WE ARE ALL POST-LIBERALS NOW: A COURSE CORRECTION NOT A REVOLUTION

It is often said we are living in an interregnum. An old way of doing politics and economics is dying but the new one is yet to be born. I'm not so sure, I think since 2016 we have been living in a broadly post-liberal era in much of the West (and certainly in the UK the country I know best).

The background noise to politics for most of my life has been *metropolitan openness*. It began with the Thatcher revolt against post-war social democracy and union power which saw the denationalisation of finance, and then a loosening of constraints on labour and capital, and the opening of the global economy and labour market especially after China's entry into the WTO in 2001.

What one might call the hyper-globalisation era was characterised by rapid growth in China and other parts of the developing world and decent/unspectacular growth in most of the rich world, but accompanied by a sharp rise in inequality and rapid de-industrialisation and regional imbalances in many rich countries.

From the 1980s, to the end of the hyper-liberalisation phase that I would place in 2016, politics was best summed up in the slogan that *the right won the economic argument but the liberal-left won the cultural argument* (and as politics is downstream of culture that was the most important victory).

In society, in the UK and comparable countries, we saw the doubling of the professional and managerial class from the 1960s until the 2010s (to around one third of all jobs), and the related expansion of higher education, producing a light-bulb shaped social structure and an expanded elite class that merged the traditional elites and asset-rich with the cognitive meritocracy -

the exam passing classes - from all levels of society. This expanded elite, that I have labelled the Anywhere class, oversaw, and in many cases advocated for, a rapid liberalisation of social norms.

In 1980s Britain around half of adults still thought homosexuality was wrong, agreed with the statement ‘a man’s role is to go out to work and a woman’s role is to look after the household’, a super-majority expressed a belief in Christianity and pride in country, fertility levels were still close to the replacement rate of 2.1, most professional people did not have degrees and net immigration was running at less than 50,000 a year.

40 years later the picture has changed radically. One result is that politics has come to revolve as much around education-based liberal/conservative value divides as around the old left-right socio-economic divides.

From the early 1990s until the Brexit vote in 2016 it is fair to say that what the populists call the *uniparty* in Britain agreed on many things: the market reforms of the Thatcher era were largely left in place, residential higher education was expanded and technical/vocational training neglected, industry shrank and professional services (especially finance) became the heart of an increasingly regionally imbalanced economy centred on London and the South-East, race and sex (and sexuality) equality and a new rights-based culture gathered pace, the social state expanded, immigration rose sharply after 1997 and national democratic sovereignty in parliament was increasingly shared with the judiciary and with transnational organisations such as the European Union.

There were some differences between centre-left and centre-right on the size of the state and levels of re-distribution and immigration but also a broad consensus on how to prosper in the

age of hyper-liberalism. And there were many good things about that consensus, especially if you were a woman or a member of a minority group. The expansion of higher education produced a bigger and more open elite than in the immediate post-war period. Many dirty and dangerous jobs in heavy industries were replaced with knowledge economy jobs in comfortable offices.

There were also many losers from the hyper-liberal consensus, especially outside the greater South East, and their number grew after the great economic slow-down following the financial crisis in 2007-8. This was not just about inequality, de-industrialisation, and the loss of well-paid jobs for people of average or even below average academic ability.

For there are also three *deeper* trends that have been eroding centuries and even millennia-long certainties and contributing to a sense of disorientation for many. The loss of religion is one. It is only in the past couple of generations that mass secularisation has taken hold in most Western countries. Notwithstanding the strong traces of Christian belief that still animate public and private life this has removed a handrail of collective ritual and moral guidance. The changing relationship between the sexes is another. Women's financial autonomy and mass entry into work (outside the home) and public life represents the biggest increase in human freedom since 1945, at least in the West. But, as Helen Andrews has pointed out, female domination of institutions such as education and the law is historically unprecedented and meanwhile many men have lost their role as main family provider and found nothing satisfactory in its place.

There is a third deeper shift. Within the life-time of today's young adults the ethnic majority in many democratic nation states in Europe and North America will fall below half of the population. In Britain the post-1997 opening to immigration means that today nearly 20% of the population is foreign born and

the White British core has shrunk from almost 90% in 2000 to around 70% today (lower in England alone). Just 53% of births in 2025 were to White British mothers. Britain is on track to become majority-minority some time in the 2060s, though that depends on levels of immigration and also on how quickly the mixed-race population, now around 3%, grows (the grandchildren of mixed-race couples usually identify as White British).

The Brexit vote of 2016, and perhaps the first vote for Trump too, was a protest vote from not only those who felt they had suffered from the economic consequences of hyper-liberalism but also those who felt a loss of certainty and direction as a result of those big cultural shifts.

Democracy worked. It gave those people a voice, through the rise of populist parties all over Europe. It has worked imperfectly, of course. After the Brexit vote a large section of the British elite tried to reverse the vote. When the impasse was finally broken by Boris Johnson with his decisive election victory in 2019, the promise to reduce immigration and to start "levelling up" the country, a promise that would not have been made without the Brexit vote, were both dramatically broken.

