Opinion
NCR Voices



A Union Jack flag flutters in the wind near Big Ben and Parliament in Parliament Square in London March 29. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Coombs)



by Michael Sean Winters

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While Americans celebrated our independence from Great Britain, the mother country went to the polls. If our electoral landscape is cloudy, the British scene is now exceedingly clear: The British people want change. What also became obvious in the results from the U.K., and from the parliamentary elections in France, is that the underlying cultural issues are very similar throughout the Western democracies, even if the U.K. is moving in the opposite direction from that of the U.S. and France.

A photo in The New York Times showed the exit poll results splashed across the façade of the BBC broadcasting house in central London, predicting Labor would win 410 seats in the House of Commons, with a picture of Keir Starmer, who became prime minister the next day, next to the stunning vote projection. By morning, the actual results gave Labour 412 seats, and the incumbent Conservative Party a total 121 seats, with two seats not yet declared. It was a thumping.

The new Reform Party, the anti-immigrant, pro-Brexit party started by Nigel Farage, only won 4 seats, but it outpolled the Conservative candidates in the first constituencies to report, Sunderland-Houghton and Blyth, a pattern that occurred repeatedly through the night. Farage himself finally won a seat in Parliament, a fact that diminishes that historic chamber and points to the deep cultural challenges facing Western democracies.

Just to the right of the BBC broadcasting house, the Times' photo showed the colonnade surrounding the rotunda that serves as the entrance to All Souls Church at Langham Place. The rotunda was the device architect John Nash used to fit the church building into the bend of the road: The main body of the church lies behind the inventive, rounded entrance. Nash, who was the leading architect of the Regency period, also designed Buckingham Palace, although the addition of the garish east front façade in the Victorian era hides Nash's entrance court from public view. The garden-facing west façade of the palace was to his design and might be more familiar to readers.

The website at All Souls lists the time of their liturgies, the various groups that meet, a section on "safeguarding," and "free English courses." Yes, in the heart of London, a storied parish of the Church of England, offers free English courses.

Immigration is a central issue in British politics, as it is here in the U.S. In April, Parliament passed a law deporting undocumented migrants to Rwanda. Now-former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was made to defend the policy each week during Prime Minister's Questions. At the debate between the two leading candidates, Sunak, who is himself the son of immigrants, tried to nail down Starmer — whose migration policy is not exactly a study in clarity.

Sunak's draconian policy only succeeded in boosting the votes going to Farage's Reform Party, dividing the right, turning a desire for change into a landslide victory for Labour.

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The challenge for Starmer is to recognize that the issue of immigration can be demagogued by focusing on the migrants: Sunak emphasized in his debate the fact that many migrants come from Iran, Syria and Afghanistan provoking images of Islamic radicals. He asked Starmer if he would travel to those countries to meet with "the ayatollahs."

Central Americans do not provoke that kind of fear, so former President Donald Trump demonizes migrants individually, claiming they are rapists and criminals, and recently suggesting they are "poisoning the blood," the most explicitly fascist thing he has ever said.

Starmer — and the Democrats and the French left — need to find ways to make the case that the migration issue is about "us," about who we are, and not only about "them." The left needs to find ways to acknowledge and celebrate the differences migrants bring.

The left throughout the West must also acknowledge the worries working-class people admit when they believe migrants will lower their wages, and the left must take steps to address those fears.

In our country, the AFL-CIO under the leadership of the late Richard Trumka addressed those fears and became a big supporter of comprehensive immigration reform. Migration does not threaten wages; undocumented migration does. The solution is to bring migrants out of the shadows.

Immigration reform will only happen when the party dedicated to humane treatment of migrants figures out how to set limits to migration that are themselves humane. That is not as easy as it sounds.

Starmer undertook one major step the Democrats have not entirely done: He excised antisemitism from Labour when he took the reins of party leadership in 2020. Starmer commissioned a study of the antisemitism within the Labour Party and when his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, questioned the study's conclusions, Starmer forced Corbyn out of the party he had so recently led.

Last week, Corbyn ran, and won, a seat in Parliament as an independent. Starmer, having shown an unwillingness to tolerate extremism, will be moving into 10 Downing Street.

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Farage got his start in politics opposing British membership in the European Union. He forced the Conservative Party to join the "Brexit" effort, which created turmoil in the British economy. His attacks on "elites" strike a chord with voters there as Trump's similar attacks do here.

Both men create solidarity by trafficking in attacks on migrants, presenting themselves as representing the common person, and in the process radicalizing many with legitimate grievances at the results of neoliberal policies begun by Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. and Ronald Reagan in the U.S.

One major difference between the right-wing radicalism abroad and that in the U.S. is the apparent lack of religious influences in Europe. The U.K. has an established church so it should not surprise that the Church of England has become part of the political establishment, and stands in the dock with the rest of the establishment when Farage and his Reform Party attack.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the archbishop of Westminster, sent a warm note of congratulations to Starmer that said, "Your previous comments about wanting a government which works with churches and faith communities have been most welcome, and I want you to know that we stand ready to play our part."

As I write this, we do not yet have the results from the parliamentary elections in France. The decision by President Emmanuel Macron and the leftist leader Jan-Luc Mélenchon to form an alliance in the second round of voting might be enough to keep the far right National Rally from winning control of the French Parliament.

Again, the cultural issues are the same: Centrist leadership touts its competence and expertise, but millions of citizens who feel left behind by economic and cultural changes want something different, and are willing to embrace more radical answers.

Prime Minister Starmer has a mandate for change, but he needs to find creative ways to make sure working people feel involved in the changes. Farage speaks to the lesser angels of human nature, and the Conservatives have to decide how they will mimic him, but Starmer needs to chart a course that is humane and inclusive, one that speaks to working-class anxieties but even more to their hopes.