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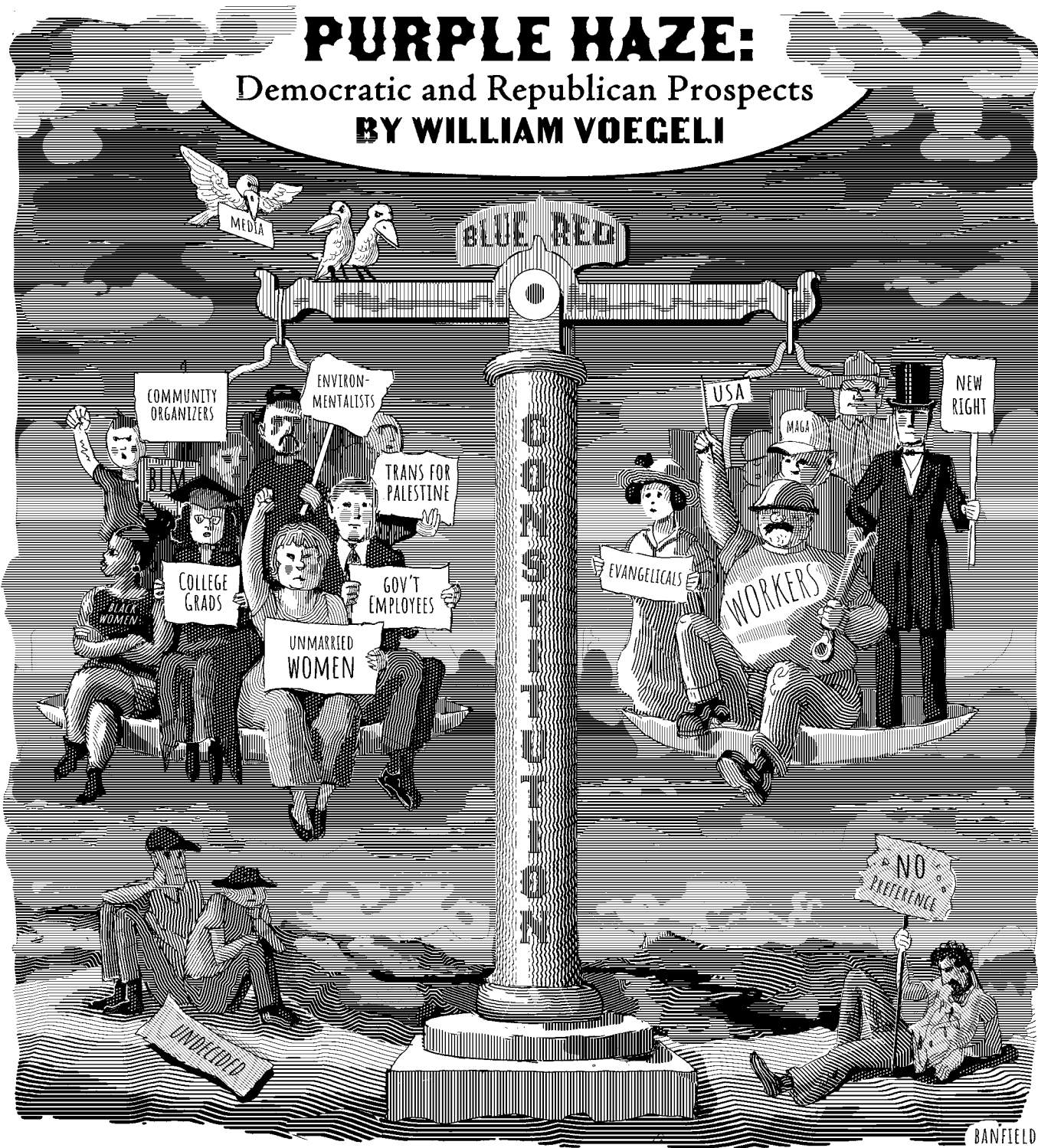
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PLAYING BILLIARDS IN AN EARTHQUAKE

Values, Voice and Virtue: The New British Politics, by Matthew Goodwin.
Penguin, 272 pages, \$19.99



