



# A Narrowing of the British Conservative Mind?

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Published online: 18 March 2022

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## Abstract

The Brexit referendum in June 2016 was a momentous event in British politics. It was also highly significant in the evolution of British conservatism, bringing to the fore a ‘hard right’ tendency. The hard right has framed the result as the initial stage of a counter-revolution against the liberal elite that, it feels, dominates the UK’s key institutions. The rise of the hard right has concerned many, including even some conservatives, who see it as a nascent form of authoritarian populism. This commentary piece provides an overview of the fundamental narrative and ideas of the British hard right through some of its most prominent figureheads: Roger Scruton, Douglas Murray and Nigel Farage. It argues that while the hard right’s ideas are not new, they are in process of dominating the British conservative movement to an unprecedented degree. As a consequence, other strands of conservative thinking are being marginalised. The article concludes by suggesting that the British hard right may have hubristically overinterpreted the Brexit result and recent Conservative Party electoral successes in 2019 and 2021, and this has led to a narrowing of the British conservative mind.

**Keywords** Conservatism · Brexit · Culture war · Intellectuals · Media · Populism

‘I’ve been good at changing national narratives and I’ll go on changing national narratives’. Nigel Farage, GB News, Oct. 21, 2021<sup>1</sup>

## The Resurgent Right

While the British Conservative Party has had wildly fluctuating fortunes in recent years, the wider conservative movement has been much buoyed. The Brexit vote in 2016 and the

Conservative Party’s convincing victory in the 2019 general election have brought a surge of confidence,<sup>2</sup> most clearly seen in self-congratulatory YouTube discussions broadcast by the *Spectator* and other media outlets such as *Unherd* and *The New Culture Forum*. We are, it has been argued, witnessing a ‘new era of conservative dominance’<sup>3</sup> in British politics.

Among some on the right, the 2019 general election and the Brexit referendum provided confirmation that conservative values are those of the majority of the British people. Brexit, in particular, has taken on totemic significance as part of an attempt to roll back the influence of the liberal left on British politics and society. For Nigel Farage, Brexit was the ‘first step’ in ‘revolutionising’ Britain,<sup>4</sup> reversing some of the

<sup>1</sup> Nigel Farage, ‘The Tories resent me completely’, October 21, 2021: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLGq1a8OY\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLGq1a8OY_k), at 1.57.

<sup>2</sup> Heath, A. (2019) ‘Boris Johnson’s brilliant Brexit dream team proves that he is deadly serious’. *Daily Telegraph*, July 25th.

<sup>3</sup> Goodwin, M. (2021) ‘Labour pains’, *Times Literary Supplement*, December 24th.

<sup>4</sup> Nigel Farage, ‘I have to say I think the Conservative Party is in dire trouble’ says Nigel Farage, December 26, 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feXA3ffSYTc>, at 0.14.

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changes foisted on the British people by the ‘liberal metropolitan elite.’ The Brexit debates had, he and others argued, revealed the tenacity of the liberal elite but also that it was capable of being defeated.

It certainly seems a long way off from the apparent ‘crisis of conservatism’ in the early 2000s. The Conservative Party’s run of poor electoral performances suggested terminal decline<sup>5</sup> for the party and British conservatism more broadly. Geoffrey Wheatcroft’s *The strange death of Tory England* typified the mood.<sup>6</sup> Books by Roger Scruton and Peter Hitchens at the turn of the millennium pointed to a feeling of loss among cultural conservatives.<sup>7</sup> Scruton described his book as a tribute to ‘the civilisation that made me and which is now passing from the world.’ There was a pervasive sense that the values they sought to defend were being swept away and that there may be no way back.

Not all cultural conservatives were in such a pessimistic mood. Simon Heffer, biographer of Enoch Powell<sup>8</sup> and newspaper commentator, offered a route map for a conservative revival. Heffer believed, in 1999, that defending the ‘constitutional sovereignty of Westminster’ and responding to ‘public concerns about the nascent European superstate’ should be the initial theme of a conservative fighback. Alongside this there needed to be an attempt to deal with those ‘domestic institutions’ which had ‘fallen into disrepair.’<sup>9</sup> He believed that the Blair government was engaged in a ‘cultural revolution’ which conservatives needed to resist and reverse.<sup>10</sup>

Heffer’s perspective was marginal at the time; it is now far more prominent within the conservative movement. Heffer became a cheerleader for Nigel Farage crediting him, rather than any Conservative Party politicians for the rightward shift in the conservative movement and in British politics.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, Farage played a central role in turning ‘hostility to the EU from a cranky obsession into one of the great themes of our national life.’<sup>12</sup> This has given the conservative movement a sense that it is capable of changing the national narrative and turning back the tide of liberal wokeness.

<sup>5</sup> Gamble, A. (1995) ‘The crisis of conservatism’, *New Left Review*, No 214, pp. 1–23, Gamble, A. (2002) ‘Tory Blues’, *Renewal*, 10 (1): pp. 59–68. Garnett, M. & Lynch, P. (eds) (2003) *The Conservatives in crisis* (Manchester University Press).

<sup>6</sup> Wheatcroft, G. (2005) *The strange death of Tory England* (London: Penguin). See also: Worsthorne, P. (2001) ‘The slow death of Tory England’, *New Statesman*, June 25th.

<sup>7</sup> Scruton, R. (2001) *England: An Elegy* (London: Pimlico). Hitchens, P. (2000) *The abolition of Britain* (revised edition) (London: Quartet). see also: Leigh, E. (2005) *The strange desertion of Tory England* (London: Comerstone Group).

