

'Things were better in the past': Brexit and the Westminster fallacy of democratic nostalgia

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***Dave Richards** and **Martin Smith** examine why Brexiteers want to 'take back control' and how this desire is not only paradoxical but part of a 'democratic nostalgia' which could further exacerbate political disengagement.*



Explanations of Britain's vote to Leave the EU have tended to focus on how it is a response to, and a potential resolution for, [a series of longer-term pathologies](#) that have afflicted British politics. A new orthodoxy is taking shape that presents Brexit as a bottom-up, populist-driven, revolt against the established order. It depicts a political drama enacted by those variously labelled as 'the have nots' the 'left behinders' or the 'somewherers' rising up from the 'provincial backwaters' to enact a bloodless coup on an out of touch, metropolitan governing elite. An elite accused of colonizing power for too long and incapable of taking account of the lives of 'normal people'. Untouched by austerity and immigration, they are responsible for forcing on everyday citizens a cosmopolitan polity that has steadily [eroded British values](#). Layered on top is an even more detached European elite, seeking to impose *de haut en bas*, its version of an open, internationalist, social Europe on Britain.



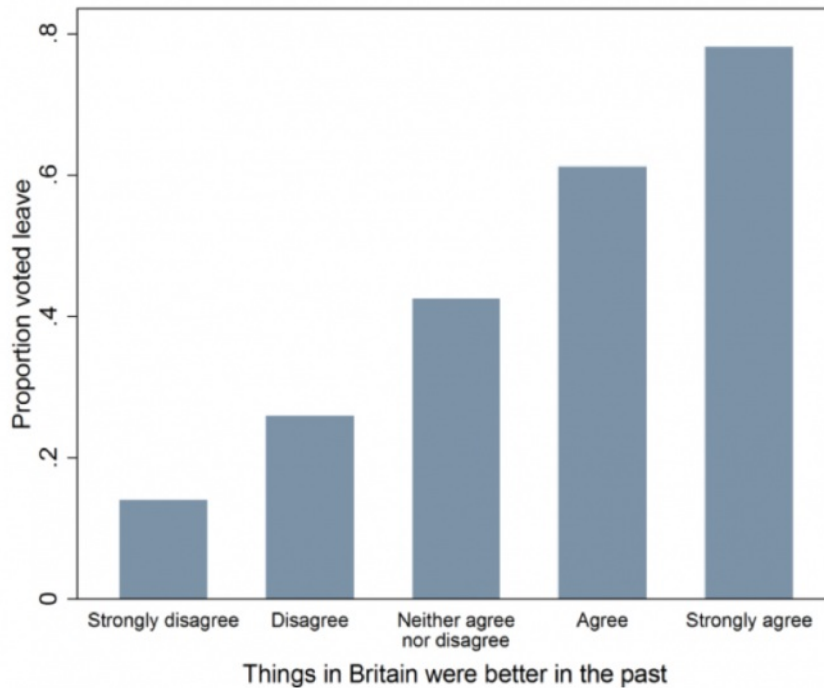
Fundamental to the Leave campaign, was the need to 'take back control' or, in constitutional terms, to reassert national sovereignty through Parliament. This vision of a strong, national community is one [set out](#) by Theresa May in her first conference speech as Prime Minister. Emphasising a [provincial form of conservatism](#), it stressed the reassertion of national borders and a commitment to a more traditional, organic, locally-based, and at times, interventionist politics, contra the market liberalism underpinning Thatcherism.

'Taking back control'

To date, the May Government's vision for Britain lacks specificity in defining what taking back control means. It argues this is for strategic reasons of negotiation – of not revealing one's hand too early. Critics, including those in the [devolved administrations](#), claim the Government does not have a coherent view on the subject and, more pointedly, a disdain for consulting beyond Whitehall on it.

Control of what, by whom, from whom? The desire to take back control is paradoxical. The signs are that taking back control goes little beyond reasserting Parliamentary Sovereignty, drawing on a mythical view of a previous golden age of Parliament. Albert Weale labels this as a form of 'democratic nostalgia' set against the perceived 'failure of democratic internationalism'. Nostalgia, in this context, refers to a particular view of Britain's past, the invoking of a Halcyon-like view of the Westminster model and with it a: '...desire to turn the clock back'. It chimes with a [British Election Study](#) survey identifying among Leave voters a relationship between a '...sense of national decline' and the view that 'things in Britain were better in the past' (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: BES Q - 'Things Were Better in the Past'



The Brexit paradox

There is a real possibility that a Brexit settlement that does not seek to imagine much beyond re-centring power to London, will exacerbate the very pathologies in the way politics is done that were distilled in the vote to Leave. If the Brexit vote was a revolt against an out of touch governing class, then the clawing back of sovereignty by a Westminster elite, or to put it more prosaically, the reclaiming of powers to Parliament, will not resolve the issue.

