

Forum: ‘First They Came for the Socialists (USHMM)’ ... Reflections on the UK Parliamentary Elections 2019

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Introduction

My family’s background convinced me at an early age of the need to be vigilant to any signs of fascism emerging in societies and in this regard social workers and social work educators face additional ethical and moral challenges. As I have argued elsewhere social work simply reflects the values of the society in which it takes places.

In 1942, for example, social workers in Vichy France worked in the Vel’ d’Hiv transition camps for Jewish adults and children awaiting deportation (Munday 2015). In South Africa from the beginnings of social work until the democratic elections of 1994, all professional education, practices, and services took place within the apartheid system and policies (Smith, 2014) (Petrie, 2019, p.336).

During the last five years I have become increasingly concerned that conditions emerging in the UK mirrored many social and economic aspects of Germany in the 1930s that led to the rise of Nazism (Petrie 2014, 2016). The recent parliamentary elections in the UK have increased my concerns and seem to share some characteristics

evident in the USA in the build-up to the presidential elections in 2020.

My family’s background

I was born in England shortly after WWII but only learned about fascism and its consequences as a young teenager. My mum was a German war bride and my dad a British soldier. I grew up knowing there had been a war between Germany and Britain, but few details were shared as my parents, like most people, were glad the war was over and looked to the future not the past. As a child I spent long periods with my mum at her family home and my maternal relatives were very familiar to me. We were not wealthy but in comparison to my mum’s family in post-war Germany we were safe and secure under the post war UK Welfare State.

When I was about 13 or 14 at home in England, I saw footage of the concentration camps on TV. I don’t know why I was alone or what I saw although I suspect it was the trial of Adolf Eichmann. I was horrified and wept and wept. I could not believe my grandparents, aunts and uncles, who seemed perfectly normal people, could have let this happen. My parents had no easy answers although my dad told me it was the British who had invented concentration camps during the Boer War in South Africa. Most English people assured me it happened because the Germans were Germans—it could

never happen in England. Even at a young age that explanation didn't convince me and the more I learned the more I was convinced it was essential to be alert at an early stage to the conditions that facilitate fascism.

Social and economic conditions that facilitate fascism

1930s Germany

The collapse of the German economy in 1931 triggered by a banking crisis led to widespread unemployment, extreme poverty and social breakdown. Consequently, citizens became increasingly disillusioned with traditional politicians and people turned to a variety of smaller more radical parties including the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazis) (Doerr, et al. 2019) that despite the name had no similarity with socialist ideologies or policies. The simple message from the Nazi party was that Jews were responsible for Germany's economic problems and Hitler would make Germany great again. It's important to remember that Hitler gained power through legitimate political processes not a military coup. He was appointed Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. In March the Nazis increased their share of the vote in the Reichstag elections to 44%. Later that month Hitler acquired powers to make laws without parliament and in 1934 he was Head of State. By 1935 the Nuremberg Laws deprived all Jews of citizenship.

Fascism can swiftly colonise political and legal systems when populations are divided, poverty is endemic, the 'Other' becomes the scapegoat and a charismatic leader arises to promise a solution to all these ills. By simplifying the message, utilising propaganda effectively and uniting people against a common 'enemy' Hitler swiftly dominated the political landscape to enable genocide.

United Kingdom in the 2000s

Whilst the possibility of genocide in the UK is currently unlikely there are worrying signs that fascist activities and violent attacks on Muslims and

Jews are increasing. Islamophobia and Antisemitism are evident in mainstream political discourse and there are similarities with the emergence of Nazism in 1930s Germany.

A divided population

The referendum of 2016 on whether the UK should Remain as a member of the European Union (EU) or Leave divided the country deeply and bitterly. The Leave vote won by 52% with 48% for Remain and the results were characterised by age group and region. Young people in the main wanted to stay in the EU and areas that had stayed impoverished since the decline of traditional industries, such as coalmining, voted overwhelmingly to Leave. One theme throughout that was amplified by Conservative governments was a view that immigrants and asylum-seekers were the main reasons British citizens were impoverished and public services were failing (Grierson, 2018). From 2016 onwards Theresa May, then Prime Minister, had tried without success to find a Leave 'deal' that was acceptable to the EU and gain parliamentary support. One of the tensions that emerged was whether a Prime Minister could act unilaterally or whether Parliament was sovereign.