A Rough Beast Descends on Westminster

MATTHEW GOODWIN HAS EMERGED since the 2019 U.K. general election as one of the few political scientists who interpret the ongoing realignment of British politics in ways favorable to the Right. Most members of the commentariat draw different lessons from this realignment, both because they're liberals or progressives themselves and because its first results are likely to be an anti-Tory landslide and a Labour government with a large majority—and that's their preferred outcome. At the same time few of them seem to be looking forward to a Labour government with any real optimism. And the internal collapse of the Tories has opened up for both Right and Left the real possibility that the Tories might be replaced as the main party of the Right by a more populist movement.

As often happens in major social crises or regime change, people discover that what they think turns out to be quite different to what they thought they thought. Some then head for the airport. In Britain's gentler democratic crisis, many on the moderate Left suddenly are realizing that the Tories are not the worst possible kind of opponent they could have—that would be Nigel Farage. Indeed, since

2010 the two major parties have found agreement on the progressive side of such issues as zeroing out greenhouse gases (Net Zero), the COVID lockdown, and (for some) Brexit. That alone explains the Tories' internal collapse and the unusual phenomenon of a mass movement of hitherto Tory voters expressing disgust toward their old party and a wish for its defeat and even disappearance.

WITH THE ANALYSES IN HIS FOUR books, notably the bestselling *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (2018; co-authored with political scientist Roger Eatwell) and now *Values, Voice and Virtue: The New British Politics*, Goodwin advances a different and quite plausible thesis that what is happening is a more profound development than a simple exchange of Labour and Tories. A professor of politics at the University of Kent, he sees recent and forthcoming elections as a new struggle within parties as well as between them that pits a revolutionary class of progressive "new" elites against a counter-revolutionary populist movement of "conservative" or "traditionalist" voters. This new political

division has come about, he argues, as a result of four major changes in British policy and political life: an economic policy of "hyper-globalization" that has deindustrialized Britain and left working-class voters behind other prospering classes; mass immigration that has changed the country deeply without a democratic mandate; the U.K.'s participation in the process of European integration that has made government more remote from the electorate; and the rise of a "new, more insular, careerist and homogenous political class in Westminster."

That last item—the new political class—was itself partly shaped by the other changes (as well as shaping them), but its main defining characteristic is that it went to university following the expansion of university admissions (mainly under Tony Blair's Labour administration) from less than 5% of the college-age cohort in the early 1960s to almost 50% today. That fundamental change is driving an excessive, stultifying credentialism that erects barriers to able people in business, government, and professional life while also spawning even less desirable results such as the fall (to the low teens) in the number of Labour M.P.s from



blue-collar backgrounds, many more graduates than there are graduate-level jobs, and the emergence of an unemployable intelligentsia.

At the same time, the blue-collar and white-collar working classes were experiencing the impact of mass immigration not only on their work life but also on their cultural surroundings and social life. Both these were transformed from a familiar, relatively comfortable status quo to a new and officially regulated multiculturalism that extended their inferior status into new official ethnic and gender classifications. These two diverging paths gradually divided Britain into what social critic David Goodhart in a similar analysis described as the social camps of “somewheres” (high-school educated, locally rooted, status-content) and “anywheres” (degree-holding, globally mobile, aspirational), each espousing social attitudes and opinions appropriate to its group.

THE LONGER THIS SIFTING HAS CONTINUED, the more there has been a gradual hardening of class differences in opinion—seen, for instance, in the corporate groupthink over Brexit in the college-educated class and the upsurge of popular anger over the government failure to prevent illegal migrants crossing the English Channel in small boats. Today, the key issues separating them are open borders versus migration control, patriotism versus cosmopolitanism, gender theory versus family support, free speech versus countering “disinformation,” parental rights versus professional expertise, and national democracy versus supranational technocracy. But new such divisions emerge all the time as the new elites’ revolution gathers pace and as traditionalist voters’ reactions counter it.

