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Britain Fires a Shot Heard Round the World



A taxi driver holds a Union flag in London after the result of the EU referendum vote. Photo: toby melville/Reuters

by Gerard Baker

The implications of Britain's vote to leave the European Union will reverberate through the Continent's politics and economy for years. But it may have an even more immediate global political significance with resonance here in the U.S. as the most powerful demonstration yet of a rising populist tide transforming the established order across the West.

The victory for the Leave campaign was perhaps the single largest blow the British populace has delivered to its establishment in modern history. Voters defied the impassioned—and unified—opposition of the leadership of all five major political parties. They rejected the advice of more than 1,200 corporate CEOs, including half of the chiefs of the FTSE 100 companies who wrote to The Times newspaper last week urging rejection of “Brexit.”

Banks in the City of London, one of the world’s major financial centers, along with the Bank of England, the country’s central bank, and most of its influential think tanks and academic institutions, had warned of the risks to the U.K.’s economic security and global financial pre-eminence if Britain did not stay in the EU. A procession of eminent foreigners, from most heads of European governments to James Dimon, the CEO of J.P. Morgan Chase, had urged a vote to stay.

In April, President Barack Obama traveled to London to weigh in, telling British voters that Britain would go to “the back of the queue” in negotiations for trade agreements with the United States if they chose to leave.

All to no avail. This unprecedented establishment campaign of persuasion failed to sway a majority of British voters who opted instead to take a step the government had repeatedly described as an act of “economic self-harm.”

Not since universal adult suffrage in the U.K. has the electorate been so willing to reject the concerted and unified advice of its political and economic leadership. Instead they chose to side with politicians who directly challenged the establishment, such as Boris Johnson, the Conservative former mayor of London, and Nigel Farage, the leader of the populist United Kingdom Independence Party.

The Leave campaign, of course, was a singularly British phenomenon, channeling longstanding national resentment of the cession of power by the government to an unelected supranational Brussels bureaucracy. But in its message and its appeal it had much in common with surging popular anger seen across the Continent and in the U.S. Populist movements have been on the rise in Europe and America since the financial crisis eight years ago. As dissatisfaction with slow growth, high unemployment and stagnant wages has risen, political parties such as the Five Star movement in Italy, the Alternative for Deutschland in Germany, the National Front in France and Podemos in Spain have made gains at local and even national levels, and populist parties have actually taken power in smaller countries such as Hungary and Poland.

In the U.S., the Tea Party rode popular resentment against economic weakness, government spending and bailouts for banks beginning in 2010. And of course this year, Donald Trump emerged from outside the established political order to become the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party.

With exquisite timing, Mr. Trump himself happened to land in the U.K. in the midst of the populist triumph. Opening his new golf course at Turnberry in Scotland, he congratulated Britons.

“People want to take their country back,” he said. And then to drive home the similarities between his own ascent and that of the Leave campaign, he said: “There are many other cases where they will want to take their borders back. You’re going to see that more and more... I love to see people take their country back.”

Tea Party supporters also identified with the victorious Leave campaign Tea Party Nation, a leading umbrella group, congratulated the British on their “Independence Day” and said in a statement “the land that gave us Magna Carta decided they wanted freedom and not a socialist dictatorship.”

There are striking parallels between the campaigns in the U.K. and the U.S. Support for Leave, as for Mr. Trump, cuts across party lines. While most of the leading campaigners to leave the EU were Conservative politicians, Leave did disproportionately well among Labour voters especially in the party’s heartlands in the north of England. Leave voters seem to have been animated most heavily by concerns about rising immigration levels into the U.K., especially from the EU. Leave voters, like Mr. Trump’s, were disproportionately older and white and working class.

They expressed frustration to opinion pollsters about a perceived loss of national British identity in the face of inflows of immigration.

Crucially, they appear much more energized than the general population. Turnout in the referendum was unusually high in pro-Leave districts, while in the areas of the country that backed Remain, such as London and Scotland, the turnout was much lower.

The key messages that resonated with Leave voters were a powerful anti-incumbent sentiment, a frustration with established political leaders, and a desire for change.

To be sure, Mr. Trump faces unique challenges in his bid for the presidency—punishingly high disapproval rates, a lack of campaign funds, the occasionally outrageous outburst and a large demographic hill to climb with minority voters, especially Hispanics.

But the shocking Brexit victory has shown the growing appeal in much of the West of a nationalist message. It has also demonstrated that anger that is not addressed by the existing party leaderships can be harnessed to propel an improbable campaign to victory over the forces of an establishment of both major parties arrayed against them.

On Thursday, Britain experienced a political earthquake. The aftershocks may reverberate far beyond its shores.

