

The left must stop indulging anti-EU sentiment and get behind Remain

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*Those on the British left who believe the EU is their enemy are giving sustenance to the nationalist right, argues **Michael Lloyd**. They misrepresent the workings of the European Union and have created a myth that it was EU institutions that foisted austerity on Greece. In fact, the EU is not a barrier to democratic socialism but simply another political arena in which the battle against neoliberalism can be fought.*



While there are a few signs that the old, anti-EU sections of the left are starting to recognise their long-standing opposition to the Union is misconceived, old habits of thinking die hard.

As someone on the left for many years – and pro-EU since the early 1970s – I have always found this quasi-Marxist antipathy to the EU, ill-informed and essentially linked to an English petty nationalism and exceptionalism. I say English, because the earlier ability to co-opt the other Celtic nations of the UK into calling themselves British is now failing to work.



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It would be bad enough if members of this recalcitrant lump on the left were simply to find themselves, as they are, on the wrong side of the global progressive struggle against neoliberal capitalism. However, they are giving sustenance to the populist rightwing sector who are promoting the campaign for the UK to vote to leave the EU.

This left grouping, numbering among them [Larry Elliot](#) of the Guardian, follow the right-wing populists in deliberately misrepresenting the way in which the EU works in political terms, and pretending that by contrast the UK is a shining pillar of democratic political governance. In this task they have been aided for years by the British establishment and the media also pretending that the EU is simply an inter-governmental body; a sort of economic version of NATO. In this way the EU is relegated to being seen as an aspect of foreign policy. Latterly the Foreign Office is effectively being run by the Treasury, which has a narrow financial perspective and has always been antipathetic to the EU.

This vision ignores the fact that the EU institutions reflect the political complexion of the member states which make up this loose confederation of nation states. When the member states are broadly social-democratic or democratic socialist then the EU tends to move forward with a more progressive social policy agenda. When – as now – there is a broadly right-wing, neoliberal consensus then we have reactionary, austerity policies being promoted at EU level, via its institutions.

This is why all on the UK left should understand that the EU should be regarded not as an aspect of foreign policy, but as an integral part of the political struggle against neoliberal capitalism. It is simply another part of the terrain on which the political battle for ideas and policies is fought, extending also globally. It is both defeatist and dangerous for the left to believe that the struggle for democratic socialism can be won in one nation-state, and particularly the UK which does not have a strong history of revolutionary political or ideological action.

Currently, Germany is perceived as a dominant force in the councils of the EU. In fact this is incorrect in relation to the EU, though it is more correct in relation to the Eurozone, which I will discuss below. The problem is that the neoliberal consensus, which UK governments have for a number of years supported, is expressed in its clearest *constitutional* form in the Germany as ordo-liberalism – i.e. the state is separate from the social market, but constitutionally guarantees the market (the pure neoliberal Hayekian model).

But this view of the role of the state is not endorsed by France and by other countries. The role of the state in France and a number of other EU countries is seen as an activist state, capable of intervening in civil society, in both economic and social terms. The UK, with an incoherent constitutional view, and having drifted towards a neoliberal position in political economic terms, tends to support the German position. Hence, and particularly given the political and economic weight of the UK inside the EU, a change of government in the UK to a democratic socialist one would see a shift away from the perceived dominance of Germany and would also be reflected in EU policy development.

There is, however, a further problem in the Eurozone. The political decision-making structure in the Eurozone is not the familiar one in the EU itself, where it is, *uniquely*, the Commission's role to propose policies. In the Eurozone's current unsatisfactory structure, it is the finance ministers of the 19 member states of the Eurozone – the Eurogroup – who put forward the policy proposals and make the final decisions. Hence, in relation to the on-going Greek debt crisis (actually a German banks crisis) it was *not the EU institutions* which forced the bad debt deal on Greece, but Germany allied with right-wing governments in the Nordic (Finnish) and Eastern European member states, with support also from the then right-wing governments in Spain and Portugal. In fact, the European Commission (and the IMF as part of the Troika) argued, and still do, for the Greek (German bank) debts to be written off or extended to 30 years. The technocratic elites did not align with the right-wing politicians on austerity.

So what lessons should be learned by those on the left who still seem to persist in believing in the achievement of socialism in one country? In my view, the main lesson is clear. The EU should not be perceived as a barrier to democratic socialism. Rather should it be seen as a battleground over which the struggle to defeat neoliberal capitalism must be fought, within the context of a global struggle. There is a powerful democratic socialist argument for the UK to remain within the EU. Failure to appreciate this argument across the left, either through a wilful ignorance of the actual political mechanics of the EU or because of a failure of an inadequate Marxist analysis, should not be indulged.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

Also by this author: [Nostalgia, xenophobia, anti-neoliberalism: the roots of Leave's nationalism](#)

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