Factory Laws in 1834 were passed in part resulting from allegations of exploitation of children amid poor working conditions in workhouses. The legislation is considered by many as legislation coming to fruition owing to public pressure.
power dynamics that has positioned it as confronting basic tenets of classical economic theory.

Bouts of British ‘exceptionalism’ have featured regularly throughout the previous century.\textsuperscript{12} From Churchill’s war cries echoing from Dover to Calais across the Channel, to Margaret Thatcher’s notorious call for a ‘rebate’ from the European Union, to Britain’s eventual divorce from the Union, Britain has managed to reserve a special place for itself in Europe. Despite their idiosyncrasies, Britain retained its normative allegiance to the Union taking the lead in establishing the most comprehensive state subsidised welfare system. This is not to say that state sponsored welfare had not been implemented before. In fact, as mentioned above, Keynesian advocacy of a state sponsored system is not at odds with market capitalism but rather complements it. Basic welfare schemes were in place throughout Europe since the advent of the century, most notably in Germany, where Bismarck’s legacy saw the implementation of ‘pension, accident and medical insurance schemes’.\textsuperscript{13} Though it was only after the Second World War, that state sponsored welfare programmes were refined and embedded into the social fabric of Europe as a whole.

The Welfare State: Need of the Hour

During the decade following the conclusion of the Second World War when welfare systems were the focus of each European state’s welfare policy, the stark contrast between socialism and communism, in their respective policy manifestations had become fairly clear. Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, under the auspices of Stalin’s international aspirations, that bore fruition in the Cominform, did more to worsen the plight of the labour class than alleviate it as Marx or even Lenin had envisioned.\textsuperscript{14,15} Stalin’s Soviet-wide smokestack

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Nick Clegg, \textit{How to Stop Brexit (and Make Britain Great Again)}. (United Kingdom: The Bodley Head, 2017).}
\footnote{Tony Judt, \textit{Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945} (London: Vintage, 2010).}
\footnote{The Cominform, succeeding the Comintern, an anachronism in temporary dialogue, was another affirmation of the inherently reactionary nature of leftist economic ideology. It was formed as part of Stalin’s agenda in reference to the specter of overwhelming Western influence in a Germany. Stalin’s appraisal of the division of German assets among the Allied powers would see communism playing second fiddle to the West, a compromise on the balance of power, a political strongman would never be willing to accept. Contrary to the popular academic belief in the domino effect which in historical parlance instigated the Cold War, the Soviets rather were reacting to perceptions of growing Western influence.}
\footnote{Many would argue that Marx’s ideology never fit into governance at any stage of globalisation which is why no measure of its success can be effectively drawn. Lenin’s ideology departed from Marx which has led many to believe that a truly operational ‘leftist’ ideology can not be an effective mode of governance.}
\end{footnotes}
industrial reforms focused on heavy industry, fostered economic growth in the short run but marginalised the demand of the labour class. The acquisition and redistribution of land did not help matters either. Land reforms, or the lack thereof, exposed the economy’s disregard for the most in need of the state’s help as they were forced onto the fringes of society. Britain, as Keynes had proposed, realised the importance of establishing a welfare system. The state had come to terms with its obligation of uplifting the society from the destruction of life and property that the World Wars left in their wake. It was an obligation no private enterprise could have been entrusted with, for what Britons wanted more than a return to financial normalcy was a stable society that guaranteed to the least, their basic rights.

Post war welfare mechanisms across Europe guaranteed protections against illness, accident insurance, financing for the unemployed in Britain, Belgium, Italy and Norway (the amount varied nationally across Europe owing to different methods of funding welfare programs), education and rehousing (important to the development of the British welfare model). Lastly, the state’s role in defining the post war development narrative became clear as those from the very right of the spectrum ceded a respectable degree of interference from the state. Austerity levels were relaxed and consequently demand for luxuries increased exponentially. The state responded through appropriation of funds for various art forms. Public parks and recreational centres were established. The idea of a stable family enjoying the graces of a progressive society was beginning to overshadow the memories of a destructive past that Europe was recovering from.