For a long time, this sorting-out was happening below the radar of public debate. Particular issues aroused contentious debate but they were not seen as items in a wider class conflict. The revolutionary effects of university expansion and mass immigration were slow and silent ones. Goodwin dates their starting point to Margaret Thatcher’s election in 1979. I would argue that they didn’t really take off until Blair’s New Labour won the 1997 election and its signature policies were continued by David Cameron’s Tories after 2010. But the rejection of European Union membership in 2016 alarmed the new technocratic elites as an outrageous attack on their power while *their* attempts to frustrate Brexit over the next three years infuriated those voters who had begun to feel, in Goodwin’s terms, that they lacked a voice in government and their values were ignored in political debate. And both groups became aware of each other as hostile forces—Re-

mainers expressing contempt for Leavers as “uneducated” and “racist,” and the latter responding with “arrogant” and snobbish.”

On the day after the referendum, the social neatness of that class division was not sharp nor perhaps permanent. The referendum was decided by a close 52-48 majority, and almost every social group—however defined—contained a significant minority of dissenters. Thirty percent of the middle and professional classes voted Leave; even Remainer London had a 40% Leave vote; ditto (almost) Scotland. But the fact that for the next three years politics largely revolved around the parliamentary struggle to implement the referendum result dramatized the clash between the establishment and the masses, entrenched this new class politics, and as Goodwin sees it, midwived into history the new counter-revolutionary populist-traditionalist class, which in the 2019 election gave Boris Johnson his new national coalition made broader by defecting Labour voters in Northern England. But the losing

Eventually either parliamentary or public opinion prevails, and formerly influential people are to be seen pumping gas or, in Britain, legislating in the House of Lords.

side was still in control of most non-elected and unaccountable U.K. institutions and even had a fifth column in Johnson’s Tory government. They continued the elitist resistance to Brexit and added a series of cultural attacks on British identity and history over such allegedly intrinsic blemishes as colonialism and slavery.

THE REVOLUTION, IN SHORT, WAS CONTINUING, and as is the action-reaction nature of politics, the technocracy and its cultural friends responded to its reverses at the hands of the populist counter-revolutionaries they despised. They maneuvered the Johnson government into imposing an authoritarian lockdown on Britain’s society and economy that, *inter alia*, weakened the economy, damaged the prospects of Brexit, and wrong-footed Johnson personally when he broke unpopular regulations in which he had never really believed. All this wasn’t a conspiracy but the kind of government the technocrats naturally favor—the defenestration of Johnson was merely a welcome by-product.

More significantly, as Goodwin underlines, a new and more radical wing of the progressive revolutionary class emerged in Britain in response to the death of George Floyd in America and it was immediately welcomed into the ranks of the technocracy in the most flamboyant way. Senior mandarins in Whitehall invited younger civil servants to establish Black Lives Matter discussion groups to promote “antiracism.” The new moderate leader of the Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer, not only “took the knee” for Critical Race Theory but also affirmed that transwomen are women. Institutions such as the National Trust and the British Museum started announcing exhibitions that confessed “links” to slavery and shamed the country. And the BBC reported that riots in support of BLM had been “largely peaceful.” All in all, these actions were slavish imitations of American fashions in protest, from the toppling of statues to the repudiation of national heroes. But they strengthened the revolutionary technocrats, enraged the traditionalist populists, and devastated the Tory Party which—in swapping Boris for Rishi Sunak—has shown itself torn between these two contending world-historical classes in Goodwin’s vision of the new British politics.

IN ORDINARY PARTISAN LEFT-RIGHT TERMS that’s not a winning position for the party, as the most recent results of special parliamentary elections, local elections, and national opinion polls all confirm. Britain’s preeminent elections expert, John Curtice, estimated that on these results the Tories could fall below their worst-ever such performance in 1997, when they secured only 165 M.P.s in a House of Commons of more than 600. Already the political commentariat is treating Starmer as the next prime minister, as reportedly Donald Trump is, too. For the moment the Mandate of Heaven has descended onto Starmer’s shoulders.

