

**A very
British populism**

Julian Bagгинi





Counterpoint is a research and advisory group that uses social science methods to examine social, political and cultural dynamics. With a focus on how civil society operates in different contexts, Counterpoint helps organisations to develop solutions for more resilient and prosperous societies.



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	Acknowledgements	3
	Introduction	5
1	An anatomy of populism	9
2	Populisms past	17
3	A very British populism	27
4	The failure of political consumerism	33
5	The response to populism	39
6	Progressive populism	45
7	A better response?	49
8	The future of populism in the UK	55
	Notes	61
	References	65

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Introduction

It is often remarked that Britain has historically managed to avoid the kind of right-wing populism that has periodically infected the rest of Europe. In the 1930s, Mosley's Black Shirts never looked like they were getting anywhere near the same support as the fascists of Germany, Italy or Spain. More recently, xenophobic populist parties have secured big electoral successes in France, the Netherlands, Finland, Greece and Italy while in the UK, the British National Party crashed shortly after take-off. Now the softer-edged UKIP has taken on the populist mantle, inspiring more fear of the main parties losing votes than of anything more sinister.

Some see this as a sign of an inherent gentleness in the British national character that makes it inhospitable to the nastier forms of right-wing populism. Others see it as more of a happy accident, helped by an electoral system that makes it hard for new parties to gain inroads. This party warns against the complacency of the 'it could never happen here' mindset.

One thing we should be pretty sure of: whatever national exceptionalisms may exist, people are more or less the same wherever in the world they live. This means that if populism speaks to an aspect of human nature, then what we might call the springs of populism will exist in the UK as surely as they do anywhere else. The fact that they have not yet manifested themselves in an electorally successful far right party doesn't change that.

So we should start with the assumption that the same kinds of springs of populism that fuel the far right in Europe exist in Britain, unless and until proven otherwise. Working on that assumption, we need to look for manifestations of populism in Britain beyond the usual far right suspects.

A search is more likely to be successful if you know what you're looking for. So before turning to the specifics of Britain, I want to begin with a sketch of populism's key features, as manifest historically and in contemporary Europe.

An anatomy of populism

In its most general, value-neutral sense, populism is defined simply as ‘support for or representation of ordinary people or their views’.¹ In social science, however, populism is almost always understood as entailing a malign kind of simplification in which the virtuous and the wicked are neatly divided between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

So Catherine Fieschi, for example, sees populism as involving two key elements: ‘the perception of a fundamental, unbridgeable fracture between the real people and the elite’ and ‘a conviction that ordinary people in their common sense and emotionally direct relationship to politics have all the answers’.² She sees this as rooted in a ‘sentiment of betrayal of the democratic promise’ by elites ‘seen as having betrayed the trust of the people, and the former are consistently depicted as usurpers’.³

Tim Bale sees at the core of populism a distinction ‘between “the people” – long-suffering, sensible, salt of the earth – and the political (and sometimes financial) class – a self-obsessed, self-interested, nest-feathering elite which will sell them down the river every time’.⁴

Similarly, the editors of a recent academic book on populism define it as pitting ‘a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous “others” who were together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice’.⁵ Here, it is the phrase ‘virtuous and homogeneous’ which invites us to assume that populism inevitably results in simplistic fallacies.

It is worth stressing right from the start that not every anti-elitist movement which sides with the people is necessarily going to end up so fatally simplistic in its analysis as to undermine its core soundness. In its struggle against apartheid, for example, South Africa's ANC could be praised precisely for having achieved a victory of the people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who were together depicted as depriving the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. Indeed, in the United States (it appears uniquely) populism is understood in positive terms, and not solely as the preserve of the right. There, populism is traced back to the formation of the National Farmers' Alliance, in 1877, which became part of a wider Farmers' Alliance, morphing into the People's Party in the 1890s, commonly known as the 'Populists'. The populists fought for the interests of poor cotton and wheat farmers.

Populism is a mistake therefore only to the extent that it exaggerates or creates a false us/them divide, and/or it is based on a false account of deprivation of the rights of the people. To use a horticultural metaphor, populism is democracy that has bolted: concerns have grown from the grass roots of society but because they have not been dealt with properly, they have not produced desirable fruit but have taken over the plot with their highly visible but useless flowers. That is one reason why '[p]opulism seems unable to exist in the absence of a measure of democracy', as Fieschi has argued.⁶

Because of the tendency of human beings to see things in excessively simplistic tribal terms, and for self-serving biases to lead us to attribute lack of personal wealth and success to the injustice of others rather than luck or our own choices, it is very hard for any 'virtuous' populism to avoid descending into something much more malign. Even those with a genuine grievance will tend to demonise the opposition and see injustice even

where there is none. The death of Margaret Thatcher is a reminder of when this kind of polarisation took hold. The miners, for example, could have credibly claimed that the Conservative government was a dangerous 'other' that sought to deprive their communities of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. But that idea, in the hands of a rabble-rouser like Arthur Scargill, became a Manichean narrative in which none of the underlying problems with the sustainability of the coal industry were acknowledged and the National Coal Board and government were cast as villains, pure and simple.

Why and when does populism emerge? Every particular outburst has its own particular story, of course, but there are some general trends. First and foremost, there must be something for the 'people' to feel aggrieved about, real or illusory. Populist leaders do not create their cause *ex nihilo*. It should certainly be a working assumption that where populism arises, the populace is experiencing some kind of real hardship or injustice, unless proven otherwise. At the same time, problems alone won't guarantee a populist upsurge. "The masses" do not rebel in instinctive response to hard times and exploitation,' wrote the historian Lawrence Goodwyn, he thought 'because they have been culturally organised by their societies not to rebel.'⁷

These grievances are typically negatives or absences, and four appear to be particularly key.

No trust

One condition, necessary but not sufficient by itself for populism to thrive, is a loss of trust in authority. As Fieschi puts it: 'Look, say the populists, the media, the bureaucrats, mainstream political parties and every other hallmark of the professional political class and the professionalisation of politics, policy and economics are

finally revealed for the useless usurpers they always were: not so much experts as a clique of intellectuals in it at the expense of ordinary folk and along for the ride for as long as it lasted.’⁸ The provocation of this could be a major event; the culmination of a slower, long-term trend; or a combination of both. This seems to be the best explanation for the current low status of many experts. The financial crisis seemed to show that economists, bankers and politicians had no idea what they were doing. But even setting that aside, ‘the notion of expertise as we know it, and as it has served us,’ says Fieschi, ‘is on its way out.’ Knowledge and expertise has been ‘democratised’ through blogs, Wikipedia and web self-publishing. Amateurs rub shoulders in cyberspace with experts, while the failures of experts cannot be hidden in the age of the worldwide web. ‘The breakdown of authority based on expertise and professionalism, combined with the spectacle of apparent ineptitude flashed across the world,’ writes Fieschi, ‘have led to the shunning and ridiculing of experts and resulted in a vacuum of authority across all sectors.’

