

Support for Brexit is no longer a minority viewpoint on the British left

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In recent years, Euroscepticism has frequently been associated with the right of the political spectrum in the UK, but a number of figures on the left have also voiced their support for the country leaving the EU. [Imke Henkel](#) writes that while criticism of the EU's handling of the Eurozone and migration crises is understandable, such problems should be used as the basis for stronger engagement from the British left at the European level.



Among the British press, which overall shows a [bias for leaving the EU](#), the *Guardian* is seen as one of the few papers with a friendly attitude towards remaining. However, there are pro-Brexit voices within the *Guardian*, too. On 20 May, Larry Elliott, the paper's Economic Editor, made [his argument](#) for Britain to leave the EU: "Brexit may be the best answer to a dying Eurozone". The piece culminated in the provocative conclusion that the EU was "the USSR without the gulag".

The article sparked a strong response from the *Guardian's* former Director of Digital Strategy, Wolfgang Blau. The German born journalist had moved to the *Guardian* only in 2013 from his previous role as editor in chief at the German digital publication *Zeit Online*. He left after just two and a half years in December 2015 to become the Chief Digital Officer at Condé Nast International. In February 2015, Blau had been one of four candidates in the internal hustings to succeed the outgoing *Guardian*-editor Alan Rusbridger. With just 29 votes out of 964 Blau came last by a wide margin. Still, his early departure from the *Guardian* surprised many in the industry.

Blau's [reaction](#) to Elliott's plea for Brexit was fierce: "Why I left the *Guardian*" he headed his objection. Elliott's position, Blau argued, was more influential, as well within the *Guardian* as for its readers, than the superficially pro-EU stance of the paper: "What most continental European media seems to miss is that these [Elliott's views] are mainstream Labour and Guardian positions, despite Mr Corbyn's current and very, very late endorsements of the EU with its – as he put it – 'warts and all'. Referendum or not, Brexit or not, these positions will remain a potent factor in the UK for years to come."

Euroscepticism and the left

This controversy offers some insight beyond the quantitative research conducted by the Reuters Institute into how newspapers influence – and indeed accord with – their readers. What Blau's response exposes is a clash between the British and the continental European view of Europe. I hail from the continent myself (Germany) and have lived in Britain since 1998. I am acutely aware of this rift.

Elliott's comment fits into a narrative that will chime with many British readers. He argues that the EU's relentless neoliberal politics caused the economic misery of countries including Greece, Ireland and Portugal, as well as Finland and even Germany. He claims, with some justification, that the euro was misconstrued and concludes that staying in the EU would shackle Britain to a currency zone that is doomed: "The left-of-centre case for divorce is that Europe doesn't work, is not remotely progressive and is heading for an existential crisis anyway."

Elliott claims to write a critique of the EU from the left, but philosophically he stands on the same ground as his right wing opponents. His argument derives from a British exceptionalism that is the mirror-image of the post-imperialist revery of right-wing Brexiteers. For anyone coming from the liberal left on the European continent it seems extraordinary that the answer to the existential problems which currently grip the EU could be to shrug and leave.

The claim that the EU is fundamentally the community that preserves peace, democracy and human rights in Europe frequently generates derision. Brexiteers tend to dismiss this argument, especially when put forward by a German national: to make this case is simply proof of a German guilt-complex as well as a specific German gratitude towards an institution that allowed the historical sinners back into the international community.

This is a nationalistic and narrow minded view. But it has shocking echoes in Elliott's Brexit-piece. Making German redemption and power the linchpin of the EU ignores the many European countries that came out of dictatorship into the community: Greece, Portugal, Spain, and the Eastern European nations. To call the EU "the USSR without the gulag", as Elliott does, betrays, if not ignorance of, then at least insensitivity for European history. It also curiously echoes Boris Johnson who found that the EU reminded him of Hitler.

Like the right-wing Brexiteers, Larry Elliott also judges the EU mostly from an economic viewpoint. I happen to agree with his criticism of the design of the Eurozone. I agree that the neoliberal austerity policy promoted strongly by the German government is coming close to destroying Greece – and, I would add, via this route the EU. I do not, however, agree that a Brexit will cure any of this. That it will be a healing shock, as Elliott puts it, is naive and a feeble excuse for national egoism ('let's get out and let them deal with the mess'). How would a Brexit help austerity-savaged Greece or Portugal? Does Elliott seriously believe that Britain leaving the EU would shock Mr Schäuble into finally agreeing to debt relief?

The EU and democracy

But what about the democratic deficit? This, again I agree, is a gigantic, troublesome problem. The EU is distant, difficult to understand, often non-transparent. However, the EU is not un-democratic. Like the British government, the European institutions are legitimised through a representative democracy. The British prime minister is elected by his party, not the people. This is why within this parliament we will see a prime minister who will have been elected by 130,000 Tory members and still govern 60 million Britons.

If we were to argue that the EU is democratic, then we would point out that EU commissioners are appointed by national governments who have been elected by the people. But indirect democracies also need several layers of elections and appointments to remain operable. Too many layers might render the process undemocratic. Then reform is needed. But again: You do not get reform by sulking and turning your back.

However, the undemocratic nature of the EU is the most persistent British myth on both the left and right. As Paul Mason, another left-wing Eurosceptic *Guardian*-commentator puts it: "in Britain I can replace the government, whereas in the EU, I cannot." This is not true. The EU parliament is elected by the European citizens in each country. The EU Council consists of elected ministers and head of states of each country (and the Commission is, as stated above, appointed by national governments and subject to a vote by the European Parliament).

The EU's problems are well-known. It faces a gigantic risk of diluting its values of freedom, democracy and human rights through its diabolic entanglement with the autocratic, human rights violating and journalist imprisoning regime in Turkey. European democracy is under threat in Poland and Hungary, not to mention the short-sighted strangulation of Greece that Elliott – and Mason – rightly attack. And we need to find a solution to deal with the millions of poor and violated people from outside Europe seeking to enter the continent.

But all this is not a reason to avert our eyes and retreat from the firing line. It is, instead, the reason why the British left should make a strong case for greater engagement at the European level. Europe needs the cool headed British voice. We need the excellent, world class British diplomats, economists and intellectuals to address these problems. Make the EU do what it should do.

However, to many British readers – and journalists – exceptionalism comes so natural that they do not even recognise it as such. And liberal, left-wing writers don't spot the similarity between themselves and right-wing positions on the EU. They are influential, because their view sits all too well in the British narrative of Europe across

the political spectrum.

This is what increasingly exasperated Wolfgang Blau, and indeed other continental European journalists at the *Guardian*. The *Guardian* might publish a greater number of pro-remain than pro-leave articles as the Reuters Institute established. From a liberal continental European perspective, however, the views it expresses are not so dissimilar from those calling for Brexit.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: the Guardian's Economics Editor Larry Elliott, via uniglobalunion.org.

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