

After a campaign scarred by bigotry, it's become OK to be racist in Britain

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The leave campaign has opened up a Pandora's box of resentment and suspicion – and it's only going to get worse when Brexit fails to deliver on its promises



Illustration by Ben Jennings

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On chaos of the kind Britain now faces, history is clear: some people always get hurt more than others. Just which groups stand to suffer most this time round is already becoming worryingly clear. Take a look at the hate reports that have come pouring in over the past few days.

In Huntingdon, Polish-origin schoolkids get cards calling them “vermin”, who must “leave the EU”. They come with a Polish translation, thoughtfully enough. From Barnsley, a TV correspondent notes that within five minutes three different people shout, “Send them home.” On Facebook, a friend in east London tells how, while

trying to sleep on a hot night, he hears a man bellowing outside his open window: “We’ve got our country back and next I’ll blow that fucking mosque up.”

None of this is coincidental. It’s what happens when cabinet ministers, party leaders and prime-ministerial wannabes sprinkle arguments with racist poison. When intolerance is not only tolerated, but indulged and encouraged. For months leading up to last week’s vote, politicians poured a British blend of Donald Trumpism into Westminster china. They told 350m little lies. They made cast-iron promises that, Iain Duncan Smith now admits, were only ever “possibilities”. And the Brexit brigade flirted over and over again with racism.

Michael Gove and Boris Johnson peddled their fiction about Turkey joining the EU. One didn’t need especially keen hearing to pick that up as code for 80 million Muslims entering Christendom. Foregoing any subtlety, Nigel Farage said allowing Syrian refugees into the UK would put British women at risk of sexual assault. In order to further their campaign and their careers, these professional politicians added bigotry to their armoury of political weapons.

To be clear, I’m not saying that the 17 million Britons who turned out to vote leave are racist; and there are genuine concerns about the pressures from migration. Further, it’s clear last Thursday’s vote took in issues other than migration or Europe: extractive elites in politics, business and finance; a badly lopsided economy; a state that stuffs London while it starves the rest of the nation.

But over the past few months, the men who are now shaping Britain’s future outside the EU effectively ditched public decency, and decided it was OK to be racist. In the process, as Michael Keith at Oxford University’s migration research centre, Compas, says, “The unspeakable became not only speakable, but commonplace.”

I saw this playing out during the campaign, on visiting south Wales. Down the years, I’ve been to many places that have lost their industries and their economies – indeed, I was born in one. This time I noticed a change among my interviewees. Previously, in Derby or Gateshead or Barking, an unemployed worker or a young mum would take at least 20 minutes to broach the subject of immigrants – perhaps mindful of the fact they were talking to an Asian man from a liberal newspaper. This time, there was no hesitation. In a region with comparatively few migrants, immigration was the first thing anyone mentioned. And the language they used came clad in them-and-us and all the touches that I’d lazily assumed had gone the way of Jim Davidson comedy LPs.

“I’m not racist. I don’t want to offend you,” a cafe worker kept telling me, plainly not caring whether she did. I tried it again in Dorset the weekend before the ballot, with a couple clutching Vote Leave signs. The woman detailed her daughter’s difficulty in getting housing in London, the groping on public transport, a cooking fire in the flat below with five eastern European men. She shook with anger. “I just want my country back.”

Maybe those people had always harboured such resentments, but now felt they could express them publicly without caring who heard. Perhaps what Claire Alexander at the University of Manchester calls the “jovial bigotry” of Farage and his ilk has helped channel their rage.

For my part, I’d focused on the rising tolerance that had marked Britain in the 90s and 00s – and overlooked some of the awkward markers of residual prejudice towards Muslims and arrivals from eastern Europe, the tabloid front pages, the bile spilled below the line on my own articles and others’. But perhaps I can be forgiven for wanting to feel at home in the country where I was born.

Attitudes change and harden, new scapegoats can always be flung into the public realm. Britain has been through six years of austerity and nastiness, in which disabled people have had their benefits cut and been labelled by ministers as skivers. The result has been a rise in hate crimes against people with disabilities.

And as for eastern Europeans and Muslims, while researching this article, a university lecturer told me quite casually: “I’m now scared to tell a taxi driver that I’m Polish.” At Tell Mama, the organisation that monitors hate crimes against Muslims, director Fiyaz Mughal recounted how the “chatter” from small violent far-right extremist groups had risen and risen during the campaign. When Johnson talked about Turkey, they circulated pictures of a church with a minaret photoshopped on top. When Farage talked about sexual-assaulting Syrians, they began talking about “rape-fugees”. This far-right chatter, says Mughal, reached its peak the week MP Jo Cox was killed.

If anything, the racists and far-rightists are in for a fertile period. Britain has just voted for a severe recession. No big business will want to make serious investments in a country riven by uncertainty, where sterling is on the way to becoming a backwater currency. And Britain, as Bank of England governor Mark Carney once said, is dependent on “the kindness of strangers” – on foreigners funding our record

current account deficit. That's all fine – until one day the strangers are a bit less indulgent.

Once it becomes clear Gove and Johnson will not get the immigration deal they fantasised about, millions of Britons will rightly feel cheated. And in former Labour strongholds across the north and Wales, the effective opposition will pass to Farage and his band of Westminster discards, monomaniacs and out-and-out racists.

Having created this much of a mess, British politics will be looking hard for people on whom to pin some blame. However much I hope otherwise, I suspect that the past few days are just the precursor to even greater nastiness. The leave politicians have, as Mughal says, “opened up a Pandora’s box” of resentment and suspicion. The consequences won’t be faced by old Etonians or stripy-blazered Ukipers. They’ll descend on a grandad heading home from Friday prayers, or a Romanian mum caught on a bus speaking her mother tongue