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Nostalgic Democracy Triumphs over Democratic Internationalism

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For democrats, two important lessons emerge from the Brexit referendum. First, it was a triumph of nostalgic democracy; second, it was a failure of democratic internationalism.

‘Take back control’ and ‘we want our country back’ are pre-eminently the principles of engaged democratic citizens. No one listening to the foot soldiers of the Leave campaign could doubt their sincerity or their commitment. Many believed themselves to be fighting for a cause greater than the standard of living or the control of tariffs on goods and services. For them the single market was a mundane matter. Instead, they thought in terms of parliamentary representatives determining the common political life in the UK. They accepted that governments might bungle, but they wanted the right to cashier the bunglers through elections. They wanted to live under rules chosen by the people of the UK. They wanted the democratic autonomy of which Pericles spoke when he praised Athens: our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours; it is more a case of our being a model to others than of our imitating anyone else. Taking this form, the Brexit referendum was thus the victory of nostalgic democracy.

Yet no modern democracy in Europe can afford the luxury of nostalgia for at least three reasons.

Firstly, democratic autonomy requires strong economic performance. Anyone who studies the development of the UK’s economic policy from the emergence of mass democracy in the twentieth century will soon realise the profound limitations how its poor economic performance has imposed upon democratic choice. Churchill’s return to the gold standard in 1926 was followed by the austerity budgets of Philip Snowden and Britain’s exit from the gold standard in 1931. The anti-inflationary programme of Stafford Cripps after 1945 reflected balance of payments constraints. The Labour governments of 1964 to 1970 were hobbled by the attempt to maintain the pound at parity with the dollar. The IMF loan of 1976 led to severe public expenditure reductions. The UK’s exit from the ERM in 1992 exhibited the same logic. In an economy like that of the UK, one that is peculiarly sensitive to international trade, democratic autonomy is only sustainable provided it is supported by economic strength. Otherwise, a democratically elected government will be buffeted by currency volatility and the markets. The UK has persistently failed this test of strength, and, in the wake of the referendum vote, any short-term benefits of the devaluation of the pound against the dollar – if there are any- will be only one more example of a temporary fix, a sugar high that prevents policy makers

dealing with the underlying structural causes of poor performance – low long-term rates of savings, inadequate education and training and a pinched level of public goods failing to support economic activity and social improvement.

Secondly, popular democratic control is qualified and mediated by the legacy of institutions, of which one vital element is the electoral system. It is possible – just - to tell a plausible nostalgic story of majority control in a Britain of the 1950s when party competition was one-dimensional and dominated by the terms of the prevailing compromise between labour and capital. In such a world, the Labour and Conservative parties captured all but three per cent of the popular vote, and, though neither secured a popular majority over the other, the median voter was in control. The case is quite different when politics is criss-crossed by a number of different dimensions, and where the party system has fractionalised. Does anyone suppose that David Cameron’s government, with 37% of the popular vote, was pursuing policies anywhere near the median voter? As the party system fractionalises even more in the wake of the Brexit referendum, it becomes less clear who is going to constitute the ‘we’ who get the country back.

This fractionalization of the party system is heightened by the results of devolution. The UK is now half-way towards a compound political system, far removed from simple majoritarianism. Compound systems rely upon the concurrent wills of their constituent parts. The Scottish government may or may not be right that it has the constitutional power to veto legislation on the UK’s exit from the EU. But whatever the legal situation, in a system of government in which the pull of devolution is growing, the political truth is that something like concurrent majorities are required. From the point of view of those who wish to take back democratic control, this simply looks like a minority exercising blackmail. Yet such a view highlights the failure to understand the complex nature of UK’s compound democracy that has emerged in the last twenty years.

Thirdly, democratic control is not a history-free zone. Existing commitments matter. The most conspicuous example post-Brexit is the UK’s commitment to the peace process in Ireland. Since 1922 the common travel area has existed between the Republic and the UK because their migration policies, both inside and outside the EU, have been in lock-step. It was inevitable, once the referendum was called, that the re-erection of border security would become a divisive issue between the communities of Northern Ireland. Post-Brexit, border security will have to be harder than it has been in the recent past, if the free movement of people from Europe into the UK is to be controlled. Otherwise the famous Polish plumbers will simply take the Ryanair flight to Dublin and then the bus to Belfast. If the control of migration is the UK’s red line, then passport and customs barriers will be needed for the crossing between the Republic and Northern Ireland. How long before a border post becomes the target of some brash 22 year old with explosives who wants bragging rights among his friends? How soon afterwards will military patrols be needed?