Britain, the least affected in terms of loss of life and material damage came to grips with austere post war realities the quickest. Winston Churchill, who guided Britain through the toils of the war effort, lost his premiership to Clement Atlee from the Labour Party. The Labour Party contested the election on a campaign of restoring order to the British public system. Working with a popular narrative, the Labour Party was able to materialize William Beveridge’s proposal for the most extensively managed healthcare system, among other

16 It is also a point of irony, summed perfectly by George Orwell in the Animal Farm that communist regimes were the most vulnerable to a ‘revolution’ as the difference between the poor and rich only widened.

17 Ibid.
provisions. The National Health Service (NHS) was created in 1948 and is, to date, the biggest public healthcare system in the world.\textsuperscript{18} Britain’s emphasis on its health service and housing facilities had shifted opinion towards the public welfare system to such an extent that upon ascendancy into office once again in 1951, Churchill and the Conservative Party had to adapt to an enlarged public sphere in league with One Nation Conservatism.\textsuperscript{19}

**The European Union’s Welfare Role**

The European Union (EU), coalesced around the notion of regional integration, has evolved since its inception to a modern day institution by taking charge of as an inherently continent wide redistributive mechanism. Calling for uninhibited trade between its members, the European Parliament knew it needed to shore up national economies to enable free and fair trade. However, the effect of the war and subsequent drought in production capacities across Europe was asymmetrically spread among Central and Eastern countries suffering the brunt of the loss. Bridging the asymmetry was obligated upon the more affluent West European states whose economy had begun recovering and growing right about the time the European project gained momentum as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was formed.

One reason why the European project has weathered resistance during the course of its existence lies in it essentially representing the European post war mood to integrate a collective economic approach with that of political institutionalisation. Equally notable was its role as a deterrent for another conflict breaking out. As the European Economic Community (EEC) prospered economically, Central and Western European countries initially hesitant on acceding to the EEC, began expressing an interest to do so.\textsuperscript{20}

---

\textsuperscript{18} The NHS is as symbolic an institution as it was a resort to subsidised healthcare for Britain. It heralded Britain’s post war narrative and set in stone the importance of the state in rendering nationwide services. Europe followed suit by expanding the healthcare sector, though not to the same scale as Britain. The NHS remains a bone of contention between the Leave and Remain campaign on either side of the Brexit debate. The argument to empower a flailing NHS at the cost of rerouting payments to Europe to the healthcare sector has made the NHS into an instrument for national advocacy; bearing sentiments of British exceptionalism inherited through the ages.

\textsuperscript{19} Term used to refer to members of the Conservative Party in Britain acknowledging the role of state in initiating social and economic programs, for the eventual benefit of the people.

More countries joining the club meant more money required in European coffers to meet demands.

The need to beef up the European treasury intensified in wake of East Europe seceding from the Soviet Union. Therein began the redistribution of funds to part of the continent, impoverished and depending utterly on financial assistance from the centre.

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is emblematic of EU’s financial conduct. The fund was created to finance infrastructural and vocational development of impoverished members of the bloc. Its purpose was made clear when internal conflicts in countries over the financing of poorer regions broke out. The Mezzogiorno region in Italy, falling behind economic markers relative to the North, depended on funds from the latter. The latter however, was not very amenable to the South’s wishes; a gap that was bridged through ERDF financing. As the case demonstrates, central European authorities had to devise legislatively sound mechanisms to circumvent national authorities in an attempt to shore up poorer regions across the continent to a level where they could effectively contribute to cross continental trade. Bolstering trade through interconnectivity at unprecedented levels has however, come at a serious price which is now, more than ever threatening to dismantle the current order of the European establishment.

Countries, most notably including Italy in the Eurozone and the Visegrad group part of the single market have led the campaign against the anti European establishment. There is a serious threat to the EU, more serious in nature relative to Brexit. Eastern Europe’s accession to the EU represented the truly regional redistributive nature of the EU, rendering it legitimacy from the


22 Matteo Salvini, one of Italy’s current Prime Minister’s and the head of the Lega Nord has criticized at length, the EU specifically the Eurozone. His party’s original stance, which he has distanced himself from was the succession of Italy’s Northern Region from the country to avoid both the reallocation of resources from North to South and excessive labour mobility from South into North. While he might have toned down the intra-Italian secessionist rhetoric, Salvini has anything but done away with the anti immigration disposition that he carried in office.