Nonetheless there is a new consensus in British politics and culture, much of which even a Labour Government is forced to adapt to. It is a consensus replicated in many other Western countries. After 30 years of metropolitan openness the background noise is now one of *provincial insecurity.*

Twenty years of stagnant incomes has cast a cloud over British life but it has also forced the political class to think harder about over-regulation and state capacity and to recognise, in the words of *Financial Times* columnist Janan Ganesh, that liberal democracy needs to be a bit more democratic and a bit less liberal.

There is also now a broad consensus, including a reluctant Labour Government in most cases, on the need for different national citizen first/tough love priorities. That consensus would include the acceptance that we have been too open to the outside world and that a pause in legal immigration and much tougher measures against illegal immigration is needed; acknowledgement that higher education has over-expanded and that an apprenticeship is at least as good a start in working life for most young people; the recognition that welfare spending is out of control and too many people are dropping out of the labour market who should be contributing; the need for a regional rebalancing to the economy, an openness towards some degree of re-industrialisation/reshoring, the idea of strategically important national industries, and limits to free trade; more investment in defence industries and the armed forces; a much greater scepticism about progressivism, from the BLM ideology to the trans movement, and its celebration of fluidity whether of borders or genders; and much more concern, partly focused on the regulation of social media, on polarisation, anomie and loss of meaning, especially among young people.

There is much in that list that is supported more in rhetoric than actual policy, but the centre-right in the UK, now meaning the Conservatives and the populist Reform party, which continues to lead in the polls, will ensure that this new consensus remains at the heart of British politics.

But is it post-liberal? There are many schools of post-liberalism often defined by their distinct critiques of liberalism itself. Liberalism, in most versions, is seen as a bloodless ideology focusing too much on individual rights and freedoms, constraints on power and value neutrality, that dispatches the human needs for community (national and local), belonging and meaning to the private sphere. Liberalism is seen as drifting too far from the

forces of ‘flag, faith and family’ that once provided connection and meaning.

The American version, associated with some people in the court of Donald Trump, tends to be more religious and aggressive towards liberalism. Writers like Patrick Deneen, and the even more radical Adrian Vermeule, regard liberalism as a form of nihilism that encourages our worst selves, especially when combined with free markets. But the answer of the religious post-liberals is that the good society requires virtue to precede freedom and, implicitly, a return to faith, usually Catholicism. This sounds more pre-liberal than post-liberal.

The more mainstream post-liberal critique of liberalism is that it is hard to derive an idea of the common good or the national interest from it because it is designed to accommodate an endless variety of individual beliefs, priorities, goals. Liberalism demands that if you pay your taxes and obey the law neither society nor state can interfere with your individual freedom, you must be tolerated even if you are an Islamic extremist who preaches hatred of the West.

Post-liberalism’s answer is that the ‘common good’ must prevail but that begs the obvious question of who defines it? Maurice Glasman’s Blue Labour, probably the best-known variant of post-liberalism in the UK, is more a vibe—left on economics, right on culture—than a political philosophy or coherent policy programme. Glasman’s book is subtitled *The Politics of the Common Good* but provides no answer to the question of how we can arrive at a consensus on the common good in modern societies with such diverse interests and values.

Matt Sleat in his recent book on post-liberalism complains that it is often little more than an immature rage against liberalism. Some variants flirt with illiberalism and religious authoritarianism

or, in the case of Blue Labour, hard-core socialist economics and the quaint idea that working class people are longing to go back to working in factories.

Nostalgia is another accusation that is hard to refute. As Samuel Rubinstein has written: “To recreate thick communities in an age of global supply chains, digital media, and geographic mobility, in societies characterised by deep pluralism and heterogeneity… seems like a pretty tall order.”

There *is* a widespread regret at the loss of community with the accompanying reduction in trust and volunteering. Similarly, people regret the loss of stable family life, nearly half of British children are not living with both their biological parents at the age of 14. But the weakening of community and family often happens because people place their own freedom and desires first. People want community but many of them want wealth, freedom and mobility more. We might regret losing the sense of a single national conversation when there were only 3 television channels but few of us want to give up the extraordinary choice of entertainment we now enjoy.

Nonetheless, there is still wide support for constraining the excesses of liberalism, both economic and cultural. We need a course correction, as Adrian Pabst and other more moderate post-liberal voices have argued, a better liberalism that speaks to the priorities of the Somewheres at least as much as the Anywheres, without jettisoning pluralism and the essentials of historic liberalism.

Post-liberalism doesn’t require a shiny new philosophical system, though the varied sources it draws upon—Aristotle, Catholic social teaching, communitarianism—lend it some intellectual glamour.

One way of thinking about post-liberalism as a course correction is seeing it as a political force that seeks to reproduce some of the background factors that helped liberalism to work well enough in earlier decades, without actually returning to the 1950s.

