

# Britain's End Austerity Now: Revival of Radical Political Left

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On Saturday, June 20, a quarter of a million people marched in London from the Bank of England to the Houses of Parliament in order to protest against the Conservative government's planned spending cuts to public services. This was the largest single demonstration against austerity to date and reflected to a degree the revival of a radical political left in Britain after decades in the wilderness.

## Austerity

Austerity refers to government cuts back on spending to try to reduce a budget deficit, the gap between what the government spends and what it earns in a single year, in order to "balance the books." This is especially the case during a recession or during a period of slow economic growth (as has been seen in Britain and the entirety of Europe over the past seven years). Of course this period of slow growth can be traced back to the 2007-08 sub-prime mortgage crisis and the subsequent recession that followed - it has in fact been referred to as an epic recession by political economist Jack Rasmus, on account of the extended period of time during which debt, default, and depression defined the economy.

Austerity is presented as an economic necessity - a belt-buckling exercise for a bloated public service sector that has been living beyond its means. This language of economic necessity forms the framework through which more visceral moral arguments are built. Because it is taken as given that there is only one economic reality, the choices are limited and thus morally charged (hence economic realism forms something of a religion in its unwavering commitment to a singular doctrine). This moralism presented itself in the form of sacrificial fairness, with the Tory-led coalition government's mantra of "We're all in it together" prefacing just about every announcement of spending cuts. But of course we haven't all been in it together. Britain is reaching Victorian levels of inequality, with the richest thousand families more than doubling their wealth since 2009, and owning more than the poorest 40 percent of British households).

It's society's most vulnerable who have been "in it." There has been the usual demonization of the poor and especially benefits claimants, despite the fact that only £1.2 billion was fraudulently claimed in 2011-12 compared to £70 billion lost through illegal tax evasion in the same year. Further spending cuts have inflicted damage on firefighters, the National Health Service, children's mental health (and mental health in general), child benefit, social care, legal aid, services devoted to victims of domestic violence, housing benefit, and - perhaps most damaging of all - the scrapping of the ILF

(independent living fund) which allows people with disabilities to live in their communities rather than in residential care. In brief, government-spending cuts have targeted the weakest and poorest in society in order to meet government targets for reduction in spending.

The anger that austerity provokes is very much a result of a perception of gross unfairness on the side of the government - which is why they are so keen to diffuse anger through Orwellian moral arguments (we're all in this together), nonsense economics (debunked in a letter from a group of high profile economists saying that proposed government spending cuts have no basis in economics), or shifting public anger onto society's weakest. This is seen as grossly unfair because while these savage cuts decimate programs of unequivocal social benefit, they do so as a result of a recession that many believe to have been caused by excessive financial deregulation and the high-risk behavior of the financial sector in general. In fact it was excessive *private* debt fueled by financial speculation which became unpayable, that caused the financial crisis. Furthermore, the hike in government debt in the crisis's aftermath was principally as a result of the "bail-out" of the banking sector, with the estimated cost to the taxpayer of £124 billion. And there was no subsequent financial regulation, imprisoned bankers, or higher taxes on the rich.

All in all then, austerity makes people angry because it is an ideologically driven program of public spending cuts which punishes the weakest in society, and takes the side of the powerful (the rich, the financial sector, the 1%, creditors). It's an age-old story then which has been made confusing because of an aggressive and unrelenting public relations campaign supported by a right-wing media which has passed economic incoherence off as doctrine, diverted public anger towards immigrants and benefits claimants, and created a sense of constant uncertainty from which no coherent opposition can be drawn.

### **The demonstration**

The march was organized by The People's Assembly Against Austerity - an organization which describes itself as "a broad united national campaign against austerity." It is a loose conglomeration of groups from all over Britain who share a commitment to resisting austerity, cuts, and privatization in workplaces, as well as community and welfare services. They have no direct affiliation with any political party and aim to supplement rather than supplant trade union, student, pensioner and community opposition to austerity measures. In other words, The People's Assembly provides a platform from which a plurality of anti-austerity views can be presented in a nonhierarchical manner without itself forming a cohesive political faction. The march on the 20<sup>th</sup> was an attempt to bring together the campaign's multifarious groups into a single, collective demonstration.

The protest could be seen as a reflection of the political context of Britain today. This was very much a general "protest of the left," with an infinitely diverse crowd being formed of thousands of separate groups with vastly different aims and ambitions but united in their opposition to the continued Tory austerity program. There were student groups, sections of the anti-austerity Green Party, trade unions, housing groups, public sector workers, environmentalists, communists, and even members of the anti-fascist football team the Clapton Ultras. It was refreshing to see so many people of all different walks of life come together to stand against the powerful.

The atmosphere was something of a carnival, with the sound of drums, horns, whistles and music providing the march with a constant buzz of noise. There was also an eclectic series of costumes and signs summing feelings up anger and discontent in a series of witty statements. Interestingly the march was saturated with a number of homemade signs that reflected the absolute anger and disillusionment of many people, articulated through a frustrated outburst of swearing - unable to express anything other than an explosion of anger and exacerbation; "Fuck the Fucking Fuckers" and "Why don't you all just Fuck Off" summed up the feelings of a furious population which is still to

develop a suitably effective vocabulary with which to critique an odious austerity program while simultaneously imagining a better world. This is a reflection of a broader existential problem within the movement at large - a campaign characterized almost entirely by its opposition to Conservative rule, rather than a viable alternative. However, there is reason for hope. The demonstration showed that an increasingly angry and disillusioned British society is pregnant with an exciting radical potential, from which a new world can be built. Bubbling under the surface a number of groups are making steps towards articulating a new language of the left from which a more coherent ideal can be established.

A long but enjoyable march to Parliament Square ended with a number of impassioned speeches - the most notable of which came from Welsh singer-songwriter Charlotte Church who managed to combine clarity, anger and grace into a short speech that received a roar of approval from the crowd. Once the march itself had finished however, the effervescent energy one is filled with when moving with a crowd dissipated rather quickly. Tiredness set in as each speaker took his or her turn on the stage and over time the crowd settled down until the speeches came to an end. Getting the Tube home gave me a moment's pause to reflect on the day; I was tired but filled with a nervous hope that once the fiery energy of the day had begun to dwindle there would be left a hardened remnant of resistance from which we can move forward.

### **Afterthoughts**

The demonstration was incredibly refreshing in the sense that it literally embodied resistance to socially corrosive cuts in government spending. It showed that people do still care passionately about the society in which they live, as well as for the weakest and most vulnerable in society. The anger and disillusionment felt raw and unfocused, but there appears to be a dormant potential lying beneath the surface of British society. The carefully constructed myths surrounding the illusion of austerity appear to be crumbling ever so slightly as people are beginning to question the true power at the heart of this ideologically-driven political project. Inspired by what is happening on the continent, a more radical politics is beginning to emerge after decades in the wilderness - it will be interesting to see what effect it will have.

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Photo by Hayley Bruford.