23 Following Brexit, nationalists across Europe have made the news more frequently than the pro Europeans. Though their reasons may vary, idiosyncratic in nature, the ultimate goal is to wrest control of national economies from the EU and diffuse it into national jurisprudence. There is however little consensus over how devolution on such a scale is to be managed, aligning the interests of both camps, a predicament Britain is no stranger to.
International Monetary Fund (IMF).\textsuperscript{24} If Eastern Europe were to be excluded from the European social and economic order, in light of Brexit, there would be little point to the EU itself. Hence, challenges emanating from the Eastern part of the continent undermine the very spirit of the most integrated political and economic union to date. Though nationalism presents a potent challenge, it is far from breaking the Union apart because political and economic realities have yet to become common knowledge. Also challenging the EU is growing nationalist rhetoric in countries that pioneered, quite presciently, the European trade agreement following the Second World War eventually taking shape as the EU. Nationalism in Italy, Germany, France, Netherlands and Austria has opened up multiple avenues of counter narratives to mainstream political support and advocacy.

**Transition in Traditional Right-Left Political Spectrum**

As the changing nature of geopolitical dynamics begins to creep into the European political system, it changes along with it the interplay between right and left-wing politics. Rise in nationalism has focused on the divide throughout Europe between those who advocate for a stronger reformed EU and those who wish to see powers from the Union devolved into national legislatures.\textsuperscript{25} Since Brexit, elections across Europe, ironically in part excluding the 2017 general elections in Britain, have in effect been referendums on the role of national legislatures inside the EU. The widespread appeal of the traditional anti/for the EU debate has forced mainstream political parties to revise their national agendas to cater to shifting public opinion. It has also fashioned the rise of single-issue parties, who prior to the convergence of an entire continents’ consciousness over the future of the Union were an anathema. Political incumbency in Europe is being challenged to a point not seen since the divisions of the Second World War. Eurosceptics would quote the rise of the Alternate for Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, The Lega Nord (LN) and Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy and

\textsuperscript{24} The IMF advocates multilateral trade but with the advent of regional trade regimes inclusive of the EU and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), it has revised its position to encourage regional trading conditioned upon it being free and fair.

\textsuperscript{25} The term ‘Euroscepticism’ has deliberately not been sued because of the ambiguity surrounding its interpretation. Emmanuel Macron, the French President, the strongest advocate of a consolidated EU, campaigned on grounds of a reformed Union, calling himself a Eurosceptic. Holding him and Victor Orban in similar stead in terms of the regional narrative they hold the reins to will be theoretically and factually incorrect.
the National Rally (RN) under Marine Le Pen in France as a challenge to the political establishment in Europe. Though sharing similar narratives to the anti establishment parties, the likes of Victor Orban in Hungary and Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland have been at the helm of their countries’ confrontation with Central European authorities while holding the highest offices.

Right and left-wing parties, in recent times, have done away with traditional differences over the state’s role in governing resources. As mentioned above, since the conclusion of the World Wars, there is a general European consensus for entrusting the provision of basic resources to state authorities. In fact, the most conspicuous point of departure between the two ends of the spectrum is immigration. The anti EU rhetoric billowing out of European nationalist movements is tapping into a growing discomfort with immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa.\(^2^6\) The current political situation set in Europe mapped on an ideological spectrum has altered the traditional lines of confrontation between liberal and economic perspectives of governance. The far right, inclusive of but not exclusive to the aforementioned nationalist entities has come to represent political parties with a stringent immigration stance. Although on economic grounds, the parties maintain their belief on the state’s conservative role in managing the national economy, they advocate for the state to do so by blocking higher numbers of immigrants.