No alternatives

A second condition, both necessary and sufficient, is a ‘perceived lack of real policy alternatives’, as Jordi Vaquer puts it. In south-eastern Europe this is manifest ‘in a context of formal democracy, with a lack of substantial political choices’ while in western Europe the problem is that ‘policy alternatives seem excessively constrained by mainstream parties’.⁹ Similarly, Elisabeth Carter has argued that the far right is more likely to do well when the centre-right party is moderate and there is convergence between the mainstream left and right.¹⁰

We can see examples of this in several countries where populist parties have emerged strongly.

In Greece, for example, none of the mainstream parties was able to offer a credible alternative to the EU-imposed austerity plan, embodied in the notorious Memorandum. ‘Nobody within the country really owns that,’ say Aristos Doxiadis and Manos Matsaganis.¹¹ Ordinary Greeks who felt that they were being made to pay the price while the wealthy and criminal got off lightly thus had no one to turn to to express their dissatisfaction at this other than the extremely nasty Golden Dawn.

In the Netherlands and in Scandinavia, the absence of serious alternatives is a result of a deep-rooted commitment to consensus in politics. This worked fine just as long as the economy was doing well and society was homogeneous and harmonious. But when immigration began to challenge the national culture and the financial crisis brought in austerity, the consensus-minded mainstream simply could not offer a voice for those who were discontent.

No debate

Related to this lack of perceived options, but not quite the same, is the absence of open and vigorous debate in the mainstream. It is not just that no alternatives are offered; certain key issues are not even discussed. Johanna Korhonen describes just this situation in Finland, whose ‘consensus culture’ allows ‘only a very thin culture of debate regarding society’. She goes on: ‘The populist rhetoric cuts through this muffled discussion culture like a hot knife through butter, because people have a pent-up need for discussion. “That Soini guy is so good because he dares to speak! And he really knows how to speak!” I once heard an elderly woman gushing.’ If people ‘are not allowed to express their views and are not being heard in an appropriate discussion, the only alternative is inappropriate discussion’.¹²

No voice

Also related, and also not quite the same, is the sense that the ‘people’ are not even party to any of the discussions going on. As Michel Wievorka has described, this complaint has been used with great effect by Marine Le Pen to bolster support for the Front National. ‘Farmers, unemployed, workers, pensioners, those of you who live in rural areas of the country,’ she cried in a speech, ‘you are the forgotten, invisible majority, crushed by a financial system gone mad.’ This resonated. ‘We don’t exist,’ complained one young worker.¹³

Overall, then, the general pattern seems clear. Populism emerges when there is some combination between perceived difficulty for the ordinary person in the street and a perception that elites can’t help or are part of the problem, because they lack the expertise they claim for themselves, won’t engage with the people, or conspire to maintain a cosy consensus. Although this might seem obvious, one corollary which is not usually drawn out is that, unless conflict is played out within the mainstream political arena, it will be played out outside it. We might call this the populist paradox: too much fear of conflict, too much emphasis on consensus, is therefore a recipe for the creation of more conflict and more challenge to the mainstream consensus from dissenting populist outsiders. Effective democracy relies on a Goldilocks approach to conflict: too much or too little makes it impossible to balance the competing interests of different members of society, meaning such conflict is essentially what politics is all about. In politics, *Justice is Conflict*, as the late, great political philosopher Stuart Hampshire put it in the title of his last book.

Equipped with this general framework we are now in a position to identify the springs of populism and how they have expressed themselves in Britain,

past, present and perhaps even future. To do this all we need to ask is: Who are ‘us’? Who are ‘them’? And how have they played out their antagonisms?

Populisms past

If we ask who has been cast in the roles of the virtuous people and the dangerous elite in Britain, we can see that there has been no shortage of actors.

For much of the 20th century, the casting was obvious. The virtuous people were the working classes, who made up the vast majority of the population but who saw little of the wealth of one of the richest countries in the world. The elites who perpetuated this were the upper classes, landowning gentry and rich industrialists. This did not lead to a rise in a kind of nasty-populism for several reasons. First of all, the 'virtuous people' were indeed both largely homogeneous and had genuine grievances. No one was manufacturing scare-stories about reds under the beds or dangerous immigrants. The cause was just.

Critically, this aggrieved people had a respectable voice, initially through the unions and in time through the Labour Party. The system delivered. It was given time to do so because the 'them' was not some despotic monarchy or military dictatorship but an upper class that had been running the show since time immemorial, unfairly but not callously or violently. The popular monarchy no doubt reinforced the sense that for all its unfairness, there was something 'natural' and 'traditional' about the status quo. So there was a lack of animus against the elite other, which, combined with real progress to advance the rights of 'us', allowed the potentially populist impulse to be channelled through mainstream politics.

And so it continued until the late 1970s. Even as the working class as we had known it declined, the social divide still ran pretty much along class lines, and Labour and the unions continued to support their side. So there were plenty of us/them grievances in Britain, but the other conditions for populism's rise were not fulfilled. The crisis of expertise is more recent, and before then the 'people' saw a Labour movement engaging with their problems, taking them seriously and fighting for them in the mainstream.



The fracturing of we, the people

Things have changed, however, starting in the Thatcher era. Although she was incredibly divisive, it is arguable that Thatcher herself muddied what could have been more neatly populist waters. Thatcher championed several causes on the side of the 'ordinary working man' that she was in other ways the enemy of. People bought their council houses and made a quick buck on British Gas shares. She herself was a grocer's daughter from Grantham and played up the ideas of 'common sense' household thrift and hard work, qualities admired by the traditional working classes. She was also an unabashed

patriot in a country where many of the university-educated classes were embarrassed by any flag-waving. So paradoxically, although she was by all accounts the most divisive leader of the 20th century, in several crucial respects she put herself on the side of the good, honest, ordinary people. Populism could not get a hold in this complicated scenario. Those who felt utterly opposed had the Labour Party and unions to stick with, while others saw good things in the ruling elite.

In the longer run, the Thatcher years unarguably contributed to the blurring of any clear sense of who the virtuous, homogeneous masses were. Although the decline in the proportion of people self-identifying as working class has been slow, gradual and non-linear (working-class self-identity weakened in the 1970s and revived in the 1980s), the long-term trend is for a marked decrease in the strength of this identity, as shown by British Social Attitudes survey data. So, in 1964, 65.7 per cent of Britons self-identified as working class and by 2005 that figure had fallen only as far as 58.2 per cent. However, these figures include people who both volunteer a class identity and those who will choose one if prompted to do so. The 'unprompted' are those who answer 'yes' to the question 'Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to any particular class?' and are then asked to say which one. The prompted are those who answer 'no' to the first question but who will give an answer to the question 'Most people say they belong to either the middle class or to the working class. Do you ever think of yourself as being in one of these classes?' In 1964, 34 per cent self-identified as working class in the unprompted scenario. By 2004, this proportion had decreased to 25 per cent, at the same time as unprompted middle-class affiliation had grown from 14 per cent to 20 per cent.¹⁴

Class thus no longer provides a clear divider between a majority 'us' and elite 'them'. However, if you look at

British culture over the last 25 years or so, it's not difficult to see that the distinction between perceived elites and the homogeneous people lives on in other forms.

