

Trump's victory, Brexit and Paul Mason's call for a new "progressive alliance"

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16 November 2016

Seizing on the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as US President elect, prominent journalist Paul Mason has utilised his column in the *Guardian* to argue for a broad political realignment of the Labour Party and Britain's pseudo-left groups behind what he refers to as the "globalist section of the elite."

The linking of these two issues reflects the strategic thinking of a broad layer of the ruling class in Britain and throughout Europe.

Think-tanks and commentators across the continent understand that Trump's election, coming after Britain's exit from the European Union (EU), marks the definitive end of the post-war order and especially of the "monopolar" domination of US imperialism proclaimed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991—and poses an existential threat for the European bourgeoisie.

After noting Trump's statement made only days after the Brexit vote, "I think the EU is going to break up... the people are fed up," the European Council on Foreign Relations warned prior to the presidential election, "If Trump wins he will launch a revolutionary presidency—pulling back from NATO and other security guarantees, undermining key parts of the global free trade regime and building closer relations with strong-man leaders than allies."

The think-tank concludes, "Trump represents only an extreme version of a growing feeling in the United States that, in a time of relative decline, the country is getting a raw deal from its allies... Given the current direction of US politics, Europeans would be wise to take more proactive measures to visibly increase the burdens they bear within the alliance and their capacity for independent and cooperative action under the next US president—no matter who he or she is."

On November 2, the Carnegie Europe think tank asked a number of key policy figures, "Is America Still the Guardian of Transatlanticism?" Their predominant view was it is not. They then urged the European imperialist powers to pursue a more independent and especially militarily assertive role in the face of America's own more unilateral assertion of its own interests.

Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer of the German Marshall Fund of the United States wrote, "European leaders will have to demonstrate that beyond transactional burden sharing, the transatlantic partnership matters when it translates into real co-leadership, based on credible capabilities and unity in action."

Heather Conley, senior vice president for Europe, Eurasia and the Arctic, and director of the Europe Program at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, urged that "it is essential that Europe view itself as a co-guardian of transatlanticism and be increasingly prepared to sacrifice—economically, politically, and militarily—to defend the international liberal order."

What is being argued for is a European response to Trump's "America First" doctrine, which threatens to provoke an accelerated trade war and the possible fracturing of NATO. Such a response will necessitate European protectionism, stepped up austerity against the working class

and the possible creation of a European Army. President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has already insisted, "The idea that the Americans will eternally see to... European security is not true... We have to do it ourselves. And this is why we need a new approach to the European community of defence, including a European army."

However, this leaves the problem for the ruling elite as to who would support such a perspective for trade and military war if it were laid out honestly? The role played by Mason and others within Britain's pseudo-left and liberal commentariat is to dress up this strategic reorientation of imperialist policy in a progressive cloak, in an attempt to build a popular political base of support.

This appeal is pitched above all to upper middle class layers who see both Brexit and Trump's election as a threat to the comfortable and economically privileged position they enjoy. In return, they have serviced the economic needs of big business in a managerial role, or in various cultural and academic fields that have benefited from access to the Single Market and EU subventions. However, the appeal is also directed at students and other young people fearful for their own future and that of the UK. Utilising the racism, xenophobia and nationalism espoused by Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and by Trump in America, they urge the formation of an alliance with supposedly progressive sections of the British bourgeoisie.

In the process, one attack upon another is levelled against the supposedly "white," "male" and, more often than not, supposedly "working class" constituency of an emerging neo-fascist movement. It would be possible to cite extensively from numerous such pieces published in the *Guardian*, considered the voice of British liberalism. "Misogyny won the US election—let's stop indulging angry white men," writes Hadley Freeman, for example. She proclaims that "those who voted for Trump and Brexit did so to turn time back for their personal benefit, those who voted for remain or Hillary Clinton did so because they know time only moves forward, and this benefits society."

Mason's specific political use value is that he is embraced as one of their own by the pseudo-left in a way that Freeman, Polly Toynbee and other Blairite hacks are not. Moreover, he seeks to root his call for a new movement in defence of capitalism by alluding to the history of the British labour movement—above all the mass mobilisation to block a march by the British Union of Fascists (BUF) along Cable Street in London in 1936.

Mason published two articles on the same theme in quick succession.