But the referendum campaign was not lost solely by the power of nostalgia. It was also lost by the failure to put the democratic case for the EU. Of all the silent voices, the most silent of them all was that of democratic internationalism. How did it come about that the EU was portrayed as an anti-democratic institution? With its 28 countries, there are currently more democracies in the EU than there were *in the whole world* in 1951 when the Coal and Steel Community was formed. Of those 28 countries, eleven have become democracies since the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, and three of them – Greece, Portugal and Spain – since the collapse of the last vestiges of fascism in Europe in the 1970s. Helmut Kohl may have been economically illiterate but he was profoundly right politically when he offered the citizens of the former GDR one Deutschmark for one Ostmark. He thereby cemented the political identity upon which common democratic institutions could be built. The EU now comprises the largest group of national democracies joined in political association that the world has ever known. This is not to say that the EU is solely responsible for democratic consolidation in central and eastern Europe. The firm resistance of NATO to the Soviet threat during the Cold War played the leading role. A military alliance of states, however, can only ward off territorial enemies. It cannot create the conditions for democratic consolidation, particularly in a part of the world that is still overcoming its historical legacy of imperial and authoritarian rule.

Nostalgia sufferers assert that the EU is a leviathan, an unaccountable super-state that itself would be unacceptable, in terms of its democratic credentials, if it sought to join itself. This is to confuse a union of democratic states with a democratic state. To be sure, the bland invocation of the ‘pooling of sovereignty’ usually used to describe the powers of the EU obscures more than it illuminates. No one to date has worked out the principles for the sharing of power among states as representatives of their peoples on which the EU is built. The Confederalist Papers have yet to be written. Moreover, there is what Peter Lindseth (2010) has rightly called a democratic disconnect between national parliaments and the exercise of EU powers. Yet, as the House of Lords European Committee pointed out in a report published at the end of 2014, there is little point in creating new powers for national parliaments in the EU’s legislative processes when the existing powers under the Lisbon Treaty are not being used. In a world of dense economic and social interconnection, taking back control means taking responsibility for scrutinizing the work of international institutions, not pretending that you can be immune from their existence or running away from the best prospect of rules-based international relations.

Some will draw attention to countries like Poland and Hungary, whose political leaders are currently revelling in the claim to be illiberal democrats, governing regimes with the outward semblance of a constitutional democracy but in which the arbitrary use of political power is deployed to weaken opposition. Can we really say in the light of this experience that the EU is a force for the consolidation of democratic values? Democratic consolidation in the wake of authoritarian regimes is often a case of one step forward and two steps back. What the EU provides is a framework in which

political developments threatening the consolidation of democracy are open to criticism and review, as the report of 1 June 2016 of the European Commission criticizing Polish government policy threatening the rule of law (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-2017_en.htm) goes to show. It may not be much but it is more than we would have without the EU.

Brexiters were right to be sceptical of the basis on which David Cameron campaigned for the renegotiated agreement he claimed to have secured. Much of it was of marginal relevance to their concerns. However, there was one principle that he willingly gave away that, though of primarily symbolic significance, is nonetheless important, namely the principle of an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe. The peoples of Europe are threatened with serious security threats, with the movement of refugees from war-torn or impoverished parts of the world and the militarization of Russian foreign policy, as well as having to deal with the consequences of the financial crisis. What all the countries of the EU need is responsible cooperation in the pursuit of their common interests and democratic values. What they do not need is a retreat into nostalgia. In the UK the political class has lost the sense that politics is a vocation calling for the responsible exercise of power. Important political decisions should not be an exercise in self-intoxicating rhetoric. We can only hope and pray that out of the current confusion the UK discovers a seriousness of purpose attuned to the international responsibilities that all democracies should demonstrate. The etymology of the word 'precarious' is 'dependent on the results of prayer'. Our situation is truly precarious.

References

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