

Turning Point or Pause? Reflections on the Presidential Election

The extraordinary period in office of Donald Trump, 45th President of the United States, is coming to its close in much the same way it started. Claims of election fraud without any evidence let alone grounds for concern were made immediately polls closed and these claims continued the line Trump had pushed from April onwards. Some street protests took place and national TV showed images of heavily armed Trump supporters flaunting automatic weapons as police officers stood and watched.

Four Seasons Total Landscaping

Many of Trump's supporters really want to believe the election was stolen and their 'anger' has been provoked by the President. It was noticeable, however, that Fox News formerly the most loyal, pro-Trump media outlet quickly distanced itself from Trump and his claims. For many people looking on in the UK, the appearance of Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, to address a press conference in the car park of Four Seasons Total Landscaping in Philadelphia turned a potential threat to the democratic process into a moment of pure farce. A 'recount by hand' in Georgia served only to underline the Biden victory and in other states the lack of evidence and the margin of Biden's win led to the collapse of legal challenges.

Glass ceilings shattered

Joe Biden was elected the 46th President, winning the popular vote by more than 6 million votes and securing a comfortable majority of Electoral College votes. Biden is the oldest man [the Presidents have all been men] to win the Presidency and at the end of his four-year term he will be 82 years old. Vice President-elect Kamala Harris is the first woman to be elected to the post and also the first person of African and Indian heritage to serve as Vice President. The noise we heard after the election was settled was the sound of those glass ceilings being shattered.

Seamless transmission unlikely

Despite the election of Harris and Biden, the US appears more bitterly divided with an apparent sense of anger underpinning confrontation between communities in many parts of the US. There has not yet been a coming together across the nation, traditionally prompted by a generous concession speech from the unsuccessful Presidential candidate. We have seen and heard the words of George HW Bush and John McCain as they conceded after hard fought elections, their speeches shown again as a reminder of how the transfer of power "should" take place seamlessly. Trump's lack of grace has not come as a surprise.

Outsider surges

What has actually happened in the US? Perhaps it's simply too early to be certain but we do know there have been surges in support for 'outsider' movements and candidates – like Trump - in many countries. In Europe, we saw early manifestations in Belgium, in the Netherlands and in France. In Germany, the relatively modest electoral success of the Nazi-influenced AfD has led to huge concern. In Italy and Greece, 'outsiders' were elected into national office where they have foundered as the responsibilities and constraints of office left them exposed. There are concerns about the strength of democratic values and institutions in Poland and in Hungary, straining the commitments they made to the principles of the European Union.

UK isolated

The UK government stands alone outside the EU and distant from Biden after Johnson and ministers gambled on Trump's re-election leading to an easy free trade deal with the US. In his first week as President-elect, however, Biden made it crystal clear he wants a close relationship with the EU and, even worse for the UK government, he expects the Good Friday Agreement to be honoured. For

genuine democrats in the UK, the Biden Presidency will inspire fresh hope and belief which are sorely needed after four successive Conservative election wins.

'Boris Trump'

But the UK's problems do run deep. Led by 'Boris Trump', a privileged and wealthy establishment figure who like Trump realised before anyone else he could use television to pitch to voters outside his party. Johnson too has had a 'colourful' life outside mainstream politics; he has been sacked from several roles for lying, caught on tape agreeing to share the details of a journalist so he could be beaten up by his best friend from school and had numerous relationships and an unconfirmed number of children.

Corruption tolerated

Johnson really wants to be seen as the Winston Churchill of our times but falls far short. He is lazy in office, a weak Prime Minister who dithers and delays. He failed to take decisive action when ministers broke the Ministerial Code, or failed to manage the exams system in senior schools, or apparently took corrupt decisions to favour developers and their own constituents. Like Trump, Johnson has failed to give strong leadership in managing the response to Covid-19. More than 70,000 'excess deaths', many of which could have been avoided, an inadequate response to logistical problems in delivering PPE and the badly managed Test and Trace system. An electoral price will be paid for these failures.

Russian influence

There are common threads when we look at Trump's election win in 2016 and the EU Referendum in the UK. There is the Russian connection as Putin pursued his strategic goal of a greater Russia through making the US weaker and destabilising the EU with the exit of the UK as a leading member. Steve Bannon was hired to play a prominent role in both election campaigns (he's currently facing fraud charges in the US) and there has been speculation about links between Russia and Farage and Banks of the Leave.EU campaign. Indeed, it has also been suggested Johnson has his own links to Russian money and influence.

Who cares about election law?

We now know 'social media' played a major, perhaps crucial, role in the Trump election success and in the 2016 Referendum. Trump used Twitter as his main channel to communicate directly to the public, bypassing the mainstream media which he routinely dismissed as 'fake news'. The press has reported how Robert Mercer, a long-term friend of both Farage and Bannon, used his tech company Cambridge Analytica/SCA and Aggregate IQ to use open source data taken from Facebook to target millions of voters. The data were allegedly shared with Vote Leave, led by Johnson, Gove and their 'fixer' Dominic Cummings. The data were used to target seven million voters with more than 1.5 billion digital ads in the final 3 to 4 days of the campaign, as Cummings boasted. Alarmingly, the Electoral Commission, the police and the National Crime Agency have so far failed to uphold laws relating to the Referendum, overseas funds, unknown donors and the misuse of personal data.

Wider impact of the Biden win?

As the fog and smoke of the Presidential election battle clears, we can see early signs that restore a degree of hope. Black Lives Matter campaigns were supported across communities even as they were criticised as a cover for Marxist organisations. Both voter registration and turning out to vote matter; Biden's narrow but decisive win in Georgia followed the registration of an additional 800,000 voters in a campaign led by Stacey Abrams, a black Democrat politician. It can be said today that a majority, albeit a narrow majority, in the US prefers truth and hope to lies and hate. It should also be

noted that the qualities that caused many to doubt whether Biden could beat Trump may actually have been the qualities needed to secure his electoral success.

Hope is a powerful political force

Many people want the 2020 Presidential election to mark a turning point in the fight to push back the divisive force of nationalism, of corporatism and isolationism. Right now there's an opportunity to ensure this is not a pause before more dangerous forces are on the march again. A sense of hope is a powerful political force and it is reborn. The Democrats have some time now to reassess their values and principles and consider their preferred candidate and platform for 2024. Trump's allies and friends will be very anxious about due legal process and prosecution. Evidence that is presented in the US courts may well have importance and an impact within the UK legal system. In the UK, Trump supporting politicians and Brexit campaigners will be considerably more anxious than they were before Biden's victory was confirmed. They know there should be a price to pay for fraud, corruption and cronyism; they may fear a knock on the door.

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