For the nature of the [British political tradition](#) is one in practice whereby Parliamentary sovereignty effectively means executive sovereignty. The implications of this position are illustrated by the [Great Repeal Bill](#), which will allow ministers to rescind EU regulation without a full debate in Parliament. In principle, government will be able to reduce social rights, labour protection, and environmental regulation [without meaningful consultation](#).

The Government views accountability as occurring after the completion of the Brexit negotiations, rather than allowing the process to be 'micro-managed' by MPs along the way. What then has been portrayed as a populist revolt by ordinary people, is translating into an elite-driven project heavily orchestrated through Whitehall's prism. The danger then in the end product, is that people will see government as more remote and more out of touch. The Vote to Leave's powerful rallying cry of UK citizens once again being in control of their own destiny will appear as little more than a chimera.

The importance of sovereign states and negotiations

A deeper problem is one of capacity. The arguments around Brexit, echoed by Marie Le Pen in France, are partly a rejection of globalization and, as we have seen, a reassertion of the myth of the sovereign state. The assumption is that these shifts from an international to national system are the choice of governments; that within the current structure of international and political organisation, governments can simply opt to become 'sovereign' nations again.

Yet, as [Mick Moran](#)'s recent contribution to this debate has once again reminded us, Britain's account of sovereignty was forged at its height as an Empire state, when it 'ruled the waves' and had the economic power to impose trading conditions on other nations. Its membership of the Common Market in the 1970s was a response to a decline in sovereignty and an inability to succeed in the newly globalizing economy at a stage when its economic and political

power were declining. The loss of sovereignty was a cause, not a consequence, of EU membership in 1973, as Britain rapidly lost its economic power. Sovereignty then is not something that can be magically conjured up.

Reports have already emerged, most notably following the recent meeting between [Theresa May and Jean-Claude Juncker](#) of a gap between what the U.K. Government's expectations about negotiating trade agreements with the EU are and the reality of what can actually be delivered. Leading Brexiters such as David Davis and Boris Johnson [have argued](#) that the importance of Britain to major European economies such as Germany and France would secure the UK's continued access to the EU market. Such a view is certainly [contested from the European perspective](#) and crucially ignores the salient need for EU negotiators to prioritise the politics of shoring-up the European project over the economic case. Again, if the UK fails to make an agreement, it will be governed by WTO rules on trade; a set of rules that the UK will have no or minimal control over.

The problem of representation

Parliamentary Sovereignty is based on the idea that Parliament is the embodiment of the will of the people, with MPs as representatives of their constituents. This notion of sovereignty and representativeness is legitimised by accountability. Whilst the executive can take back control, it is accountable to Parliament and ultimately the electorate for its actions.

So, Parliamentary Sovereignty operates within a system of constraint. This majoritarian system of government – where the winner takes all – developed in an era of two parties with distinct links to particular social bases. But overtime there has been a steady erosion of the two party system. Scotland is now dominated by the SNP and Labour's vote is shrinking even within its traditional heartlands. Both the recent local elections and [John Curtice's](#) analysis of current polls suggests that while the Conservatives will likely be returned with an increased majority in the forthcoming General Election, it will be without the support of sizeable parts of the country.

The rationale for Theresa May calling an election is that it strengthens her Government's bargaining position over Brexit. Yet this majoritarian approach reveals the true nature of the British political tradition in its capacity to insulate against pressures for plurality and deliberation in the negotiations. The voice of the 48 per cent against leaving and the majorities in Northern Ireland and Scotland who [voted remain](#) will have limited political traction. Crucially, with strong, single party government in a system where party competition has broken down, then the accountability mechanism is severely weakened.

Why does this matter? The path currently being set is one leading to a post-Brexit polity where political sovereignty is re-established on the basis of representation. Yet the breakdown in traditional party alignment means the links between party and voter are fracturing leading to a Parliament that is even less representative of the electorate than in the past. In the absence of any consideration for seeking out a more deliberative and consensual approach to decision-making, often referred to as a [New Politics](#), the UK's political system is in danger of further losing legitimacy.

We are at a point in time of heightened expectations over what the impact of taking back control by the Westminster Government can deliver in terms of new economic opportunities, controlling borders, and reducing immigration. At the same time, in terms of political statecraft, appeals to an existing strategy of de-politicisation involving the blaming of others [in this case the European Union] for any failings will lack credibility.

By reasserting Westminster control founded on an appeal to a misplaced sense of democratic nostalgia, the old patterns of government which originally contributed to a rising anti-politics climate will be strengthened. The fear is this will further exacerbate political disengagement, so leading to a much broader crisis of delegitimisation across the UK's political system.

Note: This is a summary of a paper the authors are giving at the International Institute of Administrative Sciences

(IIAS) Conference, Aix Marseille University 30 May- 2 June 2017, Aix-en-Provence, France entitled 'Brexit, Institutional Crisis and the Future of U.K. Governance'. A version also appears in a University of Manchester publication [here](#).

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