The new us and them

For much of the middle class, represented by the *Daily Mail*, the villainous elites have been the liberal intelligentsia. You can pretty much capture this in one headline to a Quentin Letts *Mail* column: 'I am white, middle-class, love my wife and adore traditional TV sitcoms. So why does the BBC hate me?' The sense here is of a virtuous, homogeneous people comprising white, respectable, Christian, 'hard-working ordinary families' threatened by a dangerous left-wing elite who want to advocate atheism and minority religions, prefer to give money to immigrants and the unemployed than to working tax-payers, and who are more supportive of gay rights than heterosexual families.

This, however, has not led to nasty right-wing populism, for several reasons. First of all, it is central to the identity of the 'people' that they are decent, respectable and law-abiding. They are very reluctant to get involved with any far-right party which has associations of thuggery and council-estate skinheads. Revolution is after all itself a fishy European import.

The outlet for their discontent is not the street but the pages of the *Mail* and the *Express* and to a certain extent the rank and file of the Conservative party, which has enough members voicing these concerns for people to feel there is some representation of them there. Even though there is a strong anti-immigration and minority strand in this, the narrative they buy into does not lay the blame at immigrants but at the liberal elites who don't care for the traditional character of the country. When people say such things as 'I've got nothing against the immigrants' they usually mean it. Indeed,

they often say 'who could blame them? Wouldn't you rather live here, with all the benefits, than in bongo-bongo land?'

The working class now pits itself against the same 'other'. The virtuous, homogeneous people here are the traditional white, working-class Britons who had their dignified industrial work taken away from them by the Tories in the 1980s and who have now seen Labour betray them as they go hunting for votes in middle England. They also often believe that immigrants and minorities get more respect and better treatment than they do. So although the 'us' is a little different in the working-class and middle-class cases, they have enough in common and there is sufficient agreement about who 'them' is to have some sense that, despite their differences, they are on the same side, that of the ordinary, decent person.

It surprises many, particularly those for whom Marx remains much more than of just historical interest, why the now often underemployed or unemployed working class is not more rebellious. One reason may be that even when labour was more organised and strikes were the norm, there was moderation in how to go about things which was different from the continental way. Lorry drivers and farmers blockading ports and youths hurling missiles at the police is something the French do. The right way to do things here is to gather round a brazier handing out leaflets.

The miners' strike of 1984–85 was the violent exception to the rule, and although now it seems it is the police violence that is most remembered, at the time, away from the mining communities, the perception that it was the miners who were resorting to violence too easily did much to undermine public support for them. This perception was widespread: *Private Eye*, for example, made a mock appeal to help the mining families at Christmas: '£2 will buy a small brick to throw at the police. £3 a slightly larger brick,' and so on, until

‘£100 will buy a concrete pillar weighing well over half a ton.’¹⁵ This last item was chosen carefully, since on 30 November 1984 two striking miners dropped a concrete block from a motorway footbridge onto a taxi taking a strike-breaking ‘scab’ to the Merthyr Vale mine, killing the driver, David Wilkie. The miners’ strike was deeply divisive, with some collieries even opposing the National Union of Mineworkers’ strategy. As such, it could never be seen as representing the homogeneous, virtuous people and so was never a truly populist moment. Furthermore, since it ended in a working class both divided and fallen, it perhaps shattered any illusion that ordinary working people represented a homogeneous and virtuous people. The former industrial communities feel as though they are on the margins of society, not representative of the whole of it. ‘We’ are no longer the people but the outcasts.

The springs of populism have therefore been alive and well in Britain throughout the modern era. It is simply that they have found outlets which are more benign than many of its European counterparts, having a habit of manifesting themselves most clearly in relatively non-political contexts.

Containing populist pressure

Furthermore, mainstream politics has been adept at incorporating populist notes into the tunes it plays. The worship of ‘common sense’, for example, is a common way of pitting the wisdom of the people against the pseudo-profundity of academics and ‘experts’. I’ve interviewed several MPs who were also philosophers, and all acknowledge it is not in their best interests to advertise this. For example, asked if in this country it’s almost a disadvantage to confess a philosophical background, Oliver Letwin replied ‘Massive’, without hesitation. ‘I do my best to conceal it.’ Asked to explain this he

sees good and bad reasons. ‘The good side is that this country is a robustly commonsensical sort of place in which people distrust over-intellectualising. After all, it’s possible to intellectualise yourself into the gas chambers. The bad side is that this is also a country in which there is a sort of excessive distaste for intellectuals, and there’s something good about a country like France where people came out in the streets when Sartre died, which certainly wouldn’t happen in England.’

Jesse Norman also says ‘the British public is famously nervous about what it sees as abstract ideas or academic talk’. Tony Wright is another former MP who thinks ‘the thought side is often a disability in the routine world of politics’ and that ‘[i]t doesn’t do to be too reflective, you just have to know which side you’re on and who to cheer for really, and it just complicates matters to be able to see two sides of a question’.¹⁶

This is a very strong potential source of populism in the UK, but politicians in this country know this and so tend to dodge the bullets. Westminster already talks the languages of ‘ordinary, hard-working families’ rather than that of the Oxford seminar, and occasional lapses (such as chancellors talking of ‘endogenous growth theory’) are swiftly mocked and so not made again. The elites in many ways take on board the anti-intellectualism of the masses, learning that to retain credibility, they must radiate good common sense, rather than theorising.

This is just the most obvious way in which populism has been more of a social and cultural force than a political one. You see it in a disdain for ‘fancy food’ and experts telling people what to eat, even when those experts affect Mockney accents. You see it in the assertion that ‘boys will be boys’ and women are women. You see it in the near universal contempt for ‘political correctness’, an imposition of the intelligentsia who don’t know a joke when they see one. In each case, the virtuous,

homogeneous people are defined by their common sense and lack of extremism. Britain's populists are therefore small-c conservatives and would make for very reluctant radicals indeed.

A very British populism

Class, however, has certainly not gone away. Today, 'the white working class' increasingly refers to a specific subset of what were its historical members. These are very often non-working classes. There are many families where the main breadwinner in the 1970s was a male miner or steelworker who lost his job in the 1980s and no one in the family has worked since: the phenomenon of a third generation on benefits. Those in work increasingly have low-paid, low-status jobs. As more people stay in school post-16 and nearly half go to university, and more skilled manual work is becoming automated, there are fewer good jobs left for the less educated.

