

## **BREXIT AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A DEFENSE OF THE INDEFENSIBLE**

*A response to Politics and the English Language*

From the very beginning, Brexit has been haunted by the misuse of radical language, deliberately or otherwise. During this period, the peoples of the United Kingdom have been thrown propaganda from every side. This has caused some to divide themselves based on facts and figures which may not be entirely true, such as the infamous ‘Brexit bus’ debacle. This era of British politics has been an excellent example of how to use hyperbolic statements and obnoxious use of metaphor, but the recent debates have been particularly damning. Nonetheless, MPs are finally speaking out against the subversive rhetoric that our Prime Minister, among others, have been using to bully their way through debates.

However, this is indicative of a wider problem, not only in British politics, but in the act of politicking itself. Becoming aware of this and making a collective attempt to combat it is imperative to developing informed opinions and therefore regaining power within the political establishment, the rulers of which thrive in our ignorance. *Realpolitik*, or *political realism*, is long dead, and ideological war has become such an accepted norm, so that many do not even realise there is an alternative.

In this age, where we are seeing the catastrophic consequences of our own actions, and those with the power to make meaningful change shut themselves away in diamond-encrusted bunkers, there is nothing more pressing than to establish our own bastions: those of truth and cynicism. This is an essential first step towards fighting against those who would rather lie to protect their comfortable lives over caring for the communities that got them there in the first place.

In all of this, Brexit is but a microcosm of political drama. Yet, by studying how the British public has been manipulated, we can look at the bigger picture with greater insight,

and with a reference point from which to better understand the political world. It could also perhaps lead to a resurgence of the *Realpolitik*.

25<sup>th</sup> September, 2019. Parliament has just reopened after the prorogation was ruled unlawful. The green benches of the Commons are packed with MPs ready for another round of Prime Minister's Questions. From Her Majesty's Opposition, steely looks of indignation and an air of animosity, all weighing down on the Prime Minister, his eyes looking particularly weary. Member for Dewsbury, Paula Sherriff, stands up, papers quivering in her hands. In the House of Commons, it is forbidden to address any member directly; instead they should address the Speaker of the House. Even though Sherriff was abiding by this rule, she never broke eye contact with Johnson – this was personal.

“I genuinely do not seek to stifle just debate,” she began, “but this evening the Prime Minister has continually used pejorative language to describe an act of Parliament passed by this house. I'm sure that you would agree Mr. Speaker that we should not resort to using offensive, dangerous, or inflammatory language for legislation we do not agree with. And we stand here, Mr. Speaker, under the shield of our departed friend [Jo Cox] with many of us within this place subject to death threats and abuse every single day. And let me tell the Prime Minister that they often quote his words – ‘surrender act’, ‘betrayal’, ‘traitor’, and I for one am sick of it. We must moderate our language, and it has to come from the Prime Minister first.” The longer she spoke the more passionate she got, her voice shaking with every word. This statement very astutely sums up one of the main problems caused by using radical and violent language in politics. To no one's surprise, it is radical and violent actions. Sherriff's sentiment was echoed by many others that day, and the only defence the Prime Minister could muster was calling the allegations “humbug”.

There are other examples of toxic language being used in Parliament: Lib Dem MP, Sir Ed Davey, has gone on record supporting a ‘Remain Alliance’ to “decapitate” Boris

Johnson. Furthermore, Jess Phillips (Labour MP) said that she would “knife” Jeremy Corbyn “in the front not the back”. However, this isn’t anywhere close to one of the worst offences. Jo Cox, the late MP mentioned by Sherriff, was murdered by a man with connections to the neo-nazi group the ‘National Alliance’. Witnesses claimed that he was shouting “This is for Britain. Britain will always come first.” In a first world country, a politician’s death like this is almost unthinkable. Yet, it has happened. It is not fair to put direct blame on anyone but the murderer himself, but the fact that he could’ve very genuinely thought what he was doing was for the good of Britain, only shows how this extreme rhetoric has been internalised. If the Prime Minister can call those he doesn’t agree with ‘traitors’ and MPs can candidly toy with the idea of murdering their party leaders, why can’t we?

The fact that language has escalated to such a level on both sides of Parliament means that genuine reasoning is often void from debate, which only causes further hysteria. This is a problem which is confounded by the fact that many people accept that politicians lie and avoid questions. They are resentful of it. But, rather than seek to change it, they ignore politics entirely, which I have personally seen many times – especially from my generation. As frustrating as it is, we must move past this assumption, hold people accountable for what they say, and raise our voices when they when they break their promises.

Yet, this problem is not confined to Parliament. Another example of the increasingly violent response to politicians occurred in April of 2019, when British troops in Afghanistan were filmed using a picture of Jeremy Corbyn for target practise. An army spokesperson claimed that: "We are aware of a video circulating on social media, this behaviour is totally unacceptable and falls well below the high standards the army expects, a full investigation has been launched." Now, this was arguably a tongue-in-cheek affair, and was definitely not supposed to be made public, but the potential message it gives the British public is serious. Many people look up to and respect the Armed Forces. If those servicemen thought that it

was acceptable, surely we can? For such an actions to be normalised is only internalising hatred for those we disagree with, which is extremely unhealthy for politics and the general public. However, this is just a symptom of the wider problem: just why is it that these soldiers thought that was acceptable?

This is why the reduction of metaphor in politics is crucial to the future, not only of the United Kingdom, but the world as a whole. Imagine being a Hutu in Rwanda, 1994, and the radio telling you daily that you are superior and that the Tutsis are ‘snakes’. Imagine being a German citizen under Nazi rule, and not being able to escape the message that Jews are the ‘vermin’ of Europe. In both of these examples language was being used to demonise people, in order to make their systematic oppression seem natural and just to their respective communities. While our current situation is nowhere near that extreme, we must draw these parallels in order to see how metaphor can be used to subvert the general public. If we cannot trust our leaders to debate with facts, how can we trust one another to truly understand what they are fighting for? As much as they seem loathe to, our leaders must be role models to citizens. They must set the standard, and in the current system that is nigh on impossible.

So what then, can we learn from *Realpolitik*? Ludwig von Rochau, the man who coined the term, wrote that “to bring down the walls of Jericho, the Realpolitiker knows the simple pickaxe is more useful than the mightiest trumpet”. In its original terms, it aims to bring pragmatism to politics, so that the best answer for problems can be found genuinely, and we do not settle on ideas because we prefer one politician to another. While it has some negative connotations, this school of thought can be worked into our own, so that the public consciousness can grow stronger.

The deceitful misuse of language has serious, often fatal, consequences. We need to recognise this before it is too late – for millennia peoples across the world have been swayed by metaphor, but if we take this understanding into our collective political consciousness, we

can be far more objective and pragmatic in our political choices, which is essential in an era where misinformation has never been so rife. We have the power to make political change, and nothing is more important than seizing it.

We must be the generation that puts an end to this style of politics.

We must be the generation that wields tireless indignation against those who abuse language for their own benefit.

We must be the generation that states what we mean; nothing more, nothing less.