<sup>8</sup> Heffer, S. (1998) *Like the Roman: The life of Enoch Powell* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson).

<sup>9</sup> Simon Heffer, The right way forward?, BBC Radio 4, 1st October 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Heffer, S. (2000) *What Tories want* (London: Politeia), . Heffer, S. (2005) ‘Labour has left a scar on the soul of Britain’, *Daily Telegraph*, October 26th.

<sup>11</sup> Heffer, S. (2022) ‘One party after another’, *Daily Telegraph*, February 2nd.

<sup>12</sup> Sandbrook, D. (2022) ‘A joker who had the last laugh’, *Sunday Times*, February 6th.

Farage and Heffer are among those who hold a ‘hard right’ view, as outlined by Edmund Fawcett in his recent history of conservatism.<sup>13</sup> It is, I think, an apt label. At the very least, this strand of thought is a more undiluted form of conservatism. The hard right is prominent among conservative commentators and within the think tanks of the right. It also has a considerable presence within the Conservative Party, at the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary levels. In short, it represents a significant portion of the British conservative movement.

Fawcett defines the hard right as ‘an unstable tactical alliance of free market hyper-liberals and popular anti-liberals.’<sup>14</sup> While many do indeed see a fundamental contradiction between free markets and cultural conservatism,<sup>15</sup> the hard right themselves sees them as in harmony, not in ‘unstable’ tension. For them, the de-traditionalising forces in our society do not include the free market. This view is evident in concerns about ‘woke capitalism’. It is the values that the free market is being infused with that is the problem, not the free market itself. This explains why the hard right feel they must engage in a culture war. They must do so as gaining *political* power is not enough. Matthew Goodwin summarises this position in arguing that though the Conservative Party may ‘wield electoral power’, it holds ‘little social power’. The right has, Goodwin suggests, ‘lost every big culture war since the 1960s.’<sup>16</sup> Reversing this trend of defeat is the core project of the hard right in Britain today.

Is the political ideology driving this resurgence on the right actually conservatism? Fears have been expressed that the hard right ideology comes from beyond the conservative tradition. An apparent rightward shift has aroused deep concerns, not only among opponents of conservatism. The spectre of authoritarian populism has risen, a view articulated by Jonathan Freedland. He described Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party as ‘a populist nationalist movement railing against a hated elite’. Though undoubtedly ‘right wing’, it was ‘anything but conservative.’<sup>17</sup> More recently, Freedland has argued that Brexit has transformed the Conservatives ‘from a conservative party into a national-populist party.’<sup>18</sup>

Coming from a *Guardian* commentator such criticisms are to be expected but he is not alone. Andrew Gamble has been one of the leading analysts of the British right, tracking shifts in conservative ideas since Enoch Powell’s

<sup>13</sup> Fawcett, E. (2020) *Conservatism: The fight for a tradition* (Princeton University Press)

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 421.

<sup>15</sup> Gray, J. & Willets, D. (1997) *Is conservatism dead?* (London: Profile).

<sup>16</sup> Goodwin, M. (2020) ‘Left behind on the right’, *Sunday Times*, March 15th.

<sup>17</sup> Freedland, J. (2019) ‘How Brexit caused the strange death of British conservatism’, *Guardian*, June 8th.

<sup>18</sup> Freedland, J. (2022) ‘This scandal reveals a Conservative party corrupted by Boris Johnson – and by Brexit’, *Guardian*, January 21st. See also: Mount, F. (2019) ‘Boris Johnson and the Hollow Men’. *New Statesman*, 21–27 June.

‘articulation of a radical new vision’ which prioritised national identity and free markets, in the late 1960s.<sup>19</sup> Gamble sees a significant shift to the right in the UK in the present moment. The centre right, so long ‘a dominant political force’, in a number of European nations, is, Gamble believes, in retreat. It has, Gamble relates, historically played an important role in maintaining democratic norms, such as supporting key institutions in the law and media. In recent years the populist right has successfully been able to ‘paint’ centre-right parties as ‘part of the cosmopolitan elite’. Gamble sees the populist wave as based on a shallow view of democracy and politics and wonders whether, ‘if the insurgents continue to make ground’, we might see ‘the demise of the forces of moderation and the return to a new era of nationalism and authoritarianism.’<sup>20</sup> Such concerns have also been expressed by some on the right.

### The Spectre of Authoritarian Populism

In *Twilight of democracy* Anne Applebaum looks at the influence of a group of intellectuals who laid the groundwork for the radical right in Poland, the USA and the UK. She previously saw herself as on the centre-right, allied with those who believed that free market capitalism was the best way to ensure economic success and political liberty. She has watched in horror as many of her former centre-right acquaintances have, in her view, moved significantly further to the right. She now feels that the political right in a number of countries (including the USA, the UK, Hungary and Poland) has taken a lurch to something beyond conservatism. Some have, she believes, begun to embrace something with distinctly authoritarian characteristics.<sup>21</sup> In similar fashion Barbara Walter and others have warned about a backslide towards ‘anocracy,’ a transitional stage of government between democracy and autocracy in a number of countries previously considered beacons of democracy, including the USA.<sup>22</sup> For some commentators, what is fuelling this slide towards anocracy is rising right wing populism within the Republican Party.<sup>23</sup>

Such a fear has been expressed before. For some, Thatcherism was an aberration within British Conservatism,

especially in its iconoclastic attitudes to a number of British institutions.<sup>24</sup> However, evidence that the rise of the hard right represents a more radical departure from mainstream conservatism than Thatcherism can be found in recent comments by David Willetts. Willetts, a leading thinker within the British conservative, is concerned about the rise of the hard right and its propensity for culture wars.<sup>25</sup> He has had ‘moments’ of concern that British conservatism might go for ‘an all out assault on our national institutions’, but believes that threat has now passed. Willetts believes that the party is strong enough to confront rather than absorb the hard right tendency.<sup>26</sup> Many others do not share his optimism that the hard right ‘threat’ has passed.