In the more dramatic turn of events, it is the left-wing that has morphed its stance to one not entirely dissimilar to the right’s for two primary reasons. Firstly, electoral politics with reference to party stances are prone to change as the political atmosphere evolves with contemporary social, economic and political issues taking precedence over more anachronistic ones. Such transitions are further intensified as demographic shifts begin to take shape impacting the way the consciences of entire societies evolve. Secondly, the survival of single-issue political parties and those that tend to develop one election cycle at a time depends on evolving with the political landscape. Hence parties at the fringes of the ideological spectrum, placed there so because of their ‘extreme’ disposition towards social, political and economic issues find a need to adapt to contemporary trends and practices. Immigration currently serves as

---

the measure of adaptability.

The established parties in states setting the normative agenda channelled through the Union are moderate if mapped on the spectrum but in real time, are in favour of a reformed mechanism for allowing refugees into Europe. If the parties on the fringes successfully tap into the anti immigration rhetoric, it would represent the most opportune point in the political evolution of the EU that centrist parties that have been at the helm of their state’s affairs since the development of the post World War order can be driven to the back benches of legislative management. Rabble rousing their way through the top, political pariahs have re-emerged as strongmen trying to herald Europe into an era, reminiscent of the interwar period.

Germany has been a model of economic development for developing countries. Its status as such becomes all the more impressive given the post war state of its economy and international repute. It stands firmly at the centre of the EU, a role further bolstered by Britain’s withdrawal and Emmanuel Macrons ascendancy to the French presidency, complementing Angela Merkel’s vision for Europe.\(^\text{27}\) Despite its role as the political strongman in Europe, or as some might argue, because of it, Germany has seen the most dramatic rise to parliamentary influence of the AfD.\(^\text{28}\) The reason why the AfD is more pronounced than its European counterparts is because it has broken through traditional German political lines at the fore of European politics since the inception of the 21\(^{\text{st}}\) century. The AfD, as its fellow nationalist parties in Europe, calls for a stop to immigration. Its economic stance has been overshadowed because of its emphasis on anti immigration as the core policy point it wishes to propagate.

From a bird’s eye view, Germany under the AfD has succumbed to Euroscepticism. To boot, Angela Merkel’s announcement to not run for a fifth presidential bid could not have come at a better time for nationalists to ramp

\(^{27}\) Emmanuel Macron, a centrist, came to power by deriding the occupation of political debate by the left-right wing politics and their intransigence to move forward. He called for reforms to be made to the EU to consolidate it; one of which was the better management of refugees flowing into Europe. He is a self-proclaimed Eurosceptic with a strong belief in free trade.

\(^{28}\) Germany under Angela Merkel has, during the course of the previous crises, championed the European cause in league with the European Comission and European Council. Merkel’s open border immigration policy, which she is set to compromise on after backlash from within her own alliance in Bavaria and her dictation of the Greek economic recovery from the Euro crisis lead to stronger internal and Europe-wide opposition against her.
up pressure on the more established centre and centre-left parties. The more established centre because of the 2017 elections in Germany is still struggling to come to terms with changing social and political realities. State elections in Bavaria and Hesse, serving as a proxy referendum on Merkel’s chancellorship saw the Christian Social Union (CSU) and Christian Democratic Union’s (CDU) share decline noticeably. The CSU in Bavaria and CDU in Hesse could not prevent the inevitable shifting of electoral politics to parties at the fringes.

![Guardian Graphic | Source: ARD and ZDF TV channels](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/14/bavaria-poll-humiliation-for-angela-merkel-conservative-allies)

The two state elections are important to mention for they reveal a pattern that does not however, necessarily spell out disaster for the left. The political party gaining most ground in both states is The Green Party. Not only were they able to attract disillusioned CDU/CSU voters but were able to deter the AfD from

---

29 The Christian Social Union (CSU), referred in political parlance as, the CDU’s sister party in majority in Bavaria has had trouble realigning itself with a increasingly disillusioned Bavarian public, threatening to bolster AfD ranks. To stop the flow of voters from flocking to the AfD, Horst Seehofer has tried to carve out a reputation for the CSU, independent of Angela Merkel’s patronage by speaking out against open border immigration policies.

