Tony Blair: Against Populism, the Center Must Hold

By Tony Blair
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LONDON — Outrage is easy; strategy is hard. Outrage provides necessary motivation. But only strategy can deliver victory.

The emotional response to the rightist populism sweeping the West is one of protest and dismay. But if there is to be an effective fightback, there has to be a cool analysis of what is happening, why and what can be done.

Politics is being reshaped, and this phenomenon is the same whether it is in the United States or in Europe. At stake in the forthcoming elections in France and Germany will be the future of Europe and, possibly, of European liberal democracy.

The rightist populism, on both sides of the Atlantic, is intent on blowing up traditional conservative politics and replacing it with a new coalition, comprising traditionally left-leaning supporters in working-class communities who feel left behind by globalization and traditionally right-leaning supporters who hate liberalism. Both constituencies believe that traditional culture is at risk from immigration and “political correctness.” Both believe in the nation-state as opposed to international alliances. Both feel let down by the so-called elites and think that the solution is an authoritarian figure strong enough not to care what a biased establishment thinks about him.

This is a revolution that is partly economic, but mainly cultural. The new coalition differs from the old Reagan-Thatcher one, though it has some similarities. Back in the 1980s, working-class voters moved to the right because they felt that the left didn’t satisfy their aspirations for self-improvement. That was a cultural issue, of course; but it
was primarily an economic one. It was not so much that they felt fearful as that they felt held back.

Today is different. The modus operandi of this populism is not to reason but to roar. It has at times an anarchic feel. Yet it has also mobilized a powerful media behind it. Its supporters welcome the outrage their leaders provoke. This polarizes public discourse and enhances their sense of belonging, so that even when they’re in government, they act as if they were excluded from it.

Meanwhile, traditional conservatives feel like strangers in their own land. They are unsure whether to play along with the new order on the basis that it will soon pass or to accept that this is a revolution aimed at overturning their authority and fight it.

The causes of this movement are the scale, scope and speed of change. This is occurring economically as jobs are displaced and communities fractured, and culturally as the force of globalization moves the rest of the world closer and blurs old boundaries of nation, race and culture.

The same dynamics are splintering the left, too. One element has aligned with the right in revolt against globalization, but with business taking the place of migrants as the chief evil. They agree with the right-wing populists about elites, though for the left the elites are the wealthy, while for the right they’re the liberals.

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This leftist populism is a profound error. It has no chance of matching the populist appeal of the right, and it dangerously validates some of the right’s arguments. This only fuels a cynicism that depresses support for the more progressive parts of the left’s program.

But this left tendency has gained from the seeming paralysis of the center. The parties and politicians of the center have become the managers of the status quo in an era when people want change. So, the center — in both its center-right and center-left camps — is marginalized, even despised.

The question is, will this be a temporary phase, perhaps linked to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and Sept. 11, and will politics soon revert to normal, or has a new political age begun?

The party structures on both sides of the Atlantic have their origins in the Industrial Revolution and the debates engendered by that epoch about socialism and capitalism, the market and the state. These parties have endured because the roots they put down were very strong. But now, there are different distinctions than those simply of traditional right and left.
When I was growing up, people like my dad were conservative; and that meant economically and socially. Today, many such voters don’t fit that old stereotype. They may be pro-private enterprise and conservative on economics in traditional terms, but they’re also socially liberal — in favor, for instance, of gay rights. And there are those who used to vote left, but who are culturally illiberal and now don’t mind voting for parties of the wealthy.

Today, a distinction that often matters more than traditional right and left is open vs. closed. The open-minded see globalization as an opportunity but one with challenges that should be mitigated; the closed-minded see the outside world as a threat. This distinction crosses traditional party lines and thus has no organizing base, no natural channel for representation in electoral politics.

Politics in most European countries, and certainly in the United States, is still dominated by the traditional parties of right and left. Under pressure from radical populism, though, it’s shifting more to the extremes, as we’re seeing with the British Labour Party and the French Socialists.

So this leaves a big space in the center. For the progressive wing of politics, the correct strategy is to make the case for building a new coalition out from the center. To do so, progressives need to acknowledge the genuine cultural anxieties of those voters who have deserted the cause of social progress: on immigration, the threat of radical Islamism and the difference between being progressive and appearing obsessive on issues like gender identity.

The center needs to develop a new policy agenda that shows people they will get support to help them through the change that’s happening around them. At the heart of this has to be an alliance between those driving the technological revolution, in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, and those responsible for public policy in government. At present, there is a chasm of understanding between the two. There will inevitably continue to be a negative impact on jobs from artificial intelligence and big data, but the opportunities to change lives for the better through technology are enormous.

Any new agenda has to focus on these opportunities for radical change in the way that government and services like health care serve people. This must include how we educate, skill and equip our work forces for the future; how we reform tax and welfare systems to encourage more fair distribution of wealth; and how we replenish our nations’ infrastructures and invest in the communities most harmed by trade and technology.

Progressives must reach across the party divide, making a virtue of nonpartisanship. Those who feel dispossessed within existing party structures should make common cause, and do so unashamedly. This is exactly what those of us are doing in Britain who are making the case for staying in a reformed European Union.
The politics of the progressive center has not died, but it needs reinventing and re-energizing. For liberal democracy to survive and thrive, we must build a new coalition that is popular, not populist.

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