### Reframing the Stampede to the Right

The hard right, of course, provides an alternative framing of this shift in British conservatism. The rightward move is a necessary step to counter what the hard right sees as an increasingly radical left. This view will be familiar to those who follow American conservatism. The recent NatCon2 conference (run by the Edmund Burke Foundation) saw speaker after speaker talk in apocalyptic terms regarding the spread of the ideas and influence of the radical left. As John O’Sullivan put it in his address, the conference was part of a movement which understood that ‘we are facing the long drawn out collective nervous breakdown of our entire civilisation.’<sup>27</sup> There was a concerted focus on identity politics, indicative of a shift away from a primary focus on the promotion of free market economics. There were repeated references to cultural Marxism, the idea that the left is using the institutions of Western societies to bring about a social revolution. Something similar has happened in the UK where free-market think tanks such as the IEA have shifted focus to cultural matters, such as debates over free speech, statues and the like.

In the UK, this hard right view is associated with Nigel Farage in the realm of party politics. In terms of public intellectuals, foremost are Roger Scruton and his acolytes, most notably Douglas Murray,<sup>28</sup> someone who bridges the British and American conservative scene.<sup>29</sup> Scruton has become

<sup>19</sup> Gamble, A. (2021) *The Western ideology* (Bristol University Press), p. 7. See also: Gamble, A. (1974) *The Conservative nation* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

<sup>20</sup> Gamble, A. (2018) ‘True Blues’, *Prospect*, July. See also: Bale, T. & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (eds) (2021) *Riding the populist wave Europe’s mainstream right in crisis* (Cambridge University Press).

<sup>21</sup> Applebaum, A. (2020) *Twilight of democracy* (London: Penguin).

<sup>22</sup> Walter, B. (2022) *How civil wars start and how to stop them* (New York: Penguin).

<sup>23</sup> Brooks, D. (2020) ‘The rotting of the Republican mind’, *New York Times*, November 26th.

<sup>24</sup> Grant, W. (1989) ‘The erosion of intermediary institutions’, *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No 1, pp. 10–21.

<sup>25</sup> Willetts, D. (2021) ‘Thatcherism and Brexit as political projects’, *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 3, pp. 428–435.

<sup>26</sup> Willetts, D. (2021) ‘Back to basics’, *Prospect*, April.

<sup>27</sup> John O’Sullivan, ‘Why internationalism needs nation-states’, November 30, 2021: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kfv\\_npjE00M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kfv_npjE00M), at 1.13.

<sup>28</sup> Murray, D. (2020) ‘Roger Scruton: A man who seemed bigger than the age’, *Spectator*, January 12th.

<sup>29</sup> see: Douglas Murray, ‘Reflections on the revolution in America’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CR4f59SWk&t=1152s>

something of a conservative lodestar with a number of political commentators viewing him as a key voice. His rich and elegant writing on a range of cultural topics has brought prestige to the conservative movement. Through the Conservative Philosophy Group and in editing the *Salisbury Review*, he articulated hard right views in the 1980s, when he felt his brand of conservatism was neglected.

His death in 2020 saw him praised by many in British public life and lionised by many within the conservative movement.<sup>30</sup> Two centres were founded in his honour.<sup>31</sup> Though a significant conservative voice for over 40 years, Scruton's influence now seems greater than ever, including among conservatives beyond the UK.<sup>32</sup> Scruton has a similar position within the conservative movement as Allan Bloom, whose *The closing of the American mind* is alluded to in the title of this commentary. Bloom's book became a surprising best seller and he is regularly eulogised by cultural conservatives. Both Bloom and Scruton have become key figures in the counter-attack against the liberal left. Both believed that the trends in the universities were symptoms of a wider cultural malaise and contained the seeds of 'a new kind of absolutism.'<sup>33</sup> A similar sense of threat also pervades Douglas Murray's thought.

Murray embodies a type of conservatism which is very comfortable in the public sphere and which delights in the pugilistic aspects of political debate. In his book *Neoconservatism*, first published in 2005, Murray argued that conservatives need to abandon their resistance to change and embrace a conservatism with a more radical edge. Murray believed that defending the status quo was no longer a strategy that conservatives could follow: 'because the status quo has changed, because the status quo is no longer conservative, conservatives must seek to change the status quo.'<sup>34</sup> There are a number of conservatives with a similarly harder edge to their approach and a desire to be combative in their interventions. The hard right considers itself to be an insurgent force, decried by the liberal establishment, battling to save Western societies from the onslaught of the 'woke' radical left.

## Popular Populism

Murray fundamentally rejects the idea that populism is something to be denounced. He sees it as a word used 'pejoratively'

<sup>30</sup> Hannan, D. (2020) 'Roger Scruton was the greatest conservative thinker of our age', *Daily Telegraph*, January 18th. Grant, M. (2021) 'Roger Scruton was the voice of meaning in a rudderless world', *Daily Telegraph*, January 10th.

