

Britain in Crisis

BY DR. JOHN COWLEY



The outcome of the referendum to leave Europe has thrown Britain into political turmoil. Both the Conservative and Labour Parties are riven by divisions between Remainers and Brexiteers. Scotland are overwhelmingly opposed to leaving Europe and Ireland faces being openly divided again if we do. People generally are deeply divided over the question of whether to leave or remain. There is an upsurge of the extreme right politically accompanied by a big rise in Ethnic minorities facing discrimination and abuse and racially motivated hate crime.

All this turmoil and uncertainty is taking place in a society deeply divided as a result of austerity. The rich have never been so rich. The Credit Suisse global wealth report revealed a boom in the number of super-rich people in Britain. There were 44 dollar billionaires in Britain, compared with 8 at the start of the century. While ordinary working people wages have stagnated in recent years. Professor Philip Alston, an expert in human rights law, produced a report for the UN Human Rights Council on the level of poverty in Britain. He concluded: "The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos." The report concluded that in 2017 14 million people – a fifth of the population – were living in poverty and that 1.5 million people experienced destitution, meaning they had to go without shelter, food, heat, light, clothing or toiletries during a one-month period. Austerity, he argues, has "deliberately gutted" local authorities, shrinking libraries, youth, police and park services to the extent that there are "unheard of levels of loneliness and isolation." He warned that if Brexit proceeds it will have "a major adverse impact" on "a significant part of the British population." *The Guardian 22 May 2019*

London, one of the great cities of the world, embodies in its housing the effects of this growing inequality. There are thousands of multi-million-pound houses and flats empty that are privately owned, many by overseas investors. Bishops Avenue, known as millionaires' row, on the edge of Hampstead, has a number of such privately owned houses that are empty. Since the Right to Buy was introduced in 1980, 287,303 council homes have been sold off in London and today close to 50% of those homes are now privately rented. 466 private landlords across London have portfolios of five or more former council homes. *Report by London Assembly Member Tom Copley.* The housing crisis, as reported by the Resolution Foundation, shows that young people today are on the receiving end of a poorer housing experience than their parents and grandparents. Just last year a neighbour in his 80s told me how he had always lived in Camden Town, that is where his parents had lived and his grandparents, but now hardly any of his children or grandchildren could afford to live in London.

Whatever happens regarding whether Britain leaves Europe with or without a deal or a second referendum results in a majority vote to remain, there will be deep divisions and growing political uncertainty. Britain is in crisis.