

“Forward – not back – to the future”

In or out of Europe, both Leavers and Remainers are making a fundamental mistake if either think they can take us back to the status-quo ante.

Nigh on fifty years’ membership has changed the United Kingdom beyond recognition, according to Philip Cunliffe in an affiliate article which we publish in full below.

Any attempt by Leavers to reconstitute a political system based on a pre-1973 model is bound to fail, not least because one of the main reasons for signing up to European membership in the first place was to try and reverse the years of post-war economic decline which had left Britain as the ‘sick man of Europe.’

By the same token, any idea that the populist Brexit genie can be put back in the bottle is for the birds. The growth in horizontal government among Europe’s political elites at the expense of vertical representation by voters who elected them to office in the first place has been well and truly exposed. Any idea that the British electorate will endorse a continuation of that process is surely dead whatever their views on the European Union.

An entirely new settlement is needed which learns from the past, addresses the present, and builds for the future.

Nation-building starts at home

By Philip Cunliffe

New nation – new structures

If we are to constitute a new nation, then we need new representative structures – new parties, new laws and a new political system. Taking back control has failed, because restoring the legal supremacy of parliament has meant simply thrusting forward an unrepresentative and feckless political elite, so used to taking directives from Brussels that they are incapable of representing the nation.

On the seventh anniversary of the Brexit referendum, it is clear that many Remainers are feeling increasingly confident and increasingly optimistic that they may be able to re-attach Britain to the European Union, if not formally re-join the organisation in due course. They take heart from polls that seem to show that those who were too young to have voted in 2016 are firmly set against Brexit, and that even Leave voters filled with disappointment and regret.

There is plenty to dispute in the polling data – not least by considering the evidence of other polls that show more complex results, and the absence of so-called ‘Bregret’ among Leavers. More importantly, instead of fighting the last war, Brexiters – as well as those who voted for the EU in 2016 but plumped for national democracy since then in the face of Remainers’ rage – should be looking to the future.

‘Brexit lies ahead of us not behind us’

The reality is that the politics of Brexit lies ahead of us, not behind us. Instead of re-fighting the referendum, we should be focused on the more pressing and difficult task – the effort to build a newly independent British nation-state. To do this, we must inevitably build on the ruins of the British member-state. This is the argument that my co-authors and I make in our book published earlier this year, *Taking Control: Sovereignty and Democracy After Brexit* (Polity).

In other words, there can be no going *back* to national sovereignty, only forward. The nation that Britain was in 1973 when we formally joined the European Economic Community (EEC, precursor of the EU), is long gone. As L.P. Hartley put it, the past is a different country, they do things differently there. This should be no cause for regret. Indeed, the very fact that Britain entered the EEC and then voted to remain in the referendum of 1975 was testimony to the fact that the British nation-state of the day was itself ailing, in need of the political and economic crutches provided by the Common Market.

In other words, even if we could restore the nation-state of the 1970s, we would only end up in the same place again – it was after all, the Britain of the 1970s that led to the Britain of the EU, the Britain of today that we are trying to better.

The fact that we could not simply return to a sovereign Britain was not clear at the time of the 2016 referendum. This is testimony to just how poorly understood the EU was across the ideological divide of the Brexit debate. This was true of Leave campaigners as much as those Remainers who presented the EU as the pinnacle of human civilization. Leave campaigners and voters too often saw the EU as a malevolent foreign super-state subjugating Britain to its arbitrary laws, or else as a Napoleonic trading bloc, tying up the buccaneering British spirit of free trade in red tape.

UK sovereignty suffocated

In truth, the EU was neither. It was not external to British politics, but rather the *form* that *national* politics assumed in the era of neoliberal globalisation. Using the prerogatives of the executive to conduct foreign policy, British politicians and civil servants would negotiate domestic policy

in Brussels alongside the political leaders and civil servants of other European member-states, the decisions reached there then cascaded down across increasingly compliant national legislatures across the continent.

In this way and over the course of decades, popular expectations were systematically lowered, democracy was gradually constrained and the nation itself bound up. Presenting political decisions as the outcome of international agreements provided the perfect foil for national aspirations and popular hopes.

Disenchantment with the EU

As national elites turned away from the citizens of their own countries in preference for the cosmopolitan elites and social mores of the new era of globalisation, so voters increasingly spurned national political systems that were insulated from popular oversight and input. This was the void described by late Irish political scientist Peter Mair – the chasm between rulers and ruled that opened up across the states of Europe.

Prospect for national renewal

On the flipside, the fact that we can't go back to the old nation also means that the potential for British nationhood today is much greater than widely realised, and certainly greater than that of 1970s Britain. British society today is rich in untapped potential. This potential stands in stark contrast to the decrepitude of the British state, the sclerosis of public life and the decay of our national infrastructure. How do we unlock the potential of the British people, and reap the political and economic rewards of self-rule? To do this, we must constitute the British nation anew. What would this mean?

As the great English political theorist Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury made clear, a nation can only exist through an institutionalised system of representation. Without a singular focus to concentrate public will, political authority and obligation, there is only a multitude – a disorganised morass.

Out with the old, in with the new

As our political elites have grown accustomed to drawing their authority and legitimacy from horizontal elite networks at the supranational level, the vertical structures of political integration and representation at the national level have shrivelled and ossified. In other words, the member-state has thrived in conditions in which sovereign representation is weak, in which civil society is atomised and fissiparous identity politics prevails. If we are to constitute a new nation, then we need new representative structures – new parties, new laws and a new political system.

Proposals for renewing our democracy

To incentivise greater representation in our political system, and as part of a political package, we propose strengthening the democratic, elected components of the constitution. Thus in our book, we propose abolishing the House of Lords and expanding the House of Commons, to give us one parliamentarian for every 50,000 electors. In order to break up the existing oligarchy of technocratic parties inherited from the member-state, we propose substituting the first-past-the-post system with proportional representation.

Together, this will enhance the capacity of civil society to organise and embed its interests in the state – both by breaking up existing parties, but also carving out greater space for our elected representatives to debate legislation

and scrutinise the executive. At the same time, we propose ending the corporate financing of political parties, capping contributions at a certain percentage of median individual income to help ensure that parties are not captured by wealthy individuals or corporate interests.

The need for nation-building is why we called our book 'Taking Control'. In contrast to the slogan of the Vote Leave Campaign, we claim that there was nothing to return to. The project of taking *back* control has failed, because restoring the legal supremacy of parliament has meant simply thrusting forward an unrepresentative and feckless political elite, so used to taking directives from Brussels that they are incapable of representing the nation. By contrast, the project of taking control can now begin, if we are willing to fill the void of national politics. This means we must all assume individual political responsibility for our collective life together.

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The original article can be found [here](#).

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