<sup>31</sup> The Roger Scruton Centre for the Study of Western Civilisation and The Roger Scruton Legacy Foundation.

<sup>32</sup> He was recently invoked by leading Republican Ron DeSantis in a speech in which he talked about the 'vicious ideology' of 'wokeness'. <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/491325-ron-desantis-vows-to-stamp-out-the-vicious-ideology-of-wokeness/>

<sup>33</sup> Scruton, R. (2015) 'The end of the university', *First Things*, April.

<sup>34</sup> Murray, D. (2006) *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It* (New York: Encounter), p. xiv.

by the left to 'decry anything you do not like.'<sup>35</sup> There is credence to Murray's allegation that populism is a catch-all word, used rather indiscriminately. This echoes the use of the term neoliberal, often applied to different things and with inexact meanings.<sup>36</sup> For Murray, the 'media and political class' use the word populism to de-legitimise ideas which are simply just popular. In short, it's a way to say that 'the people' have 'got it wrong'. The resultant 'fear of the public' as a 'lynch mob in waiting', Murray alleges, pervades much political discourse. Murray here articulates a key theme of a gulf in world-view between the political class and the public. While the European publics 'have been stampeding to the right', the political and media class were, 'almost in response . . . stampeding to the left.'<sup>37</sup>

What is needed to bridge this chasm is to realise Scruton's hopes to 'restore conservatism to the Conservative Party.'<sup>38</sup> From this perspective, any electoral setback suffered by the Conservative Party can be traced to it being insufficiently conservative.<sup>39</sup> Farage believes that, having become broadly social democratic in character under David Cameron's leadership, the party 'only came to its senses and became conservative again' due to 'an insurgency in British politics'.<sup>40</sup> This insurgency came from his UK Independence Party, which, through its strong showing in European Parliament Elections, forced the Conservatives to embrace Brexit. While Farage argues that the wider membership of the Conservative Party remains conservative in outlook, the current leadership is drifting away from such principles and is 'not conservative in any way at all.'<sup>41</sup> Farage has warned the Conservatives that a similar 'revolt on the right' is brewing and that the only way to rein it in is by truly embracing conservative values on economic and cultural matters.<sup>42</sup>

## Culture War Conservatism

The narrative of a liberal elite capture of the institutions is central to spokespersons of the hard right. This concern about the ideas percolating through the media and higher education

<sup>35</sup> Douglas Murray. 'Can Europe survive the new wave of populism?' May 8 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vm2jTm2U6wE>, at 9.16.

<sup>36</sup> Turner, R. (2007) 'The 'rebirth of liberalism': The origins of neo-liberal ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12 (1), pp. 67–83.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas Murray, 'Douglas Murray - The people and the elites'. November 22, 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=789WYIMfDS>

<sup>38</sup> Phillips, M. (2020) 'Scruton knew the precious value of freedom', *Times*, January 14th.

<sup>39</sup> Murray, D. (2001) 'Why would any true conservative vote for this soft-Left bunch of eco-extremist, Tory statists?', *Daily Telegraph*, June 19th.

<sup>40</sup> Nigel Farage, 'This is not the Conservative Party - It's Blue Labour', September 9, 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bthV44dGTz0>, at 0.51.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, at 5.44.

<sup>42</sup> Farage, N. (2022) 'A revolt on the Right is brewing — and I'm ready to be part of it', *Daily Telegraph*, January 7th.



has long been a concern of Scruton's. In *Thinkers of the new left* he critiqued a range of Marxist and socialist intellectuals.<sup>43</sup> This book was, according to Scruton, 'subjected to fierce abuse'<sup>44</sup> in the press and in sections of academia. As a result of publishing the book, Scruton felt he was subsequently ostracised by many in the universities.

In a 1988 essay on 'The left establishment,' Scruton reflected on research conducted by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* which revealed that only 16% of academics in the UK voted Conservative in the 1987 General Election.<sup>45</sup> He saw the emergence of a 'full scale left-establishment' at the very time when socialist ideas were, in his view, losing credibility across the world. Scruton believed that left-wing dominance in academia posed serious dangers as this 'intellectual establishment'<sup>46</sup> had great influence on what was taught in the universities and schools. In short there was much scope for indoctrination.<sup>47</sup> Murray sees whole swathes of the humanities full of tenured academics 'basically expressing a culturally Marxist view of the world'. According to Murray, the 'only place you can find open, radical Marxists—after the Cold War closing—is in the university system.'<sup>48</sup> This is why the character of academia is such a central theme for the hard right. John Anderson, in conversation with Murray, outlined that the universities are so important because what 'filters out' from academia are ideas taken on by those who teach our children, the media etc.' These ideas end up in 'all sorts of influential places', including the boardrooms which have become 'centres of great wokeness.'<sup>49</sup>

The hard right tends to portray itself as a marginalised group. This aspect of conservatism has been present for some time. Writing in 1979, Andrew Gamble noted that many conservatives had 'transformed from natural defenders of British institutions into frequent outsiders and critics.'<sup>50</sup> Many within the hard right feel that their voice is marginalised in leading institutions and within British intellectual life more generally. Matthew Goodwin, reflecting on Scruton's passing, regretted the absence of conservative thinkers in Britain's public discourse.<sup>51</sup> This is a concern shared by Murray for whom it is essential that conservative thinkers play a leading role in

'rebalancing' public life and public debate. Further, it was the job of a Conservative government to 'ensure that the cultural winds begin to blow the other way'—that is, away from the values of the left. A priority is to get those of a conservative persuasion 'placed' into 'positions of responsibility'.<sup>52</sup> Only then can a rebalancing take place.

