

## **Fabulously British**

**UNLIKE JACK WILLS - The University Outfitters -** Tariq Ali, George Galloway, and John Rees, are not 'Fabulously British'. They have, however, entered the lists in the struggle to restore the sovereignty of British capitalism from the baleful embrace of European bureaucrats. *Spiked Online*, whose writers are deeply concerned at the manner in which Johnny-come-lately in Brussels and Strasbourg is undermining the Mother of Parliaments at Westminster, has now joined them in the 'leave' camp.

Unity of a sort is emerging between people on the far left, those in league with conservative libertarians, Tories, and the out-and-out national chauvinists of Ukip. This unholy alliance is founded on the need to defend democracy from European elites by getting Britain out of the European Union.

Their contention is that the anti-democratic forces concentrated in and around the Belgian capital are systemically undermining the British parliament, shackled as it is by the country's membership of the Union. They believe that if we left the club of twenty-eight nations our country would be free to make its own laws without interference from foreigners. The British electorate would, they argue, be much better placed to influence government policy and restore our flaccid democracy to rude health. The elite in Britain and Europe would find it more difficult to have it all their own way as our sovereignty, as in times of yore, is once again underwritten exclusively by the will of the British people expressed in Westminster elections.

This is not as mad as it sounds. The chancers and charlatans – those on the far left, together with their conservative libertarians allies – arguing for the 'leave' campaign, actually do have a point. In fact they have two points:

1. The European Union is profoundly undemocratic.
2. If a majority vote to leave on 23 June Cameron and Osborne “would be toast”.

## 1. DEMOCRACY

When surveying the European Union’s metamorphosis from the ECSC (1951) to the EEC (1958), to the EU (1993), and its truly byzantine whys and wherefores, I, in common with most of my friends and acquaintances, lose the will to live. I think most of us would rather think about something else, perhaps anything else; so I can well understand those of you who can get no further.

Essentially, it’s a club set up by European democracies, governed by treaties entered into by these democratic states. The European Council, made up of the elected presidents or prime ministers of the member states, along with the Council of Ministers representing the elected governments of member states, and Commissioners, nominated by those governments, directs the work of the Union. There is also an executive bureaucracy, known as the European Commission, of 23,000 civil servants. The Parliament, directly elected, in constituencies throughout the continent, shares with the European Council the power to adopt and amend laws; it decides on the EU budget, and scrutinizes the work of the permanent civil servants of the Commission.

So the EU is a cumbersome supranational organization. Its hybrid character and the ‘indirect’ nature of most of its governing bodies results in a less than democratic structure in which the governments of member states, in association with a complex and powerful bureaucracy, ensure that the ordinary elected members of the European Parliament have less power and influence than the most junior ‘backbenchers’ of national parliaments.

The weakness of the European Parliament and its elected members is rooted in the refusal of member

states to allow it to override the sovereignty of the twenty-eight national governments and their parliaments. Obviously, the only way the EU could become a proper bourgeois democracy is if the national states were reduced to federal entities within a United States of Europe.

So, democracy in the EU exists only in the most indirect and attenuated sense. This is, if anything, made worse by the way in which the European Central Bank, the and the courts and auditors of the Union are allowed to operate as technical functions and functionaries independent of political control or proper scrutiny. So the EU is not democratic any more than the United Nations, NATO, the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

However, those who counter pose the EU's operations to those of directly elected national parliaments are pulling a fast one - comparing apples with oranges. There is indeed a crisis of bourgeois democracy at every level in the government of wealthy capitalist states. This is revealed in the manner in which a host of civil society institutions from trade unions to charities have either been hollowed out by big changes in the structure of industry and social life, or directly co-opted by the authorities to carry out 'arms-length' tasks indistinguishable from a host of functions formerly carried out by the state. These trends, together with the weakening of popular engagement with political parties and the corresponding growth of think tanks and focus groups, reveal a tendency to replace political engagement and scrutiny with the work of 'independent' professional or technical functionaries.

Whether we are discussing the regulation of banks or the operation of infant schools, the collection of taxes, the scope of the minimum wage, rent controls or house building, democratic politics is now supposed to take a back seat, in deference to the expertise of 'independent' professionals. Everywhere, throughout our society, democracy, popular political engagement, and free speech, are coming under attack, as the

authorities attempt to wrestle with the decay of practices and institutions incapable of dealing with the social, economic, and political impacts of globalization.

Consequently, the suggestion that leaving the EU will help to rectify any of this is absurd, because the question being posed in the referendum on 23<sup>rd</sup> June is not about democracy - it is about whether British capitalism and the British state and the interests of its subjects are better served in the EU or outside it.

The campaign to leave is inescapably founded upon the idea that the British people are in some sense oppressed, or cheated, or disadvantaged, by our membership - "we want our country back" is not a democratic slogan. It is a chauvinist one predicated upon the idea that British capitalism will, like Prometheus unbound, will be able to engage with globalization unfettered by Brussels. The crisis of bourgeois democracy is a worldwide phenomenon affecting all the democratic states albeit in various ways and to different degrees and cannot be addressed by withdrawing from supranational bodies or international institutions.

## 2. Defeating Cameron and Osborne

On the second point – the idea that we should campaign for Britain to leave the EU because it would weaken the Tories is as barmy as thinking that you can make Britain more democratic by supporting Brexit. There is no doubt, of course, that *Counterfire* and the Socialist Workers Party are right to predict that if the leave campaign wins the referendum on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June, Cameron and Osborne would be “toast” the following morning. What is more difficult to work out is why these radical socialists think a defeat for both the government, and Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party, at the hands of the Tory right and Ukip, would serve the interests of working people in Britain.

Presumably, they are working on the discredited and entirely discreditable assumption that the worse things get, the better it will be for the left. The victory of

the Brexit campaign would represent a dramatic lurch of our mainstream politics to the right. It would also aid and abet other centrifugal nationalisms in Europe, particularly those in Poland and Hungary, which would be greatly strengthened by the turbulence that a British exit would create throughout the continent.

Attempting to smash or unravel the European Union with nationalist rhetoric in the absence of a massive political movement capable of defeating corporate elites in Brussels, Frankfurt, and London, is profoundly irresponsible. More than this, it represents an attempt by leftists and conservative libertarians to short-circuit or replace the struggle for democracy, with the defence of 'national sovereignty'.

It is difficult to fathom how a defence of nineteenth-century notions of national sovereignty is meant to address the problems of capital flows, which surge around the globe quite literally in seconds. It is difficult to grasp how the defence of national sovereignty can be erected as a barrier to free trade, the industrialization of China, or the growth of efficiency and new points of production in one far-flung place after another.

Britain's membership of the European Union, so advantageous to big employers, so problematic for small business; disastrous for the low paid, beneficial for the skilled and highly mobile, is not a panacea for the mass of British working people. Staying in will not address the democratic deficit, or deal with the incipient economic crisis waiting in the wings. However, if Britain seeks to solve its problems by leaving Europe, it would distract all and sundry from the task of attempting to build political institutions and develop a political practice in which the challenges of globalization are contested by a resurgent and deepening democracy.