

Opinion **Populism**

The 'conservative international' battle with Britain

This time around, the Trump victory comes as the UK is vulnerable to potent arguments from the right

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The complacent offer a theatrical yawn. We've seen this movie before. The combination in 2016 of Brexit and Donald Trump's first victory saw the American populist right sensing fertile territory in the UK. It petered out. Association with Trump was not electorally helpful. Now the film has a sequel in which Britain is viewed less as a potential soulmate than a weakened enemy to be attacked by the newly buoyant international right.

There is nothing new in political internationals. From the formal Comintern to the more sinuous networks for globalisation and neoliberalism, there have always been groupings seeking to export their world view. Trump's first-term strategist Steve Bannon dreamt of a global movement. [National Conservatism](#), an evangelical ethno-nationalist faction with strong ties to Hungary's Viktor Orbán, has worked to extend its influence in the UK.

Nor is Britain unused to external attacks — although in recent years it was Brexit which provoked the incoming ordnance from both Europe and the White House.

Weakened EU nations, notably Germany are also facing fire from the US populist right — [Elon Musk especially](#). But the UK always saw itself in a separate category: in the Anglosphere, economically liberal and enjoying a “special relationship” with America.

Yet the new attacks focus on Britain's culture and institutions. The US vice-president [JD Vance quips](#) that Labour has turned the UK into an "Islamist country". [Javier Milei](#), Argentina's president, parroted the falsehoods that lionise the far-right activist Tommy Robinson, telling Davos delegates that "as we speak, in the UK, citizens are being imprisoned for exposing horrifying crimes committed by Muslim migrants". Musk's onslaughts are well-documented and his hostility widely shared on parts of the American right. Ministers soothe themselves with the fact that Trump himself has (so far) refrained from joining the uncoordinated assaults. But even so there are reasons to take it seriously.

The first is that the UK is floundering. Sir Keir Starmer is unpopular. His new government is facing both ways, increasing taxes and regulation while declaring growth its primary mission. Britain appears up for grabs (as is much of the Anglosphere, with Canada and Australia likely to turn right this year).

Second, and perhaps most important, this new conservative international is not primarily an economic movement. For sure, the tech billionaires want to undermine a regulatory opponent in Brussels, but Maga's economics are populist. Its leaders are not troubled if that leads to incoherent policies tailored nationally.

The movement's defining feature — as evidenced by the focus on Islam — is cultural nationalism. Immigration is the tip of this spear. What unifies the diverse groups on the right is a central argument that the canon of ["Judeo-Christian" western values](#) is threatened from within by multiculturalism and progressivism. From the fear of immigrants to the promotion of policies to boost birth rates, the core premise is that the west must act to save its culture.

Allied to this is the argument that the same guilty liberals have also tilted economic policy against ordinary people, via a deep state that does not even work very well. As European economies stutter, these cultural grievances are accelerated by podcasts and social media.

There is one other key difference: the decontamination of Trump. This time the new conservative international has major bridgeheads in the UK both in Farage's Reform UK and much of the Conservative party. Tories who kept their distance in 2016 are now openly supportive. Boris Johnson, shadow foreign secretary Priti Patel, Nigel Farage and Liz Truss made pilgrimages to Washington for the inauguration.

Political attacks have been encouraged and copied by the British right. [Suella](#)

[Braverman](#), former home secretary, echoed Vance. Little distinguishes the rhetoric of Robert Jenrick, Tory justice spokesman, from Musk.

British radical right voices discern a winning Maga agenda for the UK, based around immigration crackdowns, deporting foreign criminals, scrapping net zero initiatives, pushback on trans rights and cuts to Whitehall bureaucracy. Only in their small-state hostility to the NHS do Britain's populists offer an exploitable vulnerability.

Furthermore, the electoral system, for so long a bulwark against new and hardline parties, might now actually work to their advantage. Talk of a Reform government is overdone, but the party's current standing could give it a decisive voice in the next parliament. Fear of Reform is pulling Conservatives on to the same territory. One senior Tory laments "Labour has become too unpopular too quickly. We haven't had time to rebuild our brand." Meanwhile, Starmer lacks the communication skills to respond to an assertive right.

And victory does not have to be absolute. The movement has already shifted the boundaries. Farage's surging party is now mainstream and the Conservatives have moved to the right. Progressives within the government find themselves in retreat as ministers fret about the threat of Reform.

It is early days. Labour may recover. Trump's lustre may fade. But the conservative international has a new sense of momentum. This movie might yet have a different ending.

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