Some argue that, due to the hard right's influence, this rebalancing is already well underway. The *Financial Times* recently talked of a 'concerted campaign' to 'reset the balance of opinion at the top of Britain's cultural and media institutions' through an 'aggressive approach to board appointments.'<sup>53</sup> Gaby Hinscliff sees such moves as part of a 'broader and more audacious attack on liberal institutions'<sup>54</sup> with conservative critiques of the BBC being seen as part of this.<sup>55</sup> For the hard right, such attempts to rebalance are long overdue but the left's stranglehold on these institutions will take decades to loosen.

This narrative about the liberal elite is one which has been formed over several decades. It began to take root in the conservative movement in the 1960s as fears spread of rising political radicalism and the so-called permissive society. It was articulated by public figures such as Malcolm Muggeridge, in many ways a forerunner of today's conservative commentators.<sup>56</sup> Scruton himself 'converted' to conservatism in 1968 in response to the 'prevailing ethos of rebellion.'<sup>57</sup> The narrative had been honed and polished and was there ready to be deployed in political debate. It provides the backbone of much conservative commentary. It is now so common to critiques of the BBC and the universities that its ubiquity masks the fact that it is a highly contestable narrative. There is little doubt that the notion of a liberal elite has a secure place in the public mind and in political discourse. This means that conservative commentators can draw on this bank of shorthand expressions ('liberal elite', 'cultural Marxism', 'wokery', 'the radical left,' etc.) in their writing and media appearances. Their interventions may lack 'nuance' but these 'plausible simplicities', to use Crick's term,<sup>58</sup> can be highly effective. The Brexit campaign and its result displayed the effectiveness of such a mode of politics.

<sup>43</sup> Scruton, R. (1985) *Thinkers of the new left* (London: Longman).

<sup>44</sup> Scruton, R. (1988) 'The left establishment', *The Salisbury Review*, December.

<sup>45</sup> Detailed in: Halsey, A. H. (1992) *The decline of donnish dominion* (London: Clarendon).

<sup>46</sup> Scruton, R. (1988) 'The left establishment', *The Salisbury Review*, December.

<sup>47</sup> Scruton, R., Ellis-Jones, A., & O'Keeffe, D. (1985) *Education and indoctrination* (London: Sherwood).

<sup>48</sup> John Anderson. 'Conversations: Featuring Douglas Murray'. January 10, 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYaYk09kEDs>, at 23.50.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, at 27.07.

<sup>50</sup> Gamble, A. 'The Conservative Party', in Drucker, H. M. (ed) (1979) *Multi-party Britain* (London: Macmillan), p. 45.

<sup>51</sup> Goodwin, M. (2020) 'Left behind on the right', *Sunday Times*, March 15th.

<sup>52</sup> Murray, D. (2020) 'Where are all the conservative thinkers who should be rebalancing public life?', *Daily Telegraph*, February 9th.

<sup>53</sup> 'Museum chair quits as Downing Street steps up 'cultural cleansing' campaign', *Financial Times*, May 1st 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Hinscliff, G. (2021) 'Is Boris Johnson really going to sacrifice arts degrees for the Conservative cause?', *Guardian*, 20th May.

<sup>55</sup> Toynbee, P. (2022) 'The BBC must defend itself with all its might against this mortal threat', *Guardian*, January 16th.

<sup>56</sup> See his discussion with William F. Buckley on 'The culture of the left: Firing line with William F. Buckley', Jr. Episode 091, Recorded on February 26, 1968: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg\\_wQGT0Utg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg_wQGT0Utg)

<sup>57</sup> Scruton, R. (2000) *The meaning of conservatism*, 3rd edition (London: Palgrave), p. vii.

<sup>58</sup> Crick, B. (2005) 'Populism, politics and democracy', *Democratization*, Vol.12, No.5, pp. 625–632.

## Optimistic Pessimism

What runs through the thought of the hard right is a deep pessimism. For Applebaum, this ‘apocalyptic pessimism’<sup>59</sup> is what distinguishes contemporary conservatism from a more optimistic vision found in the period following the end of the Cold War. This optimistic outlook was centred around the desire to spread economic and political liberty through parts of the world which had been under authoritarian rule. Applebaum argues that in portraying the current situation as a deep crisis, the hard right is able to justify some degree of authoritarianism.

The deep pessimism about the survival of Western culture and values found in the work of Scruton and Murray does connect their work with a significant strand of conservative thought. It was a prominent aspect of many of the intellectuals associated with the British New Right in the 1970s. Figures such as Keith Joseph, Enoch Powell, Max Beloff and Paul Johnson believed that the economic and social crisis in the 1970s was a product of collectivist thinking.<sup>60</sup> Hence, their preference for free markets was far more than a question of political economy. Similarly, their profound Euroscepticism was more than simply a concern about the ‘democratic deficit’. They saw the European Union as a collectivist project, connected to other unwelcome progressive trends.<sup>61</sup>

