

Reflections one year on Part 2: Re-kindling the radicalism of Brexit?

He's almost old enough to be their grandfather. He's hardly a charismatic speaker and by all accounts, something of a political anorak who isn't very good at small talk. Yet the young people seem to love him, treating him to a hero's welcome when he addressed the Glastonbury festival. How does he do it? What is the secret behind the Corbyn phenomenon?

The answer is that he epitomises the revolt against the "establishment" which has been such a feature of recent politics in a number of countries. A serial rebel against his own party who doesn't have a posh voice, he chose to spend two years abroad doing voluntary service overseas during his late teens and didn't read PPE at Oxford. He has never worked in a bank or in the City of London. He is also a vegetarian and doesn't own a car. In summary, he is the absolute antithesis of a "Tory Toff", although a quick glance at his wikipedia entry indicates that he was privately educated for a few years before moving on to his local grammar school in Shropshire.

Given the idealism and anti-establishment sentiment of many young people, it is perhaps unsurprising that Jeremy Corbyn has become something of a cult figure and role model – a man who has not let success compromise his radical principles.

Now I'm painting a very one-sided picture of the leader of Her Majesty's opposition, with good reason. We need to ask why so many young people so enamoured with this anti-establishment figure when a year ago, so many of them shunned the biggest grassroots anti-establishment campaign of our lifetimes.

People will give you all manner of reasons for voting to leave the EU, but undergirding most of them was this same anti-

establishment spirit. Is there anyone more “establishment” than Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission? If politicians like David Cameron, with his aristocratic, privileged background, are widely despised for being remote and out of touch with normal people, how much more the MEPs and bureaucrats living their cosseted lives in the *Quartier Européen* in Brussels?

Goldman Sachs was a substantial donor to the Remain campaign and Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of England also supported staying in, along with the voice of big business, the CBI. In other words, the financial “establishment” so despised by the young – and indeed, the not-so-young on the radical left – were campaigning for the same result as their fiercest critics.

The victory we won a year ago was truly a popular revolution. While we had some “establishment” figures on our side like Boris Johnson (You can’t get more “establishment” than Eton and Balliol College, Oxford!), the real credit belongs to the thousands of ordinary men and women who tramped the streets distributing leaflets, organised meetings in village halls, set up stalls in high streets and won round their friends and relatives in conversations down at the pub or sitting round the coffee table. A handful of hard-working fishermen made a laughing stock of pop star-turned-establishment figure Bob Geldof when they sailed their boats up the Thames to the Houses of Parliament.

Yet, for all this, the images of victory which appeared in the press on June 24th were dominated by older people. One abiding memory was to hear an aged World War II veteran say ecstatically, “I’ve got my country back”, as tears ran down his cheeks. By contrast, the published pictures of despondent remainers predominantly featured the young – with the cameraman’s focus almost inevitably drawn to a group of very pretty girls!

While it was a victory over a class of people widely despised many of today's young people, they themselves saw the Brexit vote as their future being stolen from them by their parents' and grandparents' generation, with their outmoded ideas and mindset.

If we are to change the mindsets of our young people, the Brexit vote therefore needs to be painted in its true colours. We fought the establishment and won. We were the underdogs. We were (and still are) representing ordinary people and fighting against substantial vested interest. Just look at the sort of people who are trying to derail Brexit – Gina Miller the investment manager, Michael Young, the new interim CEO of the European Movement – a former senior executive of the British mining finance house and Westminster insider plus, no doubt lurking somewhere in the background is the sinister figure of Tony Blair, a man despised even more by the Corbynite left in his own party than by centre right.

I can remember lying awake at night during the Blair years shortly after being converted to the withdrawalist cause. The means of my conversion was being handed a printout of an article by Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, which explained that the EU was actually financed by US spy chiefs. I was worried. If our EU membership was a collusion between the UK government and the shadowy American CIA, where was my opposition to Brussels going to lead me? Prison? A mysterious disappearance? Obviously, in hindsight, my concerns were considerably overblown, but it does underline the point that I and many other supporters of withdrawal felt ourselves to be engaged in nothing less than a revolutionary campaign against a powerful élite determined to pursue its agenda come what may.

Will the Corbyn bubble burst? Predictions to this effect have been doing the rounds ever since he was first elected and have proved wide of the mark, but if our young people do become disillusioned with him, there is another group of radicals that will welcome them on board. We voted to leave the EU to

give the country a new future. Certainly for myself, this means a rebooting of our failed democracy and bringing power closer to the people through the introduction of binding referendums, allowing ordinary people not just to petition the government but to shape its direction and hold our widely distrusted elected representatives to account. Can there be any more noble anti-establishment cause than this?

Photo by DavidMartynHunt 