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## In Britain, fervor is in the air

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

“They have a horror of abstract thought, they feel no need for any philosophy or systematic ‘world-view.’” That was George Orwell, speaking of his countrymen in a famous 1941 essay, [“England Your England.”](#) Writing during the Blitz, as “highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me,” Orwell listed the qualities that made the English English: their love of privacy, their almost religious respect for the law, their dislike of uniformed men barking orders. “All the boasting and flag-wagging, the ‘Rule Britannia’ stuff, is done by small minorities,” he wrote: “The most stirring battle-poem in English is about a brigade of cavalry which charged in the wrong direction.”

I thought of that essay listening to the rhetoric coming out of the British party conferences, Labour and Conservative, over the past two weeks, much of which didn’t sound very English, in Orwell’s definition, at all. Certainly the Tories’ transformation, over the past year and a half, is nothing short of remarkable. Historically, they were derided as [“the stupid party,”](#) a description they accepted as a backhanded compliment: They were solid, salt of the earth; they were practical rather than theoretical; they eschewed progressive fantasy (what Orwell called “abstract thought”) in favor of sensible policies.

In the wake of the Brexit referendum, the British Conservative Party changed. Some of the cabinet, including, it seems, the hapless (and, during her conference speech, [briefly voiceless](#)) prime minister, have quietly concluded that Britain should transition out of the European Union slowly and stay inside the European customs union for as long as possible, to avoid tariffs, customs bureaucracy and the horror of a new “hard” border across Ireland. But unmoored from their old Burkean suspicion of radicalism, many Tories dislike this idea of gradual change. Some are still imagining sweetheart deals with the E.U. that will never happen: This is what Boris Johnson, the British foreign secretary, at first called “having our cake and eating it,” and now calls [“glorious Brexit.”](#)

Still others sketch out a vague vision of a buccaneering, low-tax, deregulated trading nation, the Singapore of the North — a notion based on a misremembering of 19th-century history, when Britain was a free-trading nation but also an empire. Once upon a time, if the British didn’t like the trade agreements on offer, they could blockade the harbor or bomb the port. Alas, that’s no longer true — on the contrary, the most important result of the conference was that it persuaded [the Federation of German Industry](#) to prepare for a major disruption in trade, because “the British government is lacking a clear concept despite talking a lot.”

If the Tories could be replaced by realists, it might not matter. But Brexit has released the Labour Party from its previous commitments to pragmatism, too. [As one Guardian columnist](#) wrote, “The Tories have normalised all forms of radicalism” — but the beneficiary may not be the imperial nostalgists of the right but the now far-left, and now more popular, Labour Party. Only a few years ago, it would have seemed remarkable for a Labour politician to declare his intention to re-nationalize anything. But at its conference the week before, John McDonnell, the Labour shadow chancellor of the exchequer — the man who, if the party wins the next election, will control the British treasury — was applauded when he called for “utilities and key services” to be brought back under state control. He mentioned railways and energy companies — but some have [hinted at nationalizing banks](#), as well.

There may be more to come. Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour leader — who was welcomed at the conference by a very un-British three-minute ovation — has made it clear that he approves of the Brexit vote because he, like others on the far left, believes that the E.U. prevents its members from carrying out radical economic changes. But what kind of radicalism does he have in mind? E.U. policy does not prevent any country from having nationalized health care, state-owned companies or redistributive taxes, so we must be talking about policies even more extreme than that. Whatever those may be, it’s safe to guess that they won’t make Britain look like a Singapore of the North. Better to think Venezuela of the North, or perhaps East Germany Rediscovered.

Maybe all of the fervor in the air is unsurprising: Britain didn’t have an 18th-century revolution like France, or a 19th-century revolution like Germany. As Orwell observed, it was unmoved by the various 20th-century revolutions, too. Now, in the 21st century, it could just be Britain’s turn to overthrow its system. Which would be less unnerving if the revolutionary futures on offer weren’t so starkly contradictory.