

Demagoguery in the U.K.

The nation's political class lacks intellect and character.



by Theodore Dalrymple

The permanent possibility of demagoguery is the price that must be paid for universal suffrage. Politicians, if they desire office (and few do not desire it), must pander to electorates who may not be very logical, consistent, or well-informed. People want medicines without side effects and laws without unintended consequences, or even foreseeable ones. Demagoguery creates problems, then worsens them with the solutions it proposes to what it has caused in the first place.

Demagoguery thrives in crisis, and there is little doubt that

we are going through one. In Britain, food inflation is running at 20 percent and energy prices are soaring. These increases weigh particularly on the poor, though energy costs also affect industry. Government debt is rising fast; last year, the number of migrants in the country was equivalent to nearly 1 percent of the population, and most will require lodging separately amid a housing shortage that is already acute.

What does the political and administrative class have to offer in response to all this? Paralysis and demagoguery. Recently, the government, misnamed conservative, mooted price caps on food, as if no one in history had ever thought to control prices by such measures. By even pondering these steps publicly, the government was trying to demonstrate that it *cares*—hoping, no doubt, that an expression of benevolent concern will counteract the opprobrium of the disaster it has wrought.

As to the housing problem, the government has decided to protect poor tenants (always good for a sob story) from rapacious private landlords by such onerous regulation that soon there will be neither tenants nor landlords, but many hundreds of thousands of non-migrants desperately looking for somewhere to live.

Unfortunately, the opposition would almost certainly be worse if it were in power, which it might soon be. Its solution to the housing problem? Expropriate land at sub-market price and build habitations on it, probably to rent at controlled prices. The energy problem? Forbid future exploration for gas and oil in the North Sea, or anywhere else, thus ensuring the country's energy insecurity and dependence on not necessarily friendly countries, but in the process (what is much more important) satisfying climate activists who believe that the world will end in five weeks' time. At least the policy will have their approbation and their votes.

None of the political class seems able to grasp the elementary point that confidence in the British economy is, rightly and understandably, fragile, and that endless regulation with the threat of future expropriation thrown in is hardly the way to restore it. The quest for office easily trumps the national interest in any case—and demagoguery is the natural consequence of a political class that, taken as a whole, is without intellect, scruple, or character.

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