30 Kate Connolly and Josie Le Blond, *Bavarian exit polls show support for the CSU falling more than 10 percentage points since the last election in 2013*, (2018), ARD and ZDF TV channels, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/14/bavaria-poll-humiliation-for-angela-merkel-conservative-allies

establishing a majority that would seal German’s normative shift to the right at its Eastern front. Reflecting on these election results, it can be deduced that the German public is not as disillusioned with the left as it is with Angela Merkel’s leadership. The Greens, are not only on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum of the AfD, but have successfully championed causes the AfD sought out to oppose. Much to the chagrin of the right, this affirms the precedence of a classical leftist version of the European society over a more parochial interpretation of the right-wing. Focused on sustaining the environment, the Greens have made their support for a strengthened EU, sporting an effective refugee policy. If anything, Angela Merkel can breathe a sigh of relief with assurances that her legacy will not be overturned as soon as she leaves office.

In an interview with The Economist, Sahra Wagenknecht reflected on how the left might have to regroup if it has to survive. Heading Die Linke (The Left) in the Bundestag, she offers an alternative policy approach for the liberals, one that converges them with the extreme right. Supporting public welfare for German citizens while discounting immigrants from the process seems, in her view, a more appropriate approach to reach out to the hordes of people flocking to the right. She proposes that the left model itself as a leftist version of the AfD, which is indicative of an unprecedented policy and theoretical shift. Though the AfD has not relented going into such an alliance, European political dynamics will have to change to cater to such an alliance, should it ever take place. Such a model for the left will see it clash with the principles of the EU, an institution built on the premise of liberal institutionalism. Not only will that see the EU’s role diminish but would alter traditional geopolitical alliances.

The performance of the Greens begs an inquiry into whether the rise of the right is based on the intransigence of modern European populace. This intransigence is in reference to the opposition to the Centrist advocacy advocating for a more reformed intake, but an intake of refugees nonetheless. Is the current wave of populism Europe’s way of reflecting on demographic shifts focused more on the young who do not want to be governed by the immediate post war generation, not in touch with the social realities of today? Nigel Farage, echoing similar sentiments, a tad bit more sardonically said in a speech to the European Parliament immediately following the success of his Brexit campaign,
‘But what I would like to see is a grown-up and sensible attitude to how we negotiate a different relationship. I know that virtually none of you have ever done a proper job in your lives or worked in business or worked in trade or, indeed, ever created a job’. 32 33

**A Purely British Dilemma**

Britain’s exit from the European Union with reference to shifting right-left dynamics is a case in point. Inter-Tory divisions caused by ambiguous policy rhetoric have managed to hold the Brexit debate hostage over attempts to maintain a proper functioning government.34 The liberal democrats and the Labour, the flagbearers of the left-wing in Britain, have had as ambiguous a relationship with the EU as the Conservatives do now. Tony Blair’s ascendency to premiership, ending almost two decades of Conservative governance, was fraught with ideological confrontation with John Major and the Tories at large. Blair did at the time, as he has done repeatedly throughout Theresa May’s tenure, supported Britain’s membership of the Union.35 Under Jeremy Corbyn, who has had an uneasy relationship with central Brussels authorities himself, Labour has not been able to produce an effective counter narrative to the official Tory stance partly because they have not been able to form one of their own.

Though Labour has come out in support of Britain’s inclusion in the Customs Union, preferably in the single market as well, they have done so after meticulous political manoeuvring. Performing better than expected in the 2017 general election, rallying the younger voters on issues distant, from the Brexit debate, Labour moved on to ramp more pressure on the government’s Brexit

---

32 The Brexit campaign has come undone in the face of multiple “fact-check” procedures as well as campaign finance allegations. A little too late but the turmoil prevalent inside the British Parliament has unraveled the paradoxes in the pro Brexit campaign Allegations over the provenance of campaign funds issued by Arron Banks can only serve to distance pro Brexiteers from the argument that they call for devolution of power from the few up top to the many below. The realities behind the pro Brexit campaign are not very different than those that Britons were encouraged to vote against by the likes of Nigel Farage and Johnson.


