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They came to live a British dream. Is it all over?

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Europeans moved to the UK to get ahead. But tough talk on immigration makes them fear for the future



On the southern edge of Peterborough is a new residential development called Cardea – a huge expanse of housing served by a solitary Morrisons supermarket and a self-styled “clean, modern pub” called the Apple Cart – which has become a byword for the more affluent elements of the city’s Polish population.

On roads called Jupiter Avenue, Hercules Way and Neptune Close, newly built homes extend into the distance. A three-bedroom detached will give you change out of £250,000, and put you in close proximity to the expanse of warehouses, distribution centres and retail outlets which power a big part of the local economy. The openings such places offer tend to fall one of two ways: management positions and tech roles for people who have either worked their way up or arrived with the right qualifications; or, at what the modern vernacular calls entry level, more uncertain roles for people who are prepared to put in the graft, and who often shoulder the burden of mind-bending shift patterns and low wages.

From a leftie perspective, all this might suggest some awful neoliberal dystopia. But to many people from EU countries, Peterborough has offered the prospect of self-improvement and hard-won comfort. Individual career histories often defy not only the more doomy critiques of the modern job market, but the idea that human beings can be neatly divided into “low-skilled” and “high-skilled”. They instead present a picture of people who have determinedly moved from one category to another.

One of my most reliable contacts is a fortysomething man who arrived in 2005, began stacking shelves for Marks & Spencer, and now runs his own pho-

tography business. In the recent past, I have met people who started packing crates for Ikea and became middle-managers, or initially found low-grade work in supermarkets, only to eventually open their own shops.

Such stories are built around a set of aspirations: property ownership, relative affluence, and as much stability and security as the modern economy can deliver. Hearing them first-hand, I have felt at least some of my ingrained scepticism melt away: it might be easy to scoff at such an idea, but at least some people in this part of England have lived out a kind of British dream.

But no more, perhaps. Since 24 June last year, the signals emanating from Whitehall and Westminster have been clear. If the United Kingdom once offered an open door and an array of opportunities, such things are now almost completely obscured by mistrust, bad faith, and the sense that a majority of people in England and Wales (including the 61% of voters in Peterborough who supported Brexit) have had enough.

Such is the upshot of those leaked proposals from the Home Office, reportedly reflective of the views of Theresa May herself, and loudly endorsed by the rightwing press. In symbolic terms, this is just one more burst of nastiness and delusion to add to an ever-expanding pile. But in the sense of practical policy, what has been proposed represents something quite remarkable: confirmation that post-Brexit Britain will put the demands of economics – or, put another way, national prosperity – well below the emotional stuff of belonging and nationhood, with no end of consequences.

Certainly, if it all comes to pass, there will be no more Cardeas. For any would-be migrant from mainland Europe, the kind of career ladder scaled by people in Peterborough will be snapped in two.

Supposedly low-skilled workers will only be able to stay for up to two years; even the high-skilled will have their stays capped at five. In that sense, the British dream will be over: migration from the EU will be subject to the kind of guest worker system that institutionalises prejudice and mistrust, and puts up huge barriers to some of the most basic elements of human existence.

Britain will be no place to start a family, or buy a home; as with people from outside the EU, anyone wanting to come and work here will be subject to an almost incomprehensible regime of income requirements, residency permits and immigration checks.

As far as I can tell, the mood among many people from EU countries remains stoical and hard-headed, perhaps reflective of a sensibility ingrained under communism, when the people in power regularly lost their minds but life had somehow to continue. “You are leaving the EU, so I guess some sort of restriction is inevitable,” said one of my Polish acquaintances this week.

But at the same time, there is a sense of a collective anxiety that has been slowly growing since last summer. On that score, I think of a woman I met in a Peterborough delicatessen back in February, who told me that her Facebook feed had recently filled with rumours that after the triggering of article 50, people from EU countries would be barred from re-entering Britain. “There are fears that they might chase us out of here, fears of deportations,” she said. Then she shrugged. “But life goes on.”

What all this says about the state of British Conservatism is very revealing. Post-Thatcher, the Tories have never resolved the tensions between the politics of nationalism and base prejudice, and the most basic principles of free-market economics. But if May has her

way, the first will decisively trump (a good word, that) the second.

In that sense, the fate of a lot of people from mainland Europe will be hugely symbolic. Most of the EU citizens I have spoken to in Peterborough do not have a leftwing thought in their heads; they believe in a credo of self-reliance, hard work and home ownership. In a British context, these ideas are as Tory as they come. So how come so many Conservatives now want to slam the door on their most devout adherents?

And what of the economy? Peterborough is one of the largest urban centres of a region of England in which unemployment is below the national average; and in a city of nearly 300,000, a mere 1,770 people are currently claiming out-of-work benefits. Its successive waves of migration from the EU – first Poles, Latvians and Lithuanians, then Bulgarians and Romanians – have fed a job market in which most British people are barely interested. Nonetheless, all of us have come to expect the benefits: cut-price food; consumerism-on-tap; the confidence of knowing that an online click today means a delivery tomorrow; the idea that if the worst comes to the worst, some or other army of care workers will be there to look after us.

No more, perhaps: if a good deal of the explanation for Brexit is about a denial of the future and some misplaced vision of the past, we may be about to find out what all that means in practice.

Terrified of the more irate elements of its core vote, the Labour party currently seems little interested in loudly raising the alarm. Whether Tory unease will boil over is uncertain, at best. But what we could be about to lose is obvious. Frozen into the brickwork of those newly built houses in Peterborough is a whole host of stuff – hard work, persistence, ambition, stoicism – that has played a huge role in keeping an increasingly fragile country in business. To throw all that away would be madness. But amid the general lunacy of Brexit, will that be enough to stop it?