

## **The Ideological Zealots of Brexit**

5. March 2018 by [James Bartholomeusz](#)

Nearly two years after Britain's EU referendum, the main reaction I get when talking to people from other countries is still one of bewilderment. The EU is far from perfect, but why would your country do something so monumentally stupid as vote to leave, and then press to do so in the most extreme manner possible? The temptation for many Remainers is to shrug their shoulders at the ignorance and/or bigotry of a large section of the British population. This is not only unfair (and often betrays the sort of metropolitan snobbery that Leave campaigners have been so keen to attack); it is also inaccurate. Brexit is no accident. The effort to prise the UK away from Europe is a project with a long genealogy, pursued over several decades by a vanguard of ideological zealots.

Go back to 1973, the year Britain acceded to the then European Economic Community, and you might be surprised by the different sides in the debate. In the post-war era, the British Right generally held Europhile sympathies, bearing a closer resemblance to mainland Christian democracy than it does today and attracted by the idea of building a continental free trade area. By contrast the British Left was more Eurosceptic, instinctively internationalist but anxious about the potential impact on nationalised industries and organised labour if the domestic market was opened to greater competition. Within 20 years, however, these positions had reversed. The Left was overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the achievements and potential of the European project, while the Right was critically divided on the issue. The cause? The neoliberal revolution, germinating inside the Conservative Party and soon spread across the entire country.

### **Margaret Thatcher's vision of Europe**

Margaret Thatcher's September 1988 speech to the College of Europe in Bruges is well known as an emblematic statement of Euroscepticism. Less well known is what precipitated it. Earlier that month, European Commission president Jacques Delors had addressed the British Trades Union Congress, inviting delegates and their unions to take ownership of the European project and become partners in building the single market. In any other western European country, his speech would have been uncontroversial, a call for capital and labour to collaborate in order to build a stable and prosperous society. However, with neoliberalism in its first flush of success in Britain, this was more than the prime minister and her allies could bear.

Thatcher was not the unremitting Eurosceptic that her latter-day disciples would have us believe. Her more chauvinistic moments aside she firmly believed that cooperation between European states was a vast improvement on continental civil war, and she was instrumental in creating the single market that today's Brexiteers so despise. Nevertheless, the Bruges speech makes it clear that a loose confederation was the highest level of integration she would ever tolerate, especially if - as Delors had implied - further steps would mean a European social policy and curtailing neoliberal reforms on the national level. Her vision was ultimately still of a Europe of nation states, and this line was definitively crossed four years later by the Maastricht Treaty and the founding of the European Union.

Maastricht ripped the Conservatives apart. On one side stood the Europhiles who, as veteran MP Ken Clarke noted in a parliamentary debate last year, believed they were maintaining the same pro-European stance that had been party policy ever since the Second World War. On the other stood the Eurosceptics, channelling Thatcher's spirit and outraged by the government's acquiescence to a proto-federalist treaty. Especially after the landslide victory of Tony Blair's Labour Party in 1997 the latter faction looked as though it would be consigned as a relic of the 20th Century. Nevertheless, they did not submit. They began quietly cultivating alliances in other political parties and the corporate media, and bided their time.

### **The roots of British Euroscepticism**

We now know that Maastricht failed to resolve some key contradictions in the European project, and some of those contradictions have only been sharpened by subsequent developments such as the single currency and eastern enlargement. Meanwhile, among British Eurosceptics a vengeful populist narrative took root. The British people had been betrayed by a Europhile elite, committed to a project of continental federalisation for which there was no popular mandate. The legislative and judicial sovereignty of the United Kingdom had been undermined by supranational institutions, and now representatives of other countries had a hand in writing laws that would apply to British citizens. Perhaps worst of all, the Brits were being led blindfolded down the path of further integration, for there had never been a clear plebiscite on the question of Europe. In such circumstances only a small, quasi-Leninist vanguard, informed by their superior critique of the historical situation would be able to lead the people out of their oppression.