Writing in 1978, Bernard Crick noted the increasing prominence of the ‘catastrophe men’ who, in their ‘Right-wing scare books’, were ‘preaching (like inverted Marxists) that the whole system will collapse if their nostrums are not adopted.’<sup>62</sup> In the 1970s, groups such as the National Association for Freedom and the Institute for the Study of Conflict played a role in propagating the narrative that British freedom and liberty were under threat, both from the Soviet Union and from enemies of freedom within.<sup>63</sup> There is certainly a degree of catastrophising in the outlook of the hard right, a sense of imminent danger. For example, Murray’s concerns about excessive immigration have apocalyptic overtones, as do his general fears about threats to European culture.<sup>64</sup> His fears connect him to figures of the past such as Enoch Powell. A. O. Hirschman, in his classic study of conservative modes of argumentation, delineated between perversity, jeopardy and futility. In hard right thinking, the

‘jeopardy’ aspect is dominant. The radical left is, they argue, putting western societies in serious jeopardy.<sup>65</sup>

## Overreach?

The hard right tends to revel in criticisms from the left and the centre-right. Opprobrium from such quarters merely serves to illustrate that ‘the establishment’ disapproves. But who is there to act as a cautioning voice? When will the hard right know it has gone too far? Has Brexit and the 2019 General Election gone to the hard right’s head?

The hard right’s embrace of ‘lockdown scepticism’ could be seen as such an example of possible overreach. The position has been expressed by most hard right commentators and thinkers. Daniel Hannan and others have attempted to graft lockdown scepticism to the preexisting hard right narrative of a ‘dirigiste’ liberal establishment. Connecting it with Brexit and the culture wars, he alleges that ‘irreconcilable Remainers and wokesters’ have been the most enthusiastic supporters of harsh lockdowns.<sup>66</sup> Within the parliamentary Conservative Party, lockdown scepticism has been articulated by the Covid Recovery Group, many of the members of which are also part of the highly Eurosceptic ERG.<sup>67</sup> These groups represent the parliamentary wing of the British hard right.

Lockdown scepticism is an agenda which has been actively pursued by many associated with the *Spectator*, *Telegraph*, GB News and Talk Radio. It has drawn elements of the hard right towards the conspiratorial fringes, such as *Breitbart News* and *Spectator* journalist James Delingpole. Such arguments connect with a general hard right scepticism about expertise and the university establishment. The lockdown sceptic position has gained significant traction within the conservative movement but has not achieved great support beyond.<sup>68</sup> This seems problematic for a hard right which often indulges in *argumentum ad populum*. It suggests that the ‘libertarian’ aspect of the hard right does not have a high degree of popularity, in contrast to its more overtly cultural stances. The example of the broadcaster Piers Morgan is illustrative here. He has been a prominent critic of the lockdown sceptics but he is also someone who articulates hard right views in relation to cultural matters. His recent book articulates a number of hard right themes in relation to the culture war; even the title *Wake up* echoes an earlier hard right polemic: *Wake up Britain!* by the historian and commentator Paul Johnson.<sup>69</sup> When the hard

<sup>59</sup> Applebaum, A. (2020) *Twilight of democracy* (London: Penguin), p. 165.

<sup>60</sup> Beloff, M. (1978) *The tide of collectivism- Can it be turned?* (London: CPC). Johnson, P. (1977) *Enemies of society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson). Powell, J. E. (1972) *Still to decide* (London: Batsford). Denham, A. & Garnett, M. (2001) *Keith Joseph* (London: Acumen).

<sup>61</sup> Beloff, M. (1996) *Britain and European Union dialogue of the deaf* (London: Macmillan).

<sup>62</sup> Crick, B. (1978) ‘The Right’s catastrophe’, *Guardian*, April 13th.

<sup>63</sup> Moss, R. (1977) *The collapse of democracy* (revised edition) (London: Abacus).

<sup>64</sup> Murray, D. (2017) *The strange death of Europe* (London: Bloomsbury).

<sup>65</sup> Hirschman, A. O. (1991) *The rhetoric of reaction* (London: Becknap).

<sup>66</sup> Hannan, D. (2022) ‘The PM deserves praise for keeping Britain open and the recovery on track’, *Sunday Telegraph*, January 16th.

<sup>67</sup> Parker, G. (2021) ‘Tory MP warns of revolt if Boris Johnson does not axe Covid curbs’, *Financial Times*, January 9th.

<sup>68</sup> <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/01/05/brits-support-national-lockdown-jan-2021>

<sup>69</sup> Johnson, P. (1994) *Wake up Britain!: A latter-day pamphlet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson).

right fails to achieve popularity, it is in danger of sliding into what the commentator Sunder Katwala terms ‘unpopulism.’<sup>70</sup>

## Distillation

There is little doubt that the hard right has achieved prominence due to its disciplined and coordinated approach to politics. It has a sense of clarity of purpose. Its focus on institutions is also very effective as it provides a steady drip of stories and talking points. Given the size of institutions such as the EU, the Civil Service and the BBC, there will always be something happening which supports a chosen political narrative. An example would be Boris Johnson’s contribution as the *Telegraph’s* Brussels’ correspondent in the early 1990s, where he played a significant role in the formation of the Eurosceptic narrative.<sup>71</sup> There will always be extreme or ridiculous ideas expressed by somebody, somewhere in such institutions. The media savvy hard right is adept at identifying examples of ‘wokery’ and connecting them to their well-established narrative. The *Telegraph’s* ‘Beebwatch’ campaign, which linked examples of the BBC’s misdeeds to a wider critique of liberal culture in Britain’s key institutions, is a classic of this genre.<sup>72</sup>

Recent years have seen the rise to prominence of a phalanx of confident young conservative commentators, all expressing hard right views.<sup>73</sup> They are plugged into the web of free market and conservative think tanks and media organisations. They are far from marginal figures; some have a high profile in ‘the mainstream media.’ This suggests that the hard right will retain if not strengthen its dominance of what Jacobs and Townsley term the opinion space, especially within the conservative movement.<sup>74</sup> These young commentators deify the likes of Scruton, Farage and Murray. The repetitiveness of their message is part of its strength. They generally perform well in media debates, their clear positions helping them prevail over those with less well-honed positions and talking points.