But what lesson do these results have for Goodwin’s wider analysis? I am broadly sympathetic to his case, which largely tracks my narrative above but which he supports at almost every point with an impressive array of electoral statistics and social surveys that give it additional authority—and not incidentally demolish media myths along the way. But he has two groups of critics. Those on the left have an interest in discrediting his social science evidence because it argues that the counter-revolutionary populists are likely to be a permanent force in politics and even the central core of a new right-wing politics offering a stronger challenge than the schizophrenic Tories to the dominant Left. These critics would not like to see a new conserva-



tive phoenix arising from the present debacle on the right—whether a revived Toryism or some rough beast slouching to Westminster to be electorally competitive. They argue that the evidence for either is both weak and contradicted by other surveys.

One of the more amiable of such critics is Mark Pack, the president for a while of the U.K.'s Liberal Democrat party and a political scientist who writes a blog titled *The Week in Polls*. His April 30, 2023, edition on Substack makes several criticisms of *Values, Voice and Virtue*. For instance, he sees a contradiction between its central contention that governments with a progressive elite agenda that includes high and rising immigration have been presiding over Britain since 1979 and the awkward reality that powerful but anti-woke ministers such as Norman Tebbit and Suella Braverman were in the cabinets of those years. This is an ingenious argument but it rests on a misleading interpretation of immigration statistics. Because the U.K. economy was suffering from low levels of growth or stagflation, immigration levels were static or declining until the early 1980s. Few jobs were on offer. Its recovery from the mid-'80s attracted more migrant workers, producing a modest rise in immigration from 1989 onward. But that was not why migration levels showed a much sharper rise after 1997.

In the Blair years a positive policy decision was made to raise immigration for both economic and political reasons such as “to rub the Right’s nose in diversity,” as Labour advisor Andrew Neather put it. And that *did* reflect the priorities and values of the progressive elite.

WHAT THEN EXPLAINS THE EMBARRASSING situation of Tebbit and Braverman? The short answer is that they are traitors to their class—or, to be more precise, traitors to the dominant ethos of the emerging political class in the period under examination. The longer answer is that democratic government actually requires an institutionalized version of such class treason in the guise of a formal opposition that exists to criticize and obstruct the program of the elected government. That arrangement works well when the partisan divisions in the Parliament reflect those of the electorate. But when that association breaks down, then cabinet ministers can seem like outsiders and outsiders can exercise more influence than cabinet ministers. This is usually a temporary period, however. Eventually either parliamentary or public opinion prevails, a new regime is effectively established, and formerly influential people are to be seen pumping gas or, in Britain, legislating in the House of Lords.

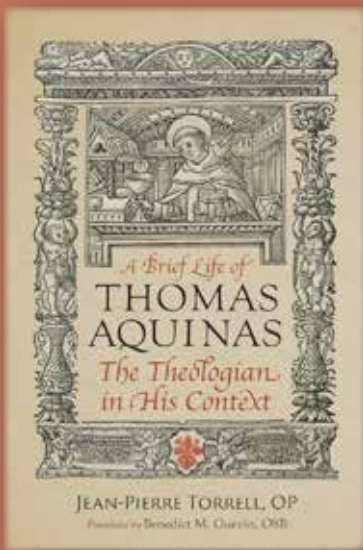
Park has a second criticism: that in its explanations the book elevates cultural power over political or economic power. That’s a fair criticism of the book’s bias, but it’s also a tricky question, because power of any kind is only really known when it is exercised and either rules or fails. When the head of the National Westminster Bank, Alison Rose, boasted about “de-banking” Nigel Farage because the bank didn’t wish to be associated with a vulgar Brexiteer, she exercised economic power she undoubtedly possessed. But that proved to be a broken reed against Farage whose cultural power rests on his reputation as the defender of the British public against establishment arrogance. She lost her job; he now has another populist arrow in his quiver. What the example illustrates is the vulnerability of the new establishment’s power where it is both seemingly powerful and especially aggressive—namely, in its ambition to replace taken-for-granted social mores, including language, by bureaucratic Newspeak that reflects or imposes new kinds of social relations. There are already popular revolts against such diktats.

PARK’S MAIN LINE OF ATTACK, HOWEVER, is to cite polling evidence of increasing progressivism in Britain over time that conflicts with Goodwin’s central argument.