Tyler Cowen defined the liberalism of the relatively stable post-war era thus: “A blend of a capitalist mixed economy, largely democratic institutions and a fair but not complete degree of value neutrality across competing lifestyles.”

That post-war liberalism in the West benefitted from many underlying factors that are now either absent or weakened: rapidly rising incomes for most people, the moral constraints provided by residual religious belief and social deference, stable family life, large ethnic majorities with a pre-political solidarity (reinforced by the experience of war) creating strong national identities and common norms across social classes.

In a world of no-growth, polarising algorithms, runaway immigration, weakened families and national attachments, and with faith in our political classes badly dented—in Britain’s case thanks to the military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial crash, Brexit without a plan, the Covid failures and frequent changes of Prime Minister—liberalism is under strain and needs a helping hand from post-liberal priorities.

My own version, that I would categorise as belonging to the moderate left conservative school of post-liberalism (maybe a liberal post-liberalism?), has three main elements.

1. *Small-c conservative common-sense*. This covers a range of issues. a) Hostility to the universalism and post-nationalism of the liberal left, (promoted by some aspects of international law). b) Restoring more political authority to elected politicians and away from judges, NGOs and

international bodies. c) A preference for low immigration favouring those from cultures that integrate easily, plus the understanding that a multi-ethnic society with a shrinking ethnic majority needs the binding force of a broad-based national identity more than ever, and that it is acceptable to feel anxious about demographic change. d) A belief in personal responsibility and reciprocity, and preference for a contributory welfare state. e) Society is not always to blame and money alone is not the answer to poverty and social failure, family structure and character formation matter. f) The state should explicitly support stable families and having children, by minimising the motherhood penalty but also by making it easier for one parent to remain at home when children are pre-school. g) Couples with children under 18 should be required to undergo free couple counselling for a limited time as a condition of today's easy, no-fault divorce process.

2. *Market-friendly, national social democracy*. a) A national business preference in Government policy and public procurement. b) Less market in some key public utilities but more market in areas where competition is weak. c) An end to net-zero self-harm and lowest possible energy costs for businesses and households. d) Limited use of subsidies and tariffs to prioritise national industry reshoring and innovation. e) Incentivisation of a more patriotic business elite, and clearer distinction in the tax system between the productive and unproductive rich (land tax?). f) Reduction in tax and regulatory burden on small business. g) Promoting higher levels of ownership, especially among young people

3. *A class and regional settlement leaning into Somewhere priorities*. There is a crisis of demoralisation in many parts of modern Britain, especially among the non-college educated. a) Our grotesque regional divides remain to be

tackled, not just by promoting public investment and growth companies in left-behind places but investing in grass-roots institutions from sports clubs, youth clubs to pubs. b) We are over-producing people with unwanted generalist academic qualifications and under-producing skilled manual workers and technicians. We still need our elite universities but a big shift is required from HE to FE. c) We also need more outlets for public spiritedness. In a more dangerous world with increasingly erratic weather the state should invest in expanding the military reserve and creating a new climate reservists force. An easy-to-use online national volunteering vehicle is long overdue.

This is not a revolutionary manifesto but it is still highly ambitious and it cuts across still powerful liberal assumptions in key areas. a) Overtly favouring immigrants who fit easily into western cultures, and regarding discomfort at rapid demographic change as legitimate. b) Challenging the economism of so much social policy which focuses almost exclusively on higher welfare support, and instead promoting family stability (and higher fertility) and acknowledgement that character formation is often more important than parental income in life chances. c) Turning many universities back into polytechnics and rebooting of technical/vocational education. d) Restoring more authority to local and national government and away from the judiciary and international conventions and institutions, even if that means leaving the ECHR etc.

We need better elites. This is one of post-liberalism's favourite themes. It is certainly true in Britain where we need a class of politicians who can speak across the Anywhere-Somewhere divide. We do not want to replace an Anywhere tyranny with a Somewhere one. Both worldviews are needed in our complex societies.

For modern electorates are both liberal and conservative. We saw in the pandemic that there was overwhelming support for draconian restrictions on liberty for what was perceived to be the common good. Most people place a very high value on security and familiarity. But the same is true about individual freedom. And no political party will get elected in most rich countries without accepting both of the post-war social revolutions: the welfare revolution of the 1940s and 1950s and the equality revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.

It is part of the post-liberal critique of modern liberalism that it promotes a shallow understanding of freedom: freedom as lack of constraint on our individual desires and projects of self-actualisation. Whether that is true of liberalism it is certainly true of the human condition that we often prioritise short-term desires over our longer-term best interests. Most of us would welcome institutions and cultural norms that nudge us to make better choices but woe betide anyone who thinks they know our own best interests better than we do.

After the relative calm of the second half of the 20th century, at least in most of the West, huge challenges are now piling up while the political ability to manage them is confronted by democratic electorates more demanding and divided than ever before.

A course correction for liberalism in the direction of a post-liberal left conservatism would align priorities more closely with majority preferences and help in achieving a soft-landing.

As the American Democratic politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan put it: “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change culture and save it from itself.”