The first came after the High Court ruled that Parliament must agree to invoking Article 50 beginning two years of negotiations over Brexit. The government is seeking to overturn this ruling and proceed on the basis of Royal Prerogative. In response, on November 7 in a *Guardian* piece entitled "Bond traders, Trots and Mumsnetters [UK parenting web site] must unite against Farage's mob," Mason urged a counter-protest against the UKIP leader's pledge to mobilise what Mason describes as "100,000 racists and xenophobes" to "march on the supreme court." He declares that political conflict is "no longer about leave versus remain, still less

Corbynistas versus the rest. ‘We’ should include everybody who wants this country to be run by parliament, with the judiciary guaranteeing the rule of law, to remain engaged with the multilateral, global institutions and be tolerant to migrants and foreign visitors.”

Mason calls for a “rhetorical break” (!) with neoliberalism, austerity, inequality, privatisation, financial corruption and asset bubbles—only then to insist, “It is entirely possible to construct a humane pro-business version of capitalism without these things.” Based on such a commitment to “humane” capitalism, he appeals for “an alliance of the left and the radical centre on the streets. That means bond traders from Canary Wharf, arm in arm with placard-carrying Trots. Masked-up Kurdish radicals alongside Mumsnet posters.”

Two days later, on November 9, following Trump’s victory, Mason was beside himself. “Globalisation is dead, and white supremacy has triumphed,” he proclaimed. He describes the result as a victory brought about by racism and misogyny—an attempt by men to preserve “40,000 years of biologically rigged social control” in an act of “gender betrayal.” On top of such supposedly near-universal misogyny was, he adds, a desire by Trump voters to “reimpose segregation on black America” through “the now-unleashed fury of white supremacism.”

Mason, in an American context, adapts his earlier appeal to one based upon “re-forming the political coalition that won both the New Deal and the second world war,” by which he means, “The left, the unions, the ethnic minorities; the liberal middle class; and that section of Wall Street and the US boardroom that is unprepared to lie supine as wannabe-Trumps put their ‘locker room talk’ into practice.”

The praise heaped on bond traders from Canary Wharf, Wall Street and the description of the “US Boardroom” as a haven of progressive political thought is extraordinarily blunt—and cannot be concealed by any number of historical references. However, it would be wrong to dismiss as political window dressing Mason’s reference to Cable Street.

His purpose in making a comparison between Leave supporters and Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists is the same as his depiction of millions of Trump voters as white supremacists—to stampede his readers into the camp of the “progressive bourgeoisie.”

Mason’s political prescriptions heighten rather than lessen the dangers posed by the growth of right-wing movements such as UKIP. For him to attack those Farage seeks to mobilise as equivalent to the Blackshirts, especially while urging an alliance with the political and business establishment, only lends credence to Farage’s demagogic portrayal of himself as an anti-establishment voice of the “people”—and will help solidify dangerous divisions in the working class. Though UKIP makes an appeal to a far right and racist layer, it is not a fascist party and has a voter base made up of disparate social forces, including layers of workers angry at a political establishment that is entirely beholden to big business and indifferent to the hardships they suffer.

This does not mean there is no real content to Mason’s reference to the Cable Street events of October 4, 1936. That day Mosley planned a BUF march through London’s East End, home to the largest proportion of Britain’s Jews. The fascists were forced to retreat by the determined resistance of anywhere between 100,000 and 300,000 overwhelmingly working class protesters. But this is not what attracts Mason. He closes his column with the cynical statement, “Eighty years on from Cable Street, we don’t have many dockers and miners around, to help face down right-wing intimidation.” Rather, his is a political endorsement of the popular front perspective of the Communist Party of Great Britain with which Cable Street is most often, and somewhat falsely, associated.

The CPGB opposed the demonstration against the BUF until the last moment. It had initially urged attendance at a Young Communist League rally, in solidarity with the Spanish Republic in Trafalgar Square, on the same afternoon as the fascist march. The counter-demonstration was also opposed by the Labour Party, with George Lansbury, MP for London’s

East End Poplar constituency and former party leader, speaking for the majority of the party when he declared, “What I want is to maintain peace and order and I advise those people who are opposed to Fascism to keep away from the demonstration.”

The CPGB subsequently hailed Cable Street as the “Popular Front in practice”—proof that the police, the state and progressive forces within the ruling class were the natural allies of the working class in the struggle against fascism, citing as evidence the passage of the 1936 Public Order Act outlawing demonstrations in uniform. In reality Cable Street was a battle between the police and anti-fascists, rather than with the fascists themselves. Police outnumbered the 3,000 fascists they were protecting by two to one and it was they whom the workers defeated that day. And once passed, the Public Order Act was employed far more often against the left than the right.

