A monopoly on virtue?

It was the “right” result in Austria but the “wrong” result in Italy. Who says so? Well, a number of German politicians for a start. The victory of the Green candidate Alexander van der Bellen over the Freedom Party’s Norbert Hofer in yesterday’s re-run Presidential Election was, in Martin Schulz’s words, a defeat for “anti-European, backward-looking populism.” Quite a few other European worthies agree with him. His German compatriot, Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel said that, “a load has been taken off the mind of all of Europe.” He called the result “a clear victory for good sense.”

By contrast, the reaction to the defeat of Italy’s Prime Minister Matteo Renzi in a referendum over a revision to the Italian constitution was very different. The German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier said that the result was “not a positive development in the case of the general crisis in Europe.” Another German, Manfred Weber, the head of the main conservative group in the European Parliament, told ZDF television that the result was a “setback”.

No one is suggesting that Renzi’s resignation followng his defeat spells the end of the EU and furthermore, pro-EU sources insist that there will be no crisis in the Eurozone in consequence, although yesterday’s vote will not do anything to address the plight of some Italian banks. What these two referendums have underlined, however, is the extent to which the prevalent attitude in the EU is – to paraphrase George Orwell – “Pro-federalist good, pro-nation state bad.”

Those of us who debated with remainers during the referendum found ourselves crossing swords with a mixture of opponents. Some, one has to say, misled, spun and were thoroughly unpleasant people. Others were genuine believers in a project with whom we would beg to differ. No reasonable person would disagree with the objective of preventing a third world war, which was one reason why the EU project gained such traction

in the years after 1945. Some remainers still genuinely believe that a federal superstate is still the best war of preserving peace, but at least they will be civil with you if you think their reasoning is faulty.

Furthermore, such people do not claim a monopoly of virtue or common sense. It is this arrogant attitude, epitomised by people like Schulz and Gabriel, which is so sickening. It would be naive to deny that there are some decidely nasty people who are vehement opponents of federalism. Take the Golden Dawn party in Greece, for example, which is claimed to include overt Nazi supporters among its membership. Even in this country, it has to be admitted that not everyone who voted for Brexit was an angel.

Nonetheless, there were many people who supported Brexit on June 23rd and many people in EU-27 who are uncomfortable with the federalist vision and who are not in any way violent, racist or stupid. There are many rational, sensible reasons for believing that nation states with robust democratic processes offer a better hope of peace than a federal monster which concentrates so much power in the hands of a remote, unelected élite. There are good reason for believing that in the long term, there will be economic benefits from leaving the EU and regaining the freedom to control our international trading arrangements.

Even touching that knotty subject of immigration, there are good reasons for wanting a greater degree of control over who enters this country. Even the claim that we need immigrants to fill jobs is actually very short-termist. Advances in robotics are likely to see 10 million low-skilled jobs – the type largely undertaken by immigrants – replaced by machines in the next 20 years in this country.

None of this matters to the self-righteous europhile élite. They are the good guys, the forward-looking people and we are dinosaurs. In this country, the Brexit vote has so traumatised academics at the University of Nottingham that they are being offered “wellbeing workshops” to cope with “stress and anxiety” caused by the Brexit vote.

We can be thankful that, whatever the machinations of some

hard-core remainers in this country who still refuse to accept the people’s voice, the EU at least seems happy – indeed keen – to see us go. If, however, its leading advocates continue, with no real justification, to claim the moral high ground while treating everyone without exception in EU-27 who shares our reservations about the EU project as backward-looking and malign, such behaviour will only ensure that sooner or later, another country will follow us through the exit door.

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