Several of the conditions for political populism's rise among this white working class were clearly fulfilled by the end of the 1980s, and so it should not have been surprising when a party came along to tap into this: the BNP. The problem with analysing the rise of the BNP is that commentators became understandably fixated with its racist agenda, especially since many of its most prominent members had previously been in the National Front. However, the truth is that most people who voted BNP were uncomfortable with its racism. People have learned to be very sceptical of the claim 'I'm not a racist but...', but usually there is more to this. People who claim this often are racist in implicit ways they don't even recognise, in that they hold negative unfounded stereotypes about minority ethnic groups. But then psychological experiments such as the Harvard Implicit Bias test show that

almost everyone harbours some unconscious prejudice. But even if ‘we are all racist’ in some sense, this is clearly different from full-blown racism, and even many BNP voters are usually sincere when they claim to have no hatred of ethnic minorities and wish them no ill.

A very vivid illustration of this came with a recent Channel 4 News film following Nigel Farage on a visit to Bulgaria, whose citizens will soon have the right to live and work in the UK as part of the EU single market. Farage believes that this will result in a ‘flood’ of immigrants. Farage was at ease mixing with the Bulgarians, who often took to him too, surprised that he was not ‘some sort of three-headed monster’, as one Roma leader put it. ‘I’m not saying anything against the Bulgarian people, I wish them well,’ he told reporter Jonathan Rugman and there seems no reason to doubt this. It is simply that Farage thinks: ‘If I was a Bulgarian, I’d be packing my bags now, wanting to come to Britain.’ Farage’s rage is directed at the politicians who have opened the door to people who, as he sees it, would be mad, not bad, to refuse the invitation in.¹⁷

That such unease about immigration and minorities need not go hand in hand with hostility towards immigrants and minorities became evident to me when I spent six months in the S66 district of Rotherham in 2005, researching my book *Welcome to Everytown* on British folk philosophy. The conclusion was confirmed when I returned a few years later after Billy Blair secured a seat for the BNP on the town council. A local shopkeeper was happy to say that Blair was ‘a friend of ours’, a ‘good bloke’, but what was surprising was that this BNP voter was a Birmingham-born British Asian. Even Blair himself seemed unfamiliar with the BNP’s policy that ethnic minorities should not comprise more than 2–3 per cent of the population, appearing to disagree with it. ‘We’re not talking about any breed or colour

here, we’re talking about people coming into the country and if you’ll do it for £10 an hour, they’ll do it for £5 an hour,’ he told me. ‘I think people worry about their families, their children, their grandchildren, they think that within the next 10, 15 years, there’ll be no work for them. I think people are frightened.’

The blame is laid more with politicians and especially Europe for allegedly giving priority to foreigners over the indigenous population. Race becomes the lightning rod for discontent as the supposed priority given to minorities is the most visible sign of how they are now at the bottom of the heap. Discontent about race and immigration should therefore be seen as a symptom of populist discontent, not its cause. (This is probably also true in the rest of Europe as well as in Britain).

A new populist vehicle

Despite its brief flourish, the BNP could not sustain its early, modest successes, for two reasons. First, it just was too racist for most. Second, partly because of this, it did not have a wide enough appeal to pick up support among the middle classes. Now, however, a party has emerged that provides a more respectable alternative for working-class and middle-class discontents alike. Unlike the BNP and before it the National Front, UKIP’s corporate personality, embodied in its leader Nigel Farage, is precisely that of the disgusted *Daily Mail* reader. While being fiercely anti-immigration, it avoids all trace of overt or even implied racism.

Both working-class and middle-class discontents are rallying around UKIP. A fascinating YouGov analysis in February 2013 showed that UKIP has a much more even spread of support across social classes than Labour or the Conservatives: the profile of its supporters is pretty much exactly a quarter AB, C1, C2 and DE respectively.

Twenty-six per cent read the *Sun* and a further 26 per cent the *Mail*, with the *Express* (6 per cent) and the *Telegraph* (8 per cent), and 20 per cent reading no paper at all. Fewer identify themselves as right wing than as Conservatives (46 per cent compared with 60 per cent) and 23 per cent consider themselves centre, as opposed to 18 per cent for Conservative and Labour voters. While 60 per cent voted conservative in 2010, only 7 per cent voted Labour.¹⁸ However, I do not think this means we should conclude that UKIP does not gain support from ex-Labour voters. My experience in 2010 was that many traditional Labour voters had already deserted the party, disgusted by what they saw as its betrayal of the ordinary working man and woman.

The rise of UKIP is therefore an interesting and unprecedented phenomenon. If previous right-wing populist parties have failed to take off because they do not chime with the inherent moderation of the would-be populist electorate, UKIP cannot be relied on to fizzle out for the same reasons. We should take seriously the possibility that in UKIP, Britain's politically underrepresented populist impulses may have found a vehicle for success.

The failure of political consumerism

When looking at the 'supply-side' factors for the rise of the populist UKIP, the failures of the mainstream parties are usually seen in terms of being too dismissive of popular grievances. However, I think there is a deeper problem here, one that cannot be remedied simply by starting to pay attention to issues which have hitherto been ignored or swept under the carpet. The problem is in how the parties now chase the popular vote and respond to public opinion.

All the main political parties seek to be popular, but none seek to be seen as populist. This is not a contradiction. If the democratic mainstream responds to popular demand, then the political elite does its job and there is no need for a populist backlash against it. However, I would argue that as the political parties have become more professional in their pursuit of the popular vote, so have they aggravated rather than ameliorated the drivers of populism.

The emptiness of Middle England

The first factor is the realisation by the parties that the mathematics of elections means that it seems obvious that it is more important to listen to public opinion than that of the party membership. From this it follows that parties must appeal to the centre, and that their policies must be driven by opinion polls.

In theory, this would seem to transfer power away from a small cadre of party activists and towards the

genuinely popular voice, and so stifle the drive for populism. And yet it is precisely since the parties have fought for the middle that populism has become a significant, though still minor, force in British politics. However, on reflection, this would seem to be an entirely natural result. A politics that focuses on the swing voter and Middle Britain can only marginalise the marginalised yet more. When all parties speak for the mass in the middle, none appear to stand for anyone at the still expansive edges.

What's more, few identify with this supposed middle anyway. 'Middle England' – a term which started gaining currency in the Major years and settled on its current ubiquity under Blair – is everywhere and nowhere, a fictional place which no one calls home.¹⁹ 'Mondeo man' and 'Worcester Woman' are abstractions, averaged-out constructs that no one would feel represents them. Neither the typical nor the average voter exists in the real world, which means parties are effectively standing up for people who aren't there. When you try to speak for everyone you end up speaking for no one.

Another effect of the race for the middle is to create a sense that dissent is being stifled. Back in the heyday of post-war two-party politics, although people still complained that 'all politicians are the same' – meaning that they looked after their own interests – most took it for granted that Labour and Conservative stood for very different interest groups and values. The drive towards the middle has created the perception of a cosy consensus at the heart of the political establishment. And if there is no challenge, no real conflict, in the middle, then people will feel the need to look to the fringes to provide the necessary dissent.