In contrast to other similar movements elsewhere in Europe, it is worth noting that this ideology is not necessarily xenophobic or isolationist - often quite the opposite. This Euroscepticism is partly informed by the fate of the nation state *per se* in a supranational union, and partly by the sense that the UK is denying its unique destiny as a sovereign global power. It is certainly the case that EEC accession filled a painful rift left in the British consciousness by the loss of a world empire, but the Eurosceptic vanguard interpret this as a historic abdication of the country's true role. They seek to replace EU membership with renewed ties to the British Commonwealth and novel partnerships with rising powers like China and the Gulf states. Underlying this vision is a fundamentally different economic model. Free from the collectivism of the European social market, Britain can return to the *laissez-faire* philosophy that accompanied its 19th Century dominance.

The vanguard have long possessed a clear idea of what they want to achieve. The main problem is that their vision holds virtually no public appeal. Like good Leninists they naturally account for this as the false consciousness of the innocent masses, repeatedly deceived by the nefarious Europhile conspiracy. Nevertheless, when a referendum was finally granted (after a stint of coordinated political blackmail directed at a fatally careless Conservative prime minister) the Leave campaign had to season its ideology with other, more popular promises. For most Leave voters, the appeal of Brexit lies in the prospect of reducing immigration and a return to greater state intervention in the economy, including higher spending on public services. The vanguard actively played on these aspirations, erecting billboards depicting a long march of Middle Eastern refugees and promising that Britain's EU

budget contribution would be redirected to the National Health Service. The fact that the low-tax, low-regulation country the Brexiteers want to build would likely increase immigration and further shrink the state was somehow conveniently avoided.

Despite years of intense lobbying against the EU by certain British politicians and journalists (it is now, perhaps too late, common knowledge that Boris Johnson fabricated the Commission's ban on bendy bananas) the vote to leave was prompted by concerns largely unrelated to those of the vanguard. Regardless, this is immaterial for those ideologues who have made it their career's work to extract Britain from Europe. The public has spoken; the metaphysical will of the people has been conferred upon the vanguard, giving them the mandate necessary to enact the Brexit revolution through a sort of constitutional dictatorship of the proletariat.

### **Theresa May's power grab**

Since June 2016, in spite of the Leave campaign's call for voters to 'take back control', many Remain voters have noticed the unsettling signs of a power grab taking place. Since becoming prime minister shortly after the vote, Theresa May has, with the fervour of a convert to the Leave cause, fought any attempt to give the legislature or judiciary a role in the Brexit process while appointing members of the vanguard to leading ministerial positions. A marginal result in favour of leaving the EU has been interpreted as a *carte blanche* to also leave the European Economic Area, Euratom and (if her rhetoric is to be believed) the entirely separate European Convention on Human Rights, as well as risking departure from the single market with no deal governing future relations with the EU. After a judicial ruling that government could not trigger article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and begin the formal process of leaving without parliamentary approval, the corporate media savaged the presiding judges and plaintiff as 'enemies of the people'. When May called an election in a speech that declared any parliamentary opposition to Brexit illegitimate, the same media outlets called on voters to use this opportunity to 'crush the saboteurs'.

It would be a serious understatement to say that preparations for Brexit are going poorly, but this has dented neither the vanguard's ideological fervour nor their conviction that sunlit uplands await the UK after March 2019. The greatest fear seems to be that the government will reach a 'soft' Brexit deal, retaining some aspects of EU membership and therefore limiting the chance for entirely autonomous national policy. With this in mind, over the last few months alumni of the Leave campaign have begun calling on the government to fully prepare for - or even purposefully seek - no agreement on future UK-EU relations, and to jettison the proposed two-year transition period that would effectively delay Brexit until five years after the referendum. Without any agreement Britain would be catapulted into the choppy waters of the global economy, subject only to World Trade Organisation rules: precisely the exposed climate in which the vanguard believe Britain will thrive.

The pragmatism for which the British are famed may yet kick in; their government, especially after an electoral humbling last summer, may achieve a more cautious and conciliatory agreement with the EU. The closer we get to Brexit Day, however, the fewer opportunities there are for even the most willing policymakers to prepare a softer landing. Meanwhile, the probability of the Brexiteers' glorious revolutionary tumult waxes stronger. It may well be that a leviathan has been born, one that will rip Britain out of the EU at any cost to the very country it claims to serve.