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He then concedes (honestly): “that isn’t the picture you get from looking at election and referendum results. How to explain that difference?” And his explanation is “two-speed liberalization” under which different parts of Britain become more liberal at different speeds, thus generating electoral conflicts which progressives sometimes lose.

That’s possible, I suppose, but is it true? An equally plausible explanation is that voters are virtue signaling in polls but utility-maximizing when they vote. One could add the observation—demonstrated throughout Goodwin’s book—that many “progressive” reforms were installed by courts, agencies, and even governments against the apparent wishes of voters. My own pet theory is that the conflict Park highlights rests on how the words “progressive” and “liberal” are applied politically through time. As an old classical liberal myself, I’m happy enough to see Mrs. Thatcher’s labor and economic reforms praised as “economic liberalism.” But that was not how progressives described them at the time when they were denounced by the right (Left) people as “authoritarian.” Today the same program is called “modernization.”

And how does Park classify immigration policy? Progressives in and out of Labour are edging closer and closer to open borders in word and action—one of the most unpopular policies in democratic debate, and one that doesn’t seem to be losing any of its unpopularity in either the U.S. or the U.K. But it’s only one of several policies—critical race theory in primary schools, affirmative treatment of gender dysphoria, Net Zero, countering disinformation, etc., etc.—that progressives celebrate and that the incoming Labour government will pursue in some form, but that the counter-revolutionary populists will oppose tooth and nail. It therefore has the main requirement of a decent theory: it can and will be tested.

SO MUCH FOR GOODWIN’S CRITICS ON the left. The first question for Goodwin from the right is whether his counter-revolutionary class should rally around the Tories one more time or hope that they suffer a terminal defeat and rally round their strongest populist rival—currently the Reform Party. With all its qualifications, the thrust of Goodwin’s book is to go with the populist alternative. The well-known disadvantage with that approach is any new party without a record in government will be suspect to the voters (“extreme,” “no chance,” “who?”) whereas the Tories are a known quantity even if also a damaged brand. If the Tories obligingly disappear altogether in the coming election, voting Reform would be a realistic strategy. But if not, they and Reform will block each other’s way, divide the conservative electorate (poison in a two-party electoral system), and perhaps prolong the life of a Labour government that itself seems likely to be weak, extreme, unpopular, and winning only by default.

Goodwin’s critics on the right, especially those on the internet, agree with him that the Tories have let conservatives down, share his doubts that the Reform Party is up to the task of replacing it, and have picked up his occasional hints that he will in time outline a program for a successful insurgent conservatism. In the meantime, some advance programs of their own. One is Pete North, a veteran influential blogger on Substack under the name of Northern Variant, who has offered an entire manifesto, encompassing both philosophy and policy to the Reform Party. It’s a persuasive but bold and controversial program. Its flavor can be sensed in this brief excerpt:

The very idea of acting in the national interest is considered small and inward

looking. Most of our problems can be traced to a prevailing mind-set that holds democracy in contempt.

As such, the conflict of our times is that between international technocracy and national democracy. Ergo, Reform should stand in defence of national democracy, and for the restoration of real democracy—locally and nationally.

Such boldness, expressed in such simple rhetoric, needs time to persuade millions of voters, a task that would be easier if it came from a longstanding political party. Stephen Harper achieved that in Canada when he first divided conservatives into Tories and Reform, then reunited them in Canadian Party of Canada, and then went on to win three elections. Nigel Farage was aiming at a modest variant of that strategy when he offered an electoral pact to Boris Johnson that would have given a dozen or so M.P.s to Reform’s predecessor party. They would be useful allies today. But in 2019 the Tories drove a hard bargain, conceded nothing but got Farage’s populist votes anyway—and promptly squandered them.

For the moment, therefore, we are waiting for someone to emerge offering a set of policies grounded in a conservative political philosophy appealing to a majority coalition of voters built on Goodwin’s counter-revolutionary class after the election has cleared the ground. Nigel Farage? Goodwin? North? A resurgent Boris? Or whoever replaces Rishi Sunak as Tory leader after the election—already a crowded field?

But are we waiting for Godot?

John O’Sullivan is the president of the Danube Institute and a senior fellow of the National Review Institute.

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