The end of representation

There is another effect, less noticeable but perhaps even more important. This is what could be termed the rise of political consumerism. Consumerism is about giving people what they want, without the 'mediation', as Tim Bale puts it, of politicians or experts.²⁰ The parties have adapted to this accordingly. Rather than reflecting the settled will of the party membership, from whose ranks they are drawn, today's career politician belongs to a separate profession, a kind of executive manager who starts on the career ladder as a graduate. In true consumerist style, this manager's job is to deliver to the public what it wants, or to make it want what it is able to deliver.

What this erodes is any real sense of representation. The politician *represents* neither the electorate nor her party. No matter how hard she strives to give people what they want, she belongs to the 'them' whose job it is to serve 'us', and inevitably she does not fully succeed. For the traditional working class, this has become even worse, because there at least used to be a route into Westminster through the trade unions into Labour. But with the unions diminished and the party desperate to avoid being seen as being comprised of union lackeys, that base for entry to political participation is now limited. So, fewer and fewer senior Labour politicians are seen as 'one of us'. Of the 22 members of the shadow cabinet, ten went to fee-paying schools and three went to grammars. Nine went to either Oxford or Cambridge.

The weakening of class identity as a whole also feeds into this. When it is no longer even clear what it means to be working or middle class, there is no clear sense of belonging to a group that can be represented. 'The likes of us' are no longer members of a well-defined group, spread all over the country, but more fragmented groupings, such as the people 'born and bred around here' or 'from the estates'. No mass group even claims to represent these

people in anything other than vague, general ways, partly because to identify too much with one such fragment of the population risks putting off those in others.

Pallid consensus versus red-blooded conviction

Put these factors together and the result is toxic. No one feels as though the political elite represents them, no one feels a connection with Westminster, and a large minority feel that no one is even interested in their problems. So the irony is that precisely by trying to pander to the will of the majority, the mainstream political parties have created a dislocation between political elites and the public, creating the conditions for populism. When consensus politics collides with discontent, there is no channel for that discontent other than through the populist fringes.

The Greek and Dutch examples in previous Counterpoint reports seem to bear this out.²¹ In Greece, the mainstream parties offered no resistance, no alternative, to the EU plan. In the Netherlands, the mainstream parties would not talk about immigration. With no room for friction on the key issues at the centre of power, discontent has to find other outlets.

Once that discontent arises, the logic of political consumerism means that there is a new demand which the parties need to supply. But it is too late. The discontents have already lost any sense that the parties speak for them. When the parties claim that they hear what the public is saying about, say, immigration, the public knows it is being told what it thinks the parties wants them to hear. What has been lost is any sense that the parties speak from conviction.

UKIP, on the other hand, comes across as an old-fashioned party of conviction. UKIP doesn't oppose immigration because focus groups tell it that it must. It exists because it opposes immigration. Nigel Farage may be

dismissed by many as a buffoon, but few doubt his sincerity. Could the same be said of the perception of other party leaders? No wonder then, that according to 'Ipsos MORI's March *Political Monitor* report, Farage is not only the party leader the public most thinks is doing a good job – he's the only one to get a positive satisfaction rating. Thirty-five per cent said they were satisfied with the way he was running his party against 26 per cent who were dissatisfied. By comparison, 32 per cent were satisfied with Ed Miliband, 52 per cent dissatisfied; 31 per cent satisfied with David Cameron, 61 per cent dissatisfied; 22 per cent satisfied with Nick Clegg, 65 per cent dissatisfied.²²

No more market politics

This is a striking example of how profoundly wrong it is to apply market thinking to politics. Giving people what they want doesn't work: they have to believe you want it too. Even in the market, on which this kind of politics is modelled, the most successful companies in the long-term create products and services with real merit, not just ones that push the buttons of the day. That strategy may result in a sales peak or a poll surge but it is no recipe for creating lasting appeal.

The lesson for responding to populist concerns should therefore be clear: the mainstream cannot take them on board as a tactic. It has to be convinced of where they have merits and where they do not, champion the former and challenge the latter.

This kind of 'Yes, but...' politics does not go down well. Party strategists will tell you of the importance of clear, unequivocal messages: that much as it would be nice to have a nuanced public debate, nuance doesn't work. Unfortunately, they could be right. But if the current approach isn't working and is simply making populism respectable for UKIP – and who knows what might

The response to populism

Perhaps the best way to understand what lies behind the response to populism in the UK is to note the remarkable symmetry between British and American assumptions about populism. Both see it as a symptom of a lack of faith or trust in the ruling institutions, but whereas in Britain this is taken to be a worrying sign, in America, it is taken to be an encouraging one. In Britain, democracy is working when the electorate can trust its government to get on with things; in America, democracy is not working when the electorate leaves government to get on with things.

This is despite the fact that British culture has a deep-rooted suspicion of elites, most obviously manifest in its historical anti-intellectualism. But this is not straightforward. The right attitude, it seems, is a world-weary sceptical quietism, not rebellion. The typical working man or woman, for example, may scoff at the profs and toffs, but there is a tacit understanding that institutions like parliament are not ‘for the likes of us’. We complain about elites but do not convert that into action. The spirit of America, however, is that complaints can and must lead to remedial action. This is captured in Martin Luther King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail, 16 April 1963: ‘So I have not said to my people: “Get rid of your discontent.” Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action.’ Today, protests such as Occupy are described as populist by supporters as well as opponents.

In Britain, although populism is defined as mistrust of elites by the masses, its identification is more a symptom of mistrust of the masses by elites. There is a long tradition of this in the UK, as, for example, John Carey's brilliant *The Intellectuals and the Masses* detailed for the 1920s. It continues today in images of chavs, irresponsible crisp-munching slobs, reality-TV-watching morons and shopaholic robots.

The populist trap

This deep-grained suspicion of mass opinion by elites has led the left to dismiss too many popular concerns as mere manifestations of populism. There is a kind of populist trap here: if elites do not respond to genuine grievances, then populist parties step into the void. This means that genuine grievances get hitched onto nationalist and xenophobic wagons, and so lose even more legitimacy though guilt by association.

Take white working-class grievance as an example. From 1945 until the late 1970s, the white working class always felt it had the Labour Party and the trade unions to defend its interests. But as the working class shrunk, Labour had to reach out beyond its natural constituency in order to become a viable party of government. And in the 1980s, the Conservative government smashed union power. Since then, the white working class has with some justification felt ignored or patronised. Indeed, the very name of the class has often become a misnomer. Work, once a source of pride, has either vanished or become something considered more demeaning, often less well paid. You can see this in *The Full Monty*, in which the ex-steelworker becomes a security guard, but this is not seen as a proper, 'man's job'. Contrary to what Marx believed, the wage-earner did not often perceive this alienation from his labour as problematic, so long as the

work was well paid and respected. What is problematic is having a low-status job, or none at all.

