

# The growing peril of national conservatism

It's dangerous and it's spreading. Liberals need to find a way to stop it



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In the 1980s Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher built a new conservatism around markets and freedom. Today Donald Trump, Viktor Orban and a motley crew of Western politicians have demolished that orthodoxy, constructing in its place a statist, “anti-woke” conservatism that puts national sovereignty before the individual. These national conservatives are increasingly part of a global movement with its own networks of thinkers and leaders bound by a common ideology. They sense that they own conservatism now—and they may be right.

Despite its name, national conservatism could not be more different from the ideas of Reagan and Thatcher. Rather than being sceptical of big government, national conservatives think ordinary people are beset by impersonal global forces and that the state is their saviour. Unlike Reagan and Thatcher, they hate pooling sovereignty in multilateral organisations, they suspect free markets of being rigged by the elites and they are hostile to migration. They despise pluralism, especially the multicultural sort. National conservatives are obsessed with dismantling institutions they think are tainted by wokeness and globalism.

Instead of a sunny belief in progress, national conservatives are seized by declinism. William Buckley, a thinker of the old school, once quipped that “A conservative is someone who stands athwart history, yelling stop.” By comparison, national conservatives are revolutionaries. They do not see the West as the shining city on the hill, but as Rome before the fall—decadent, depraved and about to collapse amid a barbarian invasion. Not content with resisting progress, they also want to destroy classical liberalism.

Some people expect all this to blow over. National conservatives are too incoherent to pose a threat, they say. Giorgia Meloni, Italy’s prime minister, supports Ukraine; Mr Orban has a soft spot for Russia. The Polish Law and Justice party (pis) is anti-gay; in France Marine Le Pen is permissive. Besides, the obsession with national sovereignty would make people worse off, as trade collapses, economic growth stalls and civil rights are curtailed. Voters would surely choose to restore the world liberalism made.

That view is unforgivably complacent. National conservatism is the politics of grievance: if policies lead to bad outcomes, its leaders will shift the blame onto globalists and immigrants and claim this only proves how much is wrong with the world. For all their contradictions, national conservatives have been able to unite around their hostility towards common enemies, including migrants (especially Muslims), globalists and all their supposed abettors. Nine months before America’s election, Mr Trump is already undermining nato.

National conservatives also deserve to be taken seriously because of their electoral prospects. Mr Trump is leading the polls in America. The far right is expected to do well in European parliamentary elections in June. In Germany in December the hard-right Alternative for Germany hit a record high of 23% in polls. Anticipating a lost election for Rishi Sunak, stridently pro-Brexit and anti-migration Tories are plotting to take over the party. In 2027 Ms Le Pen could well become France’s president.

And nationalist conservatives matter because when they succeed in winning office everything changes. By setting out to capture state institutions, including courts, universities and the independent press, they cement their grip on power. That is what Mr Orban’s Fidesz party has done in Hungary. In America Mr Trump has been explicit about his autocratic designs. The people working for him have drawn up policy documents that set out a programme to capture the federal bureaucracy. Once institutions have been weakened, it can be hard to restore them. In Poland pis

had the same agenda, before it was ousted in elections last year. The centre-right coalition that defeated it is now struggling to assert control.

How, then, should old-style conservatives and classical liberals deal with national conservatism? One answer is to take people's legitimate grievances seriously. The citizens of many Western countries see illegal migration as a source of disorder and a drain on the public purse. They worry that their children will grow up to be poorer than they are. They are anxious about losing their jobs to new technology. They believe that institutions such as universities and the press have been captured by hostile, illiberal, left-leaning elites. They see the globalists who have thrived in recent decades as members of a self-serving, arrogant caste who like to believe that they rose to the top in a meritocracy when, in reality, their success was inherited.

These complaints have their merits, and sneering at them only confirms how out of touch elites have become. Instead, liberals and old-style conservatives need policies to deal with them. Legal migration is easier if the illegal sort is curbed. Restrictive planning rules price young people out of the housing market. Closed shops need busting apart. To have the truly open society they claim to want, liberals must press for elite intellectual institutions—the top businesses, newspapers and universities—to embody principles of liberalism instead of succumbing to censorship and groupthink. For all that the illiberal left and the illiberal right are mortal enemies, their high-octane rows over wokeness are mutually sustaining.

To diminish the national conservative fear that people's way of life is under threat, liberals also need to stake their claim to some of their opponents' ideas. Instead of virtue signalling, they should acknowledge that the left can be illiberal, too. If liberals are too squeamish to defend principles such as free speech and individual rights against the excesses of the left, they will fatally undermine their ability to defend them against the right. Instead of ceding the power of national myths and symbols to political opportunists, liberals need to get over their embarrassment about patriotism, the natural love of one's country.

Liberalism's great strength is that it is adaptable. The abolitionist and feminist movements broke apart the idea that some people counted more than others. Socialist arguments about fairness and human dignity helped create the welfare state. Libertarian arguments about liberty and efficiency led to freer markets and a limit on state power. Liberalism can adapt to national conservatism, too. Right now, it is falling behind. ■

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