

Brexit Issues

DiPs at The Blue Mugge

Monday 3rd October 2016

These notes are based on a contribution by Alan Finlayson, Professor of Political & Social Theory, University of East Anglia, published in *Renewal: a journal of social democracy*, Vol 24 No. 3 2016 – published September 2016 (**Note**).

An Introduction:

AF opens his essay as follows. “One of the most surprising things about the success of the *Leave* campaign is that so many are surprised by it. ... The situation is not surprising: nevertheless, there is much we must learn from it. The referendum has clarified and illuminated a complex set of fractures which now defines our nation: between north and south; former industrial centres and the places of the ‘new’ economy; rural and urban, inland and shoreline; those with a university education and those without; white collar and blue collar, skilled and unskilled; Eastern and Western Europeans, older and newer immigrants, those from the Commonwealth and those from the EU; older and younger; those who own a house or have a private pension and those who do not. ... There is a need for patient analysis. ... Here are seven themes upon which we might think.”

Questions:

Let us consider AF’s seven themes in turn.

- 1) **Geographies:** “ongoing reconfiguration of relations between Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast and London” ... beneath that is the changing balance of dependency between the centre and the national periphery ... London is more related to other global cities than to the UK regions ... we need to be clearer about the history and the present of regional and spatial inequalities which define experience and inequalities.
- 2) **Economies:** an old understanding of ‘internal colonialism’ (that the Celtic fringes are culturally and economically subjugated) by England no longer holds, when the flows of goods, capital and people to London and some other dominant centres gather pace as they have ... We need to know much more about supply chains in our interconnected economy and what this does to flows of power, income and wealth.
- 3) **Ideologies:** “The point is not that we are at the end of ideology but that it is not clear what ‘the British people’ (if that is a meaningful category) may be said to ‘believe’ about this world (let alone the next). The mechanisms and institutions which once inculcated a common ‘ideological’ culture have been turned to the task of inculcating ‘entrepreneurial’ individualism, which weakens the capacity of institutions to sustain legitimacy. There is no basis on which to build consensus; no agreement on the goals of our politics, and much skepticism of ‘experts’.”
- 4) **Identities:** What is the nature of ‘English’ identity ... those who self-identified as ‘British’ largely voted Remain and those who self-identified as ‘English’ largely voted to Leave ... also, identity is steadily transferring from the collective to the personal (eg gender politics) in a way that reinforces neo-liberalism and the fragmentation of society ... “Is it possible that national identity has also become individualised’ or ‘privatised’ in this way?”
- 5) **Communications:** It is a commonplace that means of communication are changing very fast. Régis Debray [a contemporary French intellectual] argues that the pamphlet is a genre which makes possible the educative function of parties and other movements, centred on discussion groups and seminars.) AF argues that the role of social media is quite different. Initial analysis suggests that *Leave* dominated on social media. We need to understand what these changes mean for conducting public policy in any Brexit process, too.
- 6) **Technologies:** The ideological counterpart to an emergent regime - of the internet, robotics, big data and surveillance - is Silicon Valley libertarianism: something evident on the *Leave* side in the persons of Steve Hilton and Dominic Cummings. In turn this is leading to “a kind of experiment in new fusions of technology, science, policy and regulation, driven by entrepreneurs whose main ambition is to destroy the status quo.” “The referendum gave voice to a desire to ‘take back control’: it meant many things but the phrase resonates with many of us for whom the workplace is dominated by technologies which monitor, measure and evaluate.”

- 7) **Politics:** We have experienced the ‘hollowing out’ of political parties and all democratic associations. Politicians appear to be a cartel. From where will come new politicians? Perhaps Prime Minister Blair was the last of the old, not the first of the new. The fracturing of political organisations and the relative ineffectiveness of our politics are highlighted by recent developments.
- 8) **Political Parties** - an up-date. A brief review of party political policies on Brexit: and how will Brexit impact on each of these parties? In alphabetical order:
Conservative Party; Green Party; Labour Party; Plaid Cymru; SNP; UKIP...

AF's conclusion is here:

These seven themes are clearly not the whole account of post-Brexit Britain. We will need much hard thinking from many disciplines. But, “one of the achievements of Thatcherism was to separate scholars, activists and publics”. Scholars are crushed by their workloads and assessment exercises; activists are shorn of their ideological traditions; publics have been encouraged to dismiss all experts. Against that fragmentation, we must understand our continuing collective life.

And our concluding question:

Is the vote for Brexit merely part of a much bigger phenomenon that our society is struggling to understand and react to?

Note:

An up-date on AF's position can be read here:

https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/ren24.3_01editorial.pdf

The website of *Renewal: a journal of social democracy*, customarily publishes the text of any one issue some 2 or three months after a given edition is published in paper form or on-line to subscribers. Thus, readers of these notes can expect to find Professor Alan Finlayson's full article here <http://www.renewal.org.uk> by about November or December 2016. The article is fully referenced, as one might expect an academic paper to be.

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