

ZOE WILLIAMS: Mainstream conservatives are weakening defence against extremism

08 February 2019
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THE NEW EUROPEAN

Across Europe, the fight against the extreme right is being lost, and it is the fault of mainstream conservatism, writes ZOE WILLIAMS.

It's a bit of an awkward time to bring this up, but there is more at stake than our future trading relationship with anybody; there are graver issues than the mess of the Irish border, problems of a different order of magnitude even than the break up of the United Kingdom, that we will never solve without solidarity with the rest of Europe.

We don't have to be in the EU to cooperate, of course. But there is no-one in government with the mental or emotional agility to talk constructively to other European governments about the wider horizon, from the perspective of our immediate and self-inflicted crisis. That is not an argument, by the way, to hurry up and leave. It is only a reflection on how trivial these Brexit blowhards have become, how inadequate to the task of government.

Those problems, in descending order of importance: climate change, the refugee crisis, the rise of the far right. They're prioritised that way because habitat is more important than moral compass, which is more important than politics; but naturally they all feed into one another and create their own feedback loops.

No nation alone could meet any of these crises, though Germany occasionally tries, and they know no borders. For brevity, and the avoidance of gloom, I'll concentrate on the third.

There are vibrant far-right movements in every major European nation bar Portugal, including ours. Poland currently has no left-wing party in parliament at all; the prime minister of Hungary uses language about minorities unseen in the law-abiding international order for decades; the handbook of the Freedom Party, Austria's largest, holds that women shouldn't work outside the house, which feeds into a blood and soil, pan-Germanic vision that is implicitly white supremacist; we have Stephen 'Tommy Robinson' Yaxley-Lennon; France has its gilets jaunes.

Apart from a persistent failure to spot the pattern – it's not north Europe or south, not east or west, not declining or ascendant, not recessionary or prospering, it's everywhere – the critical misapprehension is that this is a failure of the left.

What's happened to the left? Why aren't we resisting better? How did we cede our ground, the principles of equality and dignity that seemed so established, the taboo around violent words and imagery, so easily? Has someone put Valium in our water supply? When did we turn so spineless?

In fact, the left opposes the far-right as much as it ever did: what we're witnessing is a failure of the mainstream right. Why is Theresa May selling herself as a dining companion to George Farmer, accepting donations from him, as chairman of the alt-right group Turning Point? Why is Boris Johnson reportedly meeting Steve Bannon, who has never made any secret of his intense and evangelical Islamophobia, and has apparently claimed Boris "letterbox" Johnson as a disciple?

Why are conservative British MEPs electing as deputy of their Conservative group on the Council of Europe Dominik Tarczynski, a man whose political meat and drink is that Europe must now "fight for its life" as refugees come to "kill us all, one by one"?

Mainstream conservatism was always the first line of defence against fascism; indeed, it drew its own legitimacy from the things it would not tolerate: open racism, misogyny, hate speech, dehumanising imagery. It would not tolerate them in small amounts, it would not tolerate them from allies; people who indulged themselves with the

cheap thrill of weaponised language were simply excluded from its sphere of credibility. In the kindest possible reading, the centre-right is perhaps unaware of the real depths to which its extremists will sink. It is a peculiarity of the modern alt-right that its networks and funding streams get more and more international, yet its trigger moments, its hot buttons, being resolutely ethno-nationalist, remain curiously illegible to any but those closest to them.

The idea that an American organisation might be funding Yaxley-Lennon's professionalised platform outside a crown court in Leeds is inherently implausible. The Polish academic Rafal Pankowski describes an incredible day in 2018, when his prime minister made global headlines in the morning, for his incendiary, otiose statement that some perpetrators of the holocaust were Jewish, then made no headlines at all in the afternoon, when he visited the graves of the Holy Cross Brigade. "That was, if anything, the more inflammatory act. He was paying tribute to Nazi collaborators."

And in a less kind, but not catastrophic reading, allying with the far-right is simply a bid for attention by shallow politicians whose moral compass was never anything more developed or profound than going with the flow. When that flow loses its direction, it is entirely in character for Johnson or Michael Gove – another who has reportedly been in contact with Bannon – to try and let off some fireworks with a little light far-right flirtation.

Yet historical precedent urges us to look a little deeper, and see how expedient it is for mainstream conservatism to allow in extremism. As professor Ruth Wodak of Lancaster University, an expert in the Austrian far-right, points out: "This is an opportunistic strategic game."

The far-right specialises in "symbolic politics – smoking in restaurants, banning the hijab – and those come very cheap. You can push through your benefit cuts and your 12-hour working days," while you surf the popularity of this spiteful signalling.

In fact, if it sounds new and terrifying, it isn't; old fascism was also networked and international. Warren Harding, the little remembered US president of 1921-23, putative originator of the phrase 'America First', drew heavily from the politics of German migrants in Ohio.

The alt-right – the modern-most edge of the movement – is distinctive for its irresistible pull towards racial purity. The further you go along its spectrum, the more race comes to trounce nationalism, so that 'America First' becomes a fantasy of the US as a white-settler state, a homeland for white people fleeing Muslim Europe. And that, if you can wade through the violent rape fantasies of the average alt-right Reddit thread, is as timelessly familiar as pastry, as war.

Indeed, the truly extraordinary thing about the new wave of misogyny which accompanies this racism is that it doesn't trouble itself to modernise its agenda at all. When we talk of women as homemakers, as brood mares, as submissive to the male business of producing the realities of the world and realising their destiny, you could be in any century throughout history – except, perhaps, the 20th.

The battle against the far-right must be collective and unbordered, because fascism acts collectively and across borders. It must be pan-European because the fascist fantasy of what Europe is for – a Christian haven against the infidel – will otherwise be kicking at the open door of people who have forgotten how to articulate the peace and reconciliation that were its real foundations.

The really crucial thing, though, is that conservatism has to stand up, and remember its values: remember why it never used to speak of people in "swarms" and "floods", remember why, even five years ago, it would never have entered a room containing Steve Bannon. And perhaps those memories will bring it out of its own ethno-nationalist reverie.

https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/top-stories/zoe-williams-conservatives-are-weakening-defence-against-extremism-1-5882688?fbclid=IwAR3jjz8NjA_C4F-fQnozfnlcGWbUZgY4ogMGRjVksi9m8mzUiNr38Q3NpPo