In this context, it is natural for the white working classes to perceive even the historical party of their interests as 'others' who were complicit in depriving them of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. The situation echoes that of France, where '[t]raditional trade unions have lost their capacity to act as a frame of reference for the working class and the FN has rushed in to fill the gap'.²³ In the UK, into that same void came the BNP, and then UKIP, as well as to a lesser extent the populist left party Respect. They take on the grievances, which then adopt a xenophobic edge: the problems of the white working class are seen to be a result of giving priority to immigrants and ethnic minorities. With this radical right agenda blended in, the real grievances get dismissed as simply manifestations of bogus grievances against minority groups.

Detoxification

The conclusion reached by many is that to avoid ugly populism, mainstream political parties need to recognise the truth in populist complaints. Another of these is the growth in inequality, or at the very least awareness and tolerance of it. A vastly unequal society is bound to lead to mistrust of rich elites. If low- and median-earning households are feeling pressed while higher earners carry on happily, it is only natural that people will feel the elites are complicit in denying the ordinary mass of people their fair share.

This argument has received quite an airing in recent years. Most would agree with Jordi Vaquer that "The isolation and policies of "cordon sanitaire" around populist parties have not, in the long run, proven effective. Trying to delegitimize these parties as anti-democratic has not

worked either.’²⁴ As Tristram Hunt has put it: ‘It is incumbent on all mainstream political parties to meet this [populist] challenge head on.’²⁵ David Goodhart has led the call for progressives to acknowledge as legitimate the concerns about population influxes. The Labour Party has for some time been prepared to grasp populist nettles, recognising ‘real grievances’ over immigration and undeserving welfare claimants. These changes, more than anything else, are probably responsible for the detoxification of populist complaints about immigration from its automatic racist associations.

The consequences, however, may not be quite what many intended. While the extreme right has indeed been declawed, this has not allowed the mainstream parties to regain the trust of the proto-populists. Rather, it has simply allowed the more moderate populist UKIP to widen its support. The mainstream has made populism respectable: it has not made itself respectable for populists.

What UKIP represents therefore is a detoxified populism, providing a channel for populist grievances that can credibly claim to be free of the kind of racism that has tarred previous populist parties. Such a detoxification was always possible because there is nothing in the core idea of populism that need be toxic.

If this is right, then it raises an intriguing question. Is it better to have a nasty populist movement at the fringes or a nicer one closer to the centre? By taking the populist agenda on board, rather than taking it on, the mainstream has effectively opted for the second strategy, however unwittingly.

Answering this question is difficult because we don’t know the counterfactuals. Could populism have been defeated without acknowledging its merits? Would simply dismissing populist concerns have only increased the sense of grievance that allows extremist parties to flourish? We simply don’t know. However, it should also

be recognised that choices are rarely neatly binary. It’s not simply a question of *whether* the mainstream acknowledges populist concerns, but *how*.

Progressive populism

Before turning to what the response to populism ought to be, I want to briefly mention an often overlooked aspect of contemporary populism in the UK: its progressive, liberal and left-wing manifestation. This is most evident in the new localism, which is a reaction against national and multinational business and/or national and supranational governments and governing bodies.

The new localism identifies the virtuous and homogeneous 'us' as the local community, defending its interests against the dangerous 'others' who impose their bland, homogeneous, placeless, insensitive values and products on an unwilling populace. In this populism, multinational corporations take the role usually occupied by national government, depriving the people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. You can see this in initiatives such as the Bristol Pound, which has the slogan 'Our City. Our Money'.

This kind of populism might appear benign. But, ironically, although it appears to be anti-consumerist, it is in fact consumerism's logical extension. Late capitalism encouraged people to think their demands could be satisfied, with as little mediation as possible. It was therefore only a matter of time before 'fat cat' multinational middle men came to be seen as standing as much in the way of consumer interests as patrician politicians and experts. Perhaps more significantly, this kind of progressive populism quite clearly bolsters the kind of parochialism that is the antithesis of progressive internationalism.

Behind the virtuous rejection of faceless multinationals lies a more questionable elevation of the local community over distant others. The result is that people are repeating slogans which surely, on reflection, they would reject. Many businesses supportive of the Bristol Pound, for example, are also supportive of Fair Trade. So why on earth do they talk as though keeping money in the local community is the best thing?

The risk is that this kind of thinking takes on a life of its own. There was an example of this in a recent BBC report on the new trend for ‘suspended coffee’, which originated in Naples, whereby customers at cafés buy a drink for anyone who is short of cash to have later. Cafés taking part in this scheme do so for good intentions. Coffee7 in Forest Gate, East London, for example, gives many of its suspended coffees to asylum seekers from a nearby project. Nonetheless, there is something worrying in the explanation of one customer, Lloyd, who buys suspended coffees. ‘I know the people here, they know me,’ he says. ‘I know the person who runs the asylum project, the renewal programme, I trust everybody. You see your contribution actually working in a direct and local way, rather than going off to some international charity.’²⁶

It is as though international charities are as much to be avoided as multinational corporations. Charity ends at home, among people you know and can see. There are limits to how much people are prepared to give away and so every pound spent on a suspended coffee is a pound that won’t be going to a larger aid organisation. Buying lattes for local people takes precedence over supplying clean water to people in developing countries.

Another form of progressive populism has been manifested in protests like Occupy. This identifies the virtuous and homogeneous ‘us’ as the ‘99 per cent’, defending its interests against the dangerous ‘others’ of banking and finance. It distrusts elites to the extent

of refusing to have any kind of leadership at all. Again, there is some good to the motivation. But the movement is also Manichean and lacks a positive programme. It becomes a focus of discontent without providing any real option for its relief.

These kinds of ‘progressive populism’ need to be attended to for several reasons. To the extent that they reflect good values, they are a reminder that populism is not in and of itself necessarily a force for bad. To the extent that it taps into bad values – parochialism, tribalism, us and themism – it serves as a reminder that the right has no monopoly on pernicious populism. But most importantly, it shows how disillusion with mainstream political parties is a reality across the social board. Political consumerism has left people of every ideological stripe feeling disenfranchised, needing other outlets for their feelings of injustice. An alternative is needed, not just to keep the far right at bay, but to rebuild trust in mainstream politics across the political spectrum.

A better response?

The political response to populism is often to cave in to the rhetoric but not to the substance, which feeds the immediate appetite without removing the causes for the gnawing. Visible measures are taken to address concerns over immigration, for example, but nothing is done to deal with the issue of refused asylum seekers. There is grandstanding at a major EU summit but no progress on applying the principle of subsidiarity more rigorously. The opposite should happen: there should be more challenges to populist complaints when they are misguided, but also more of a response to the genuine underlying grievances when needed.

It needs to be understood that a lot of populism is rooted in decent principles, such as ideas of fairness and everyone doing their bit. It gets ugly only when these principles are misapplied, often due to misinformation. Sometimes the rage is fully justified, when it is perceived that the elites don't abide by the principles they preach. There needs to be more of a charitable interpretation of popular discontent, because even if it is ultimately misguided, it doesn't come from nowhere. There is also too much fear of pandering to popular discontent, when this is not the same as listening and responding to it.