Consistency through distillation is fundamentally what is so effective about the hard right narrative. In tough political crucibles such as the television or radio studio, being able to express your position succinctly is highly effective. A few phrases (‘liberal elite’, ‘political correctness gone mad’,

‘unaccountable Brussels bureaucrats’, ‘the wokerati’) summon up narratives cultivated over decades. Opponents wishing to counteract such arguments would need to do a lot of unpacking, something unsuited to broadcast media, where time is limited. Suggesting that ‘it’s more complicated than that’ is not generally a successful strategy in such an environment.

The crucible of social media has only served to highlight the effectiveness of such political shorthand. Farage has himself argued that Brexit and the wider success of the populist right has been greatly assisted by social media, which have allowed voices from outside the political mainstream to bypass the traditional media gatekeepers.<sup>75</sup> In this context, the consistency of critique and the uniformity of rhetoric employed by the hard right are a strength not a weakness. This all suggests that the hard right is likely to remain a significant presence in UK politics. In short, as Trilling puts it, ‘Faragism’ will long outlast the political career of Farage himself,<sup>76</sup> as Trumpism will outlast Trump.<sup>77</sup> Both men have indelibly marked the politics of their respective countries.

In January 2022, the Conservative government, led by Boris Johnson, was engulfed by the ‘partygate’ scandal. This concerned social gatherings of government staff held during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, when public health restrictions that prohibited most gatherings were in force. It was notable when the allegations appeared, hard right themes again came to the fore. Some on the right saw the scandal as part of an attempt by the civil service, the mainstream media and other parts of ‘the establishment’ to bring down the Prime Minister who had delivered Brexit.<sup>78</sup> The government’s own response was the so-called Red meat strategy focused on BBC (a freeze of its licence fee) and on immigration in an attempt to shore up support within the Conservative Party backbenches, where the hard right is prominent. While some saw the strategy as panicky and desperate,<sup>79</sup> it is a testament to the way that the hard right has succeeded that its core themes were seen as the most likely to keep the party together and the leadership in place.

## Monomania

Yet, this tendency to revert constantly to the same themes may serve to weaken conservatism as an intellectual force and its

<sup>70</sup> Aaronovitch, D. (2022) ‘Far-right conspiracists loved the Savile smear’, *Times*, February 10th.

<sup>71</sup> Rankin, J. & Waterson, J. (2021) ‘How Boris Johnson’s Brussels-bashing stories shaped British politics’, *Guardian*, July 14th.

<sup>72</sup> Moore, C. (2003) ‘Time to watch the BBC bias that costs each of us £116 a year’, *Daily Telegraph*, September 9th.

<sup>73</sup> They include: Steven Edginton, Calvin Robinson, Madeline Grant, Sherelle Jacobs, Darren Grimes, Emma Webb, Tom Harwood, Dominique Samuels, Chloe Westley, Emily Hewertson.

<sup>74</sup> Jacobs, R.N. and Townsley, E. (2011) *The space of opinion: Media intellectuals and the public sphere* (New York: Oxford University Press).

<sup>75</sup> Nigel Farage, ‘Social media: The new battleground for free speech’, January 29, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxKIKhsXAS>

<sup>76</sup> Trilling, D. (2019) ‘This election may be the end of Farage but not of Faragism’, *Guardian*, November 18th.

<sup>77</sup> Caldwell, C. (2020) ‘The movement that backed Trump is here to stay’, *Financial Times*, November 7th.

<sup>78</sup> Tominey, C. (2022) ‘This could be the moment the establishment finally takes down Boris Johnson’, *Daily Telegraph*, January 26th.

<sup>79</sup> O’Grady, S. (2022) ‘Boris Johnson’s Operation Red Meat is just an act of desperation’, *Independent*, January 19th.

ability to govern effectively. Though most members of the hard right consider themselves proud Thatcherites, they overlook the extent to which her cabinets and policy teams contained figures from a variety of conservative strands. As Matthew Parris has convincingly argued, Thatcherism was formed in part by those who were not her ‘ideological soulmates.’ A number of these were One Nation ‘wets’ who generated some of her Government’s ‘greatest successes.’ This was a story which ‘defies theorists who seek a pure doctrinal thread to trace back through the years.’<sup>80</sup> A lack of ‘viewpoint diversity’ seems to threaten the intellectual health of British conservatism.

What is unprecedented is not the hard right’s existence but its prominence. This has been achieved through a disciplined and effective media strategy, building on the groundwork of hard right thinkers of previous generations. Other conservative strands seem muted and lacking in media profile. This gives a sense of narrowness to contemporary conservatism. The ‘purge’ of 21 Conservative MPs in September 2019 (over Brexit) robbed the party of some of its intellectually diverse and more able figures, such as Rory Stewart. More broadly the way that substantial figures within the recent history of the party have been traduced seems narrow minded. Due to their opposition to Brexit, figures such as John Major, Michael Heseltine and Kenneth Clarke are dismissed by Farage et al. as part of the ‘fanatical Europhile’<sup>81</sup> establishment. Robert B. Talisse has recently expressed concerns about ‘belief polarisation’ within the Republican Party, with those who do not share Trump’s views dismissed as ‘Republicans In Name Only.’ For Talisse, to ensure a healthy party that seeks to build a broad coalition, ‘partisans need to take steps to welcome dissent within their groups.’<sup>82</sup> A similar move towards ideological conformity seems well under way within the British conservative movement.