34 Since the Tori victory in the 2017 general elections, Theresa May’s cabinet has suffered from periodic resignations, most notable and impactful of which was Boris Johnson’s who resigned as the Foreign Secretary from May’s government, after a series of policy contradictions with his own party leadership came to light.

stance with more popular support. Though the instability in the Conservative Party is doing Labour’s job for them, Jeremy Corbyn finds himself in league with financial elites. Having had spent a career criticising the role of multinational financial enterprises in distorting the global economy, Corbyn and the financial right find themselves on similar footing.36

The Tories continue to battle intra party differences as the British political spectrum pins its Brexit agenda relative to what Theresa May and the European establishment has to offer. Theresa May battles to stitch together a legal framework appeasing the British and European Parliaments on one end and shaping an effective trading deal on the other. Labour ought to hold onto the strategy that allowed it more parliamentary room, in the 2017 elections to experiment with. The latter’s focus on the NHS, education and employment ought to reflect in its Brexit strategy that will appeal more favourably to the British population.

The British welfare system is at stake in the ongoing Brexit negotiations. Parties opposing the Tories in league with Conservative elements rallying for a leadership bid against Theresa May have been careful to avoid delving in much detail over the implication of the withdrawal bill and political declaration on the welfare system. This comes as little surprise even considering the central role the welfare system played in rallying crowds to vote for leaving the EU, given the British government’s failure to declare unambiguously, its plan for revamping the welfare model.

Conclusion

Politics along traditional left-right lines has been in question ever since the Brexit campaign materialised into a victory. Despite the paradoxes and the contradictions it was laced with, the campaign for Britain’s exit from the European Union brought onto the fore, concerns of the people transcending the scope of ideological politics. Political parties can no longer function along conventional ideological differences. The Europe wide spread of nationalism has challenged the very premise of liberal institutionalism. It has, in line with growing rhetoric, put an end to the interplay between political and social governance along the

36 Finding themselves at similar footing has not deterred Corbyn from publically bashing the likes of City UK and Morgan Stanley.
left-right spectrum. Though as established earlier, that might not be the case. If nationalism was to successfully diffuse across borders, ironically relying on global networking, it would run single-issue parties out of the very fuel that kept its machinery functional throughout Europe.

Nationalist leaders throughout Europe render each other legitimacy by speaking in favour of each other, ensuring that their relevance is kept true. If the EU were to devolve regulatory powers from the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to national governments, it would most likely see a return to politics on the same left-right spectrum with the conservative anti immigrants serving this time, the role of the status quo. While the anti immigrant nationalist euphoria persists in Europe, few have managed to point out what a truly post EU Europe would look like and function as. Even though, Britain is yet to formally leave the EU, the procedure has not exactly been the walk in the park envisioned by proponents of the Leave Campaign. Not only has the procedure been fraught with conflict at every turn but nationalism across the Eurozone has yet to realise that Britain was not part of the Eurozone, which would make its devolution process much less complicated than that for Eurozone economies.

Far right leaders are shaping the nature of politics that will govern Europe in the years to come. Paradigm shifts have benefited such leaders much more than the European establishment for the very nature of a paradigm shift is confrontational to the status quo. Matteo Salvini is a case in point. Having realised that secession from Italy, of its Northern territories is no longer a practical policy approach, he turned the principles of Lega Nord (LN) around to advocate an exit from the Eurozone. Marine Le Pen, a previously staunch anti European French candidate for the presidency returned to politics under a ‘reform the European Union’ banner in lieu of its outright disbandment.

Distancing itself from America under Donald Trump has not favoured the European establishment in its struggle against nationalism either. European leaders including Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron and the heads of the European Union Commission and Council, Jean Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk respectively have made no secret of their displeasure with Donald Trump’s foreign and economic policies. The trade row which has intensified the relationship between the two has only eased nationalist elements across Europe
into fostering relationships with Russia. A supportive relationship with Russia has reflected in European nationalism wide distaste for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); an interplay of politics coming full circle as Donald Trump continues to reprimand European countries for not meeting their due shares for NATO’s defence expenditures. The shift in geopolitical alliances is such that will only intensify the left-right divide instead of rendering it irrelevant.

While the proverbial ‘winds of nationalism’ continue to blow with full velocity, one can expect Europe to continue operating amidst nationalist rhetoric. A lot is expected of Brexit to reflect on what direction Euroscepticism is going to take. The left-right divide has surfaced stronger than ever as ideological spaces left void before, are filled in as political parties struggle for relevance.