Disentangling truth from nonsense

This alternative, however, need not be wishy-washy 'on the one hand this...' rhetoric. What is needed is a principled

response that is not afraid to look for the truth in populist concerns as well as challenge the falsehoods. For many, it seems to be easier to do the former than the latter, when both are equally essential. The problem we have is the same as the one Yvonne Zonderop identifies in the Netherlands: ‘To a certain extent it would actually take some courage to admit that one thought the populists’ views to be absolute nonsense. If one admitted this openly, one would immediately be accused of fostering elitist attitudes.’²⁷ But disentangling the truth from the nonsense in an issue where both have been woven together is essential if the mess is to be cleared up. Otherwise you have to give up on what is good or true or take on board what is pernicious or false.

Take as an example the issue of refused asylum seekers. Britain has had a large problem with people who have not been granted asylum but who cannot easily be returned to their countries of origin. I was involved in an ultimately failed attempt to persuade the government that it could be both progressive and face populist concerns when, in 2007, I served on the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust’s Inquiry into Destitution among Refused Asylum Seekers. At that time there were nearly 300,000 such people in the country, by the National Audit Office’s conservative estimates, and removing all the refused would have taken an estimated 18 years and cost over £3,000 million. Without either benefits or the right to work many end up destitute, often working in the shadow economy.

Populist sentiment about asylum seekers was almost completely negative. Urban myths abounded about them being given houses, food, cash and even vans. The political pressure was to be tough on them. But when I ran some focus groups in Leeds – with members of an almost all-white working men’s angling club, a group of nurses and social workers, sixth-form

students and a group of Bangladeshi women – I was struck by how people on all sides of the debate agreed on so many of the key issues. People supported the right for people to seek sanctuary from persecution. They also believed new arrivals should contribute to society if they are to gain the benefits of living in it. They agreed that bogus claimants should be dealt with swiftly and returned. And they also agreed that newcomers should not profit at the expense of existing citizens. You could hardly put a cigarette paper between the views of the white anglers and the Bangladeshi women: it was one of the latter who said: ‘The government should look after its own first.’

The problem that concerned the inquiry was with people who had not passed the test of asylum but could not be returned. Here, on reflection, people also agreed. It was vital to keep tabs on them but locking them up was expensive and counterproductive at best, unfair at worst. Supporting them with taxpayers’ money was unacceptable so they should be made to work for their keep until such time as they could be removed.

So there was a sane and rational response to asylum that should satisfy everyone. In order to return failed asylum seekers you first have to know where they are, and you won’t succeed in finding that out if you adopt a punitive approach: people will just disappear from the system. International experience suggests that the best way to return people to their countries of origin is to provide voluntary means for them to return. Forcing return may sound tough, but it just doesn’t work. Nor can people contribute to society if they are denied the right to work. Indeed, without such a right, people have no choice but to be either a burden on social services or to vanish into the shadow economy. So what is needed is a conditional licence to work, one which probably does not come with all the benefits of full citizenship.

Those working closely on asylum issues have been pleading for such a change for years. Their arguments have not won the day because they sound ‘soft’ when many of the public demand hard. But enlightened policies give the tough brigade more of what they want: fewer foreigners living off the official radar, in illegal work or none at all; fewer public health problems; more effective tracking and recording of asylum seekers; more refused asylum seekers returning home; less of a financial burden on taxpayers for those who stay in the system but are forced to accept benefits.

It is assumed that it would take suicidal political courage for any of the two main parties to stand up and make the case for a more humane asylum system along these lines. But where’s the courage in telling all sides they can have what they want, when currently neither has anything? Nor is it a robust idea that the right to work rewards rule-breakers. Put it another way and it in fact sounds very tough indeed: if you want to stay here, you must work. Nor need granting a right to work mean granting the same rights as citizens.

Normally, failing to please all of the people all of the time is political reality, but failing to please any of the people any of the time is political stupidity. Normally, a political win–win is preferable to a manifest lose–lose. But normally the issue is not asylum and refugees, where the assumption that the choice is between being hard and soft has blinded successive home ministers to solutions that are both fair and effective.

Cynics will say that you can never be tough enough for the xenophobes, and you can never be soft enough for the bleeding hearts. But the status quo is not a decent compromise between two irreconcilable camps. Rather, it is paradoxically neither soft nor hard enough, for the reason that this debate should never be about toughness or softness in the first place.

Policies rooted in principle

Would a government have been able to adopt and sell our recommendations? We’ll never know as the government buried the report, too fearful of the populist reaction to deal with populist concerns. But whether our precise proposals were right or not is not the central point. The point is that if governments are going to bring people fleeing to the populist fringes back into the mainstream, they are going to have to be strong enough to adopt policies rooted in principle that grapple with the populist concerns and don’t just offer simple reactionary responses to them.

Part of the problem with populism is that it believes in simple solutions and this mistake is only repeated if the mainstream talks and acts as though it can completely remove the springs of populist outrage. Half-hearted appeasement merely encourages the populist parties and sends out the signal that the mainstream is not comfortable with the issues. They cannot just be managed or ignored – they have to be tackled head-on. This means challenging the kind of pessimism that questions the possibility of shifting public opinion where it is out of tune with the best way forward, and so settles for trying to meet misguided demands with misguided policies.

The future of populism in the UK

The response of those worried about populism in the UK has centred too much on the need or otherwise of ‘addressing the real concerns’ of the disaffected. This is a decent start but in a strange way it both goes too far and not far enough.

It goes too far in that what it often amounts to is little more than conceding points to the populist complainants. Tim Bale, for instance, calls it ‘cosying up to... populist challengers, focusing on the concerns they focus on, and even copying (albeit in slightly diluted form) their policies’ as the ‘snogging’ strategy, and ‘inviting the populists to join you in coalition government or else to support your minority administration in votes of confidence’ as ‘marrying’. The problem is that both risk merely ‘lending credibility and legitimacy to the populists’ charges and their platform’ so that ‘the system’s centre of gravity and momentum then slips away from the centre towards one or even both of the extremes’.²⁸

The same applies if the mainstream merely imitates or mirrors the populists rather than metaphorically mixing bodily fluids with them. ‘Once a populist radical right party has established itself as a credible political actor that owns certain salient issues (e.g. crime and immigration),’ writes Cas Mudde, ‘it is largely immune to counter-strategies of other political actors.’²⁹

So in another sense the strategy does not go far enough, in that it amounts to a kind of grudging concession rather than a genuine, whole-hearted willingness to

struggle with the issues at the root of the populist discontent. This relates to the point about the problem of political consumerism: the deep problem is that politics has become depoliticised. This plays squarely into populist hands. As Fieschi puts it: ‘Democratic discourse and practice recognise the diversity inherent in the concept of the people,’ which means acknowledging that politics is the arena not of consensus but of peaceful, managed conflict. ‘Populism, on the other hand,’ Fieschi goes on, ‘denies this complexity.’³⁰ So now does mainstream politics. Without a public, political square in which differences are acknowledged and negotiated, the reality that politics is a messy, divisive business gets forgotten, and it is easier to imagine that choice is simply between the self-interested political class and the will of the people.

