

Fewer Politicians – one advantage of “Brexit”

You can swiftly judge the flavour of a democracy by its decision-making. Westminster requires its elected representatives to dash in person to the voting place, state their name to the tellers, and see their footwork published as a matter of public record.

By contrast, the European Parliament once saw an MEP wedge a baguette into the abstain button and wander off for an extended coffee. His voting pattern was probably one of the more enlightened that day. It was certainly the most consistent. It would also have meant he met the attendance threshold to pick up his salary. If nothing else, it provides new meaning to the term ‘roll call vote’.

The European Parliament provides an illusion of democracy. It is a deception, a screen, and indeed an apt mirror of the town in which it sits, and of the institutions for which it is supposed to provide at least notional oversight.

For 15 years now, Brussels has displayed what the Eurosceptic writer David Wilkinson first identified and styled “façadism”. As the city anticipated the arrival of new money after EU expansion, property developers took to gutting old buildings but keeping just the street facing in place, providing literally a front to the stripping away that was happening just out of sight. Something not dissimilar has been happening to Europe’s democracies. The old frontage is still there, but the inner workings have been ripped out.

There are two problems with this management approach. In the first instance, the people in this country overwhelmingly don’t want it. They want to live in an accountable state where they can complain and something gets done; or if something

doesn't get done, they can then vote and get the blighters out.

But the EU is not an accountable democracy. Transitional, proto-federal, corporatist, lobby-orientated, blob-driven: perhaps 'Kryptocracy' best describes it in a nutshell, though 'Pantarchy' has a certain appeal on several levels. The second problem that follows is that it's a dysfunctional system too. The European model is the result of some very clever people playing with a meccano set while their parents were too distracted to stop them expanding across the floor. The construction has gone outwards and upwards as opportunity has permitted, with gaps left for further completion throughout.

Democratic accountability has been one of these. Had the EU's founders been able from the outset to deliver a programme of open integration, these voids would already have been constructively filled. Stops and balances, valves and safeguards would be in place and the European institutions would today at least be trusted. But of course the foundations were built upon the nation states and they require current parliaments to first be cemented over, which has yet to fully happen.

Perhaps the EU's builders took their inspiration from Antonio Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, the hulking beautiful anarchy of a building site that has long loomed over Barcelona, with its hard hat halls and worker ant vistas. If so, they might also usefully reflect on the metaphor of how the distracted architect ended his days when he re-encountered the real world in the form of a passing tram.

Lacking democratic features, the EU has had to invent new ones. The flawed premise has led to some futile constructs. The Committee of the Regions provides a talking shop whose sole function has been to provide a shallow veneer of respectability. By buying-in municipal politicians, the Commission is able to point to individual reports as

democratic mandate for their initiatives, while ignoring other products which are more troublesome.

The Economic and Social Committee, meanwhile, is intended to bring together corporatist partners and interest groups. Representation is largely by self-selection amongst the cognoscenti of the Brussels scene, since only full time insiders will spot the advertising of vacant national places (the FCO singularly does not help).

At €220m annually, these are somewhat expensive talking shops. EUobserver for instance has tartly noted: "In 2010, the 344 EESC members produced 181 opinions, which when divided with the annual budget means each opinion came at an average cost of €660,000, while no information is made available regarding how these opinions influenced legislation. If they did so at all." The CotR has also been the subject of such serious fraud allegations it even triggered the emergence of whistleblowers.

The surfeit of politicians here is inversely matched by their retreat before three other wings of the Kryptocracy. Lobbyists and campaign groups can form a useful, potentially vital, adjunct to a democracy, particularly where their work is based on material that is independently produced. Scientific advisers can also supply fresh checks on potential institutional group-think that allows for assumptions to be challenged, an essential safeguard in a system so worm-holed with working groups that it even has a word for the structure and process: comitology.

The problem here is their interdependency. The problems of "Brussels talking to Brussels" and sock puppetry, so brilliantly exposed in papers by the IEA, exist because these privileged groups form a surrogate for actual democratic input. The EU, the Commission in particular, has yet to figure out that not all lobbyists – especially lobbyists it pays for – are necessarily representative, and that it needs to listen more to precisely those groups with which it disagrees the

most and therefore shuts out.

The more I reflect on the democratic failings structurally underpinning the EU, the more I come to the conclusion that there is a choice between two absolutes. This building site and its façadism cannot continue – the lobbying of the unaccountable, by the unaccountable, for the unaccountable. Either MEPs fully assume their long-touted role, or MPs fully reassume theirs. There is no middle way. The former means the full adoption of a federal European state, with MPs becoming regional councillors in circumscribed roles. The latter route instead means the UK becoming an independent nation state, and cooperating with European neighbours in a manner which is transparent and accountable. There is no middle way. There is no tolerable status quo.

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