Endemic poverty

The global crash of 2008 and subsequent austerity policies pursued by Coalition and Conservative governments for the last decade have not reduced rates of poverty since the millennium and poverty rates have increased for certain groups including children, the disabled and those of pensionable age (SMC 2019). The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights investigated Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 2018 and concluded 'The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos (Human Rights Council p.1)

The 'Other' as scapegoat

Racist attacks and hostility towards immigrants and asylum-seekers especially of colour

have increased exponentially (Home Office 218/19) as the popularity of smaller right-wing political groups and parties has increased alongside a decade of austerity and disillusionment with traditional politics. Far right groups, (such as Britain First de-registered as a political party by the electoral commission in 2017) are now seeking membership to the Conservative Party since Johnson's election (Read, 2019). Charges of antisemitism have been a feature of criticisms of the Labour Party since Corbyn's election as leader. The author of the definition of antisemitism has expressed concerns, however, that the definition has been weaponised for political purposes (Stern, 2019) and there is some evidence that incidences in the Labour Party are few (Formby, 2019). It is argued that the growth in serious violent antisemitism is endemic in White nationalist groups across Europe and the USA and that the focus on the Labour Party has allowed this threat to grow (Brown, 2019)

Rise of a charismatic leader

Personality politics rather than policies dominated the public discourse in the 2017 and 2019 elections. Even with his privileged background and support of billionaire interests Boris Johnson has been successfully marketed as a man of the people. Notwithstanding substantial evidence in the public domain about his untrustworthiness and habitual lying, (Stubley, 2019), misuse of public money and immorality (Weaver, 2019), many British voters found these matters unimportant. Hitler forged a dominant Nazi party by ruthlessly eliminating dissenting voices. Johnson has shown the same ruthlessness by expelling 21 Conservative MPs (including two ex-Chancellors and senior party figures) from the Parliamentary Party (BBC, 2019).

A simple message: propaganda and the media

Two advisors to Johnson during his political trajectory to become Prime Minister of Britain were well placed to direct him on what has been called 'target audience acquisition technology' by the discredited British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica (CA) Ltd. A one-time

advisor to President Trump and co-founder of CA, Steve Bannon, has alleged in interviews he has had regular contact with Johnson (Jukes, 2019). Dominic Cummings, Johnson's unelected Chief Special Advisor, was Director of the successful Leave Campaign in the 2016 referendum. Although the campaign was found to have broken the electoral law and fined (BBC, 2018) this has not hampered Cummings rise to power. Bannon and Cummings use of single meme phrases 'build the wall' and 'get Brexit done' were successful influencers in the 2016 US presidential election and the 2019 UK parliamentary election.

In Britain the mainstream media has also been criticised by substantial research studies (Media Reform Coalition (MRC), 2015; Schlosberg, J. 2016; Moore & Ramsey, 2017, Deacon, et al 2019) for biased and inaccurate political reporting throughout referendum, the leadership of the Labour Party by the democratic socialist Jeremy Corbyn and the 2017 and 2019 elections. In relation to the 2019 election the authors commented:

This level of negativity towards Labour was far from 'business as usual'. Press hostility to Labour in 2019 was more than double the levels identified in 2017. By the same measure, negative coverage of the Conservatives halved. (Deacon, et al Exec Summary Report 5: 2019).

There is also evidence that a misinformation campaign on social media was initiated by the Conservatives (Reid & Dotto, 2019).

Conclusions

The results of the 2019 parliamentary elections in the UK were a shock to many. The Conservative government now has a majority of 80 enabling them to pass almost any measures chosen. Priti Patel, the Home Secretary, has said in public she is in favour of the death penalty and her plans to increase penalties on Gypsies' unauthorised camps by impounding their caravans and belongings have been described as inhumane (Travellers Times

2019). A crash-out Brexit, now the most likely scenario, will be catastrophic for most people and the economic consequences will last for decades. There is ample evidence to show these conditions fuel ultra-right nationalism and ethnic violence (Doerr et al, 2019)

We may be faced with the same ethical and moral dilemmas that many Germans faced during the rise of Nazism. If political processes fail to prevent manifestations of inhumanity, perhaps the only way to challenge the removal of rights and liberties will be by personal and collective action.

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