Reviving ‘messy’ politics

What then is really needed to counter populism is nothing less than a renewal of politics as an arena of difference, debate and diversity, where everyone’s interests and concerns are included. This requires, as Aristos Doxiadis and Manos Matsaganis put it, ‘rebuilding trust in the political system’, which includes doing a good job of managing the economy in the interests of all: ‘the most effective therapy of the underdog mentality is hope and economic security.’³¹ It is not simply a matter of diffusing a handful of potentially explosive issues. Immigration, the EU and outrage at bankers are just the flowers of a populism that has deep roots in the gradual disenchantment of huge swathes of the population in mainstream politics.

It is hard to predict whatever fruits this populism will give rise to. Only a few years ago, if you were to have suggested that bankers would be the object of populist revolt, you’d have been laughed at. Indeed, what we might be seeing in the rise of UKIP (and perhaps also in the rise

of the 5 Stelle movement in Italy) is populism becoming much less focused on particular issues. The populist parties of the future will build their success on a more widespread discontent. Marley Morris has pointed to a statement by UKIP which reinforces this point: ‘the EU is only the biggest symptom of the real problem – the theft of our democracy by a powerful, remote political “elite” which has forgotten that it’s here to serve the people.’³²

The problem with this is that if you are elected on the basis of a myth – that all ‘ills originate from outside “the people”, who are united in their interest’ and that ‘[t]here are no major contradictions or issues to be resolved within this homogeneous entity’, as Aristos Doxiadis and Manos Matsaganis put it – there is simply no way you can govern.³³ At best, you have a short-term disaster and a return to traditional parties to clean up the mess. At worst, you create an ongoing situation in which governance becomes impossible, since the only electable parties are irresponsible. This is arguably already the position in Italy, where distrust of politicians has been so deep for so long that the country has preferred to elect a criminal fool or a comedian rather than the only candidate with a decent track record of responsible rule. Italy shows how, when populism becomes the dominant mode of doing politics, it becomes impossible to tackle the complexity of real problems. ‘Just to name a few of Italy’s troubles that are never cited – lagging behind in productivity, organised crime, a debilitating North/South gap, the digital divide: the evil is in the “Caste”, the wastefulness and costliness of politics,’ writes Gianni Riotta. ‘If only, the lament goes, we could “send them all home” (them being the corrupt politicians) – Italy would experience a re-birth.’³⁴

The idea that we need nothing less than a revival of real, messy, disputatious politics should not be a pessimistic conclusion. Indeed, for many it will be a welcome one, as there are many other reasons for lamenting the

rise of political managerialism and for the return of real debates about values and priorities in the public sphere. Rather than having seen the death of ideology, we even have actually seen a dearth of it. Politics hates a vacuum more than nature does, and so it should not surprise us that populist parties have been more than willing to fill this gap with simplistic ideologies of their own.

Notes

- 1 *The Oxford English Dictionary*
- 2 Fieschi, 'A plague on both your populisms'
- 3 Fieschi, 'Who's afraid of the populist wolf?'
- 4 Bale, 'Countering populism: snog, marry, avoid?'
- 5 Albertazzi and McDonnell, *Twenty-First Century Populism*, p. 3
- 6 Fieschi, 'Who's afraid of the populist wolf?'
- 7 Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, Introduction
- 8 Fieschi, 'Populist expectations (or: The Dead Expert)'
- 9 Vaquer, 'Reclaiming democratic demands from the populists'
- 10 Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, p. 142
- 11 Doxiadis and Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece*, p. 67
- 12 Korhonen, 'The crumbling of Finland's consensus culture'
- 13 Wiewiorka, 'The Front National's new clothes'
- 14 Heath, Curtice and Elgenius, 'Individualization and the decline of class identity', pp. 27–28
- 15 *Private Eye*, 'The Secret Diary of a Lord Gnome Aged 73¾'
- 16 Interviews were all in *The Philosophers' Magazine*: Oliver Letwin in issue 32, 4th quarter 2005; Jesse Norman, issue 55, 4th quarter 2011; Tony Wright, issue 46, 3rd quarter 2009
- 17 *Channel 4 News*, 'Immigration nation: Nigel Farage's Bulgaria trip'
- 18 'Profile of voters February 2013', YouGov, 5 March 2013, http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/mse55iouje/Ukip-profile-Feb-2103.pdf

- 19 You can track the rise of the term ‘Middle England’ in the corpus of British English using Google’s Ngram Viewer. Its frequency increased nearly tenfold between the early 1990s and early 2000s.
- 20 In conversation at a Counterpoint round table discussion, 1 May 2013
- 21 Doxiadis and Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece* and Zonderop, *The Roots of Contemporary Populism in the Netherlands*
- 22 Ipsos MORI, *Political Monitor*, March 2013, see www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3143/Ipsos-MORI-Political-Monitor-March-2013.aspx, last accessed 17 July 2013
- 23 Wieviorka, ‘The Front National’s new clothes’
- 24 Vaquer, ‘Reclaiming democratic demands from the populists’
- 25 Hunt, ‘The dangers of Tory populism’
- 26 *BBC News Magazine*, ‘Would you buy a “suspended coffee” for someone in need?’
- 27 Zonderop, *The Roots of Contemporary Populism in the Netherlands*, p. 21
- 28 Bale, ‘Countering populism: snog, marry, avoid?’
- 29 Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, p. 289
- 30 Fieschi, ‘A plague on both your populisms’
- 31 Doxiadis and Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece*, p. 67
- 32 Morris, ‘UKIP’s rise’ (see <http://counterpoint.uk.com/media-centre/ukips-rise>), which refers to the ‘About us’ page of UKIP’s website, www.ukip.org/page/ukip-history, accessed 29 April 2013
- 33 Doxiadis and Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece*, p. 12
- 34 Riotta, ‘The front of the ordinary man’

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Britain appears to have avoided the kind of right-wing populism that has periodically sprung up in the rest of Europe. Xenophobic populist parties have secured electoral successes in France, the Netherlands, Finland, Greece and Italy, while in the UK the British National Party crashed shortly after take-off. Now the softer-edged UKIP has taken on the populist mantle, mostly inspiring fear about the main parties losing votes rather than anything more sinister.

Some see this as a sign of an inherent gentleness in the British national character that makes it inhospitable to the nastier forms of right-wing populism. Others see it as more of a happy accident, helped by an electoral system that makes it hard for new parties to gain inroads. These people warn against the complacency of the 'it could never happen here' mindset.

In this thoughtful exploration of British culture and politics, Julian Baggini starts with the argument that the same springs of populism that fuel the far right in Europe exist in Britain. Baggini then makes the case for the need to look for manifestations of populism in Britain beyond the usual far right suspects.