The Stalinist Popular Front perspective of class collaboration in defence of “democracy” was disastrous wherever it was employed. It led to the disarming of the revolutionary working class in Spain, the terrible defeat of the Spanish Revolution and the victory of General Franco’s Falange in 1938—paving the way for the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. After first endorsing the Hitler/Stalin pact, following the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany the CPGB dutifully came out in support of the war—opposed all strike action and even defended Conservative Party candidates when they were challenged by the centrist Independent Labour Party, declaring, “A vote for [ILP leader Fenner] Brockway is a vote for Hitler.”

Mason, who spent his formative political years in Workers Power, a group fond of citing Trotsky to legitimise its anti-Trotskyist politics, knows all this very well and is in full agreement with the political trajectory implied by his analogy.

The full implications of his politics are made clear in an October 7 edition of the pro-Labour *New Statesman*, in an article entitled, “How the left should respond to Brexit.” Its strapline declares, “It’s up to the labour movement to rescue the elite from the self-inflicted wound of Brexit.”

Mason’s appeal is directed at the Labour Party and its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, whom he declares to be “a man who, for the first time in the party’s history, cannot be relied on to do the elite’s bidding” to adopt “a strategy to salvage 30 years of engagement with the biggest market in the world,” Europe. He is explicit in his ambition for Labour to replace the Conservatives as the main party of big business. And his enthusiasm for the prospect knows no bounds.

“For the first time in a generation there is a tangible split between the Tory leadership and the business elite,” he writes, describing “the most important thing to emerge since the Tory conference” as “a deep revulsion, among wide sections of normally Conservative voters, at the xenophobia, nationalism and economic recklessness on display.”

“Brexit, on its own, need not have caused a great shift in British politics. It is the new, visceral split between Tory xenophobia and the implicitly liberal and globalist culture in most boardrooms that makes this a turning point,” he declares. “The crisis consists of the perils of hard Brexit combined with a tangible split between the old party of capital and capital itself. The elite—the bankers, senior managers, the super-rich and the upper middle class—do not want Brexit. Nor does a significant proportion of Middle Britain’s managerial and investing classes.”

Therefore, “The first aim should be: not just oppose hard Brexit, but prevent it... Labour needs to lead—intellectually, morally and practically—the fight for a coherent, pro-globalist form of Brexit.”

To finally bury any claim that his agenda has any progressive content, Mason takes pains to insist that this “pro-globalist” Brexit refers only to an orientation to international capitalist concerns and not workers. Making clear that his bombastic moralising over UKIP is without any genuine content, he stresses that any deal supported or struck by Labour with the EU must include “a significant, temporary retreat from freedom of

movement. That means—and my colleagues on the left need to accept this—that the British people, in effect, will have changed Labour’s position on immigration from below, by plebiscite.”

Mason ends with an appeal to “confront the ultimate demon: Labour must show willing to make an alliance with the globalist section of the elite... We, the labour movement, will dig the British ruling class out of a self-made hole, just as we did in May 1940.”

This final reference is the key to Mason’s anti-working class, pro-imperialist political agenda. It is to the formation of the wartime alliance, so beloved of the CPGB, between Labour and the Conservative government of Winston Churchill in which Labour and its Minister for Economic Warfare Hugh Dalton was charged with policing the working class, preventing strikes and ensuring that nothing interfered with “the war effort.”

Earlier this month, Mason appeared on the same platform as Corbyn at the annual conference of the trade union-funded think tank CLASS (The Centre for Labour and Social Studies) where he reiterated his appeal for Labour to “preserve globalisation, the multilateral system, the IMF, WTO, Paris Climate Change Treaty, exchangeable currencies.” He declared, “That’s what Labour Party is. It is the desire for a capitalism that is more humane... And that’s all it is.”

The working class, whether in Britain, the US or globally, must reject all calls for “progressive” alliances with any section of big business by political bankrupts such as Mason. Responsibility for the emergence of Trump and Farage rests with Mason’s “globalist” heroes on Wall Street and in The City, which demanded, and got, the imposition by the Democrats in America and Labour in the UK of savage austerity and escalating militarism. Political independence from these parties is the prerequisite for the socialist unification of workers and youth in a struggle against capitalism, which is the only basis for combating the growth of right-wing reaction.



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