The hard right also claims that its opponents are divorced from reality, trapped in their liberal metropolitan bubble. It is argued that the Labour Party, increasingly dominated by university-educated progressives, is culturally adrift from the rest of the country.<sup>83</sup> However, what is characteristic of the conservative media in the UK is their internalised character. Conservative media channels like to emphasise the civilised character of their discussions but this is easy to achieve when those involved are ‘singing from the same hymn sheet.’ There is a sense of the hard right boxing themselves into their *own* filter bubble, not

really engaging with alternative viewpoints. They are doing exactly what they allege their left-wing adversaries are doing.

The hard right’s prominence in the British media also serves to exaggerate how widely its views are held. It is a common allegation against the left that it treats Twitter as an accurate reflection of the national debate; instead, as David Cameron put it after the 2015 General Election, ‘Britain and Twitter are not the same thing.’<sup>84</sup> Similarly, though hard right views are repeatedly expressed in the British media, it is not clear that this is reflective of a wide acceptance of such a view in the electorate. GB News was launched in June 2021. Despite assurances from its key figurehead Andrew Neil that the TV station would promote a range of voices,<sup>85</sup> it has increasingly become dominated by the hard right. The poor ratings for GB News might suggest that the appetite for the hard right view is not that strong.<sup>86</sup>

The hard right may discover that the fervour it feels is not that widely shared. The truth may be that the culture war and ‘war on woke’ it is trying to fight is something of a ‘mirage’ and lacks resonance beyond the conservative core.<sup>87</sup> The ‘cultural turn’ may eat away at the Conservative Party’s ability to maintain a broad coalition, which has been key to its electoral success. The hard right’s strength derives from its unshakable confidence in the validity of its core narrative. Not for 1 minute is there any scepticism as to whether a cultural revolution is happening. The evidence it provides for the ‘woke’ takeover tends to be the views of other hard right commentators. It means that conservative commentary is largely a form of reiteration. Much of the output of contemporary conservative commentators reads like regurgitations of the likes of Paul Johnson fulminating in the *Spectator* against ‘liberal fascism’ and ‘academic aids’ (his term for political correctness) 30 years ago.<sup>88</sup> Such monomania surely has its dangers.

A common feature of media in the USA has been the monologue. This trend has been embraced by conservatives in the UK in recent years, with Andrew Neil an early adopter.<sup>89</sup> GB News, the station set up by Neil (but now disowned by him<sup>90</sup>), has an increasingly hard right disposition. Its

<sup>80</sup> Parris, M. (2004) ‘Remember, it took the Wets to make Thatcher what she was’, *Times*, May 1st.

<sup>81</sup> Nigel Farage, ‘Bitter and twisted’ John Major’s reputation and credibility ‘starting to decline’, November 7th 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYvva-H8Y9A>, at 0.26.

<sup>82</sup> Talisse, R. B. (2021) ‘What today’s GOP demonstrates about the dangers of partisan conformity’, *The Conversation*, June 25th.

<sup>83</sup> Goodhart, D. (2017) *The road to somewhere* (London: Penguin).

<sup>84</sup> David Cameron. BBC News. Cameron: ‘Britain and Twitter are not the same thing’, October 7th 2015: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-34462075>

<sup>85</sup> Neil, A. (2021) ‘Why I’m backing new TV station news channel for Britain’, *Sunday Express*, February 7th.

<sup>86</sup> Ball, J. (2021) ‘As GB News’ ratings collapse, who is it actually for?’, *New Statesman*, July 16th.

<sup>87</sup> Mance, H. (2021) ‘Britain’s culture war is not really taking place’, *Financial Times*, May 23rd.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson, P. (1991) ‘The liberal fascists ride high’, *Spectator*, October 19th.

<sup>89</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/andrew-neil-monologue-london-attack-this-week-bbc\\_uk\\_58d4cde4e4b03787d356e007](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/andrew-neil-monologue-london-attack-this-week-bbc_uk_58d4cde4e4b03787d356e007)

<sup>90</sup> Chilton, L. (2021) ‘Andrew Neil brands GB News a ‘Ukip tribute band’ and says it was a ‘huge mistake’ joining’. *Independent*, November 18th.



presenters regularly give monologues. Monologues are certainly an effective way to communicate directly with an audience. However, they also illustrate a tendency for the hard right to engage only with a narrow range of voices and perspectives. As Fawcett's recent book on conservatism illustrates, the hard right represents just part of the rich and varied conservative tradition. This diversity has, historically, enabled British conservatism to adapt and evolve.<sup>91</sup> However, the hard right's success in the opinion space threatens to drown out other conservative voices. Brexit, driven by the hard right, has had a huge impact on British politics. One of its effects may have been to produce a narrowing of the British conservative mind.

**Acknowledgements** The author would like to thank Daniel Gordon for his very helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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<sup>91</sup> Eccleshall, R. (2000) 'The doing of conservatism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 5 (3), pp. 275–287. Gamble, A. (2021) *After Brexit and other essays* (Bristol University Press).