

***Bad Faith and Europe***

**IT IS NOW PRETTY CLEAR** that Brexit will not accept the legitimacy of the outcome unless they win the referendum. Next Friday, if the result is for Remain the supporters of the Leave camp will be convinced that “we was robbed”. Although the government and members of parliament will accept the declaration of the result and legislate accordingly, if Leave loses legal challenges, uproar, claim and counter claim will greet Friday’s announcement.

Because the country is so radically and bitterly divided rational argument and sober calculation has played little role in the debate; I fear they will play even less of a role in responding to the outcome.

The first and perhaps most bizarre aspect of all this has been the spectacle of Boris Johnson, assorted Tory ministers, and a raft of right wing politicians and businessmen attacking something called “the elite”. Apparently, they’re not part of the “elite”, anymore than conservative, and conservative libertarian journalists editors, filmmakers, academics and commentators can be said to be members of this uniquely privileged social layer. Of course, it’s a moot point where an elite begins and ends, but it beggars belief that these extremely well-heeled and well-connected politicians, public intellectuals and opinion formers can present themselves as modest Davids fighting the self-serving Goliaths of their well-heeled and well-connected opponents.

The truth is that Nigel Farage and the other leaders of Brexit opinion are elite individuals expressing the sharp divisions and conflicts, which are besetting the oligarchy that runs the British state and rules the country. As democracy has decayed, as one democratic institution after another has been hollowed out, rivalry has developed within influential circles

unsure about how to pursue their interests, and uncertain how to establish their legitimacy, and garner popular support for their sectional goals.

It is this conflict that has given rise to the jostling for priority in the rival claims to represent the authentic interests of the British people. This is what has led to Gisela Stuart and others endorsing the 'project fear' in which the threat posed by immigration, particularly Turkish immigration, has loomed so large. On the other side of the argument the threat of economic dislocation, damaged trade, and political disorder plays a similar role.

The honest fears of hardworking Gillian and Joe Public about immigration and being ruled by foreigners are counter posed by Boris Johnson's alter-elite to the arrogance of the IMF, the governor of the Bank of England, and Sir Bob Geldof, who, apparently represent the uniquely anti-democratic institutions of the European Union and the gravy train on which the Brussels bureaucracy are riding.

The truth is that Britain with its hereditary monarchy, with its Prime Minister who exercises many of the monarch's powers regarding the appointment of judges and the deployment of other royal prerogatives, with half of its legislature composed of unelected peers, and the other half elected by a uniquely unfair electoral system, is no model of democratic legitimacy. In any event comparing our national constitutional arrangements with those of the European Union is comparing apples with oranges.

The European Union is a supranational body composed of 28 states, all of who jealously guard their national sovereignty. The result is a cumbersome set of arrangements in which the elected leaders of member states, and the commissioners nominated by each of the Union's elected national governments, work with the toothless, though elected, European Parliament, and a vast bureaucracy to supervise and regulate a market embracing 500 million people.

The irony about all this is the only way of achieving a constitutional bourgeois democratic settlement of the

EU would be the establishment of a United States of Europe as a federal entity in which the existing sovereign nations were demoted to constituent entities within a single European state. In that case we might have a fully elected congress, and presidency, and a federal administration fully under the control of the government of the day.

This is precisely what those who bang on about the undemocratic nature of the EU do not want, preferring instead to sing the praises of British democracy, which despite its manifest flaws and limitations is “the best in the world”.

The truth of the matter is there is in Britain a profound democratic crisis in which the central government and its administrative apparatus has steadily eroded the role and participation of civil society institutions, trade unions, and elected local authorities, preferring instead to centralise and decentralise in a manner which demotes political participation and debate in favour of privileging the role of think tanks, focus groups, experts, managers, and officials, in the development of policy and the delivery of public services. It has been a development in which even charities and ‘the voluntary sector’ have been co-opted by the state to carry out the decisions of the centre. These trends are not unique to Britain and are certainly not produced by membership of the European Union – they are the product of the restructuring of advanced economies over the last forty years, of deindustrialisation, and the onward march of globalisation.

They have led to a growing sense of alienation among large swathes of the population who feel that their interests and concerns are disregarded and ignored. People are not imagining this – the political class and successive governments have indeed side lined the concerns of large sections of the population. This certainly accounts for the emergence of populist politicians like Johnson and Farage.

However, the crisis of democracy will not, and cannot be addressed by leaving [or remaining in] the

European Union. Whether or not we are in or out of Europe we will continue to face the problem of how to create democratic institutions and responses capable of dealing with the challenges of globalisation and rapid technological change.

In the knockabout of the referendum this question has been elided and swamped by the manner in which the Brexit elite has challenged the Remain elite. The suggestion that the fight has been about “getting our country back”, “cutting red tape”, “controlling our borders” have obscured the meaning of democracy and led to a row in which the authority of the IMF, big bankers, and wealthy corporations, has been ranged against the authentic concerns of small business and the mass of working people. This has led to some conservative elements within the labour movement and the left to line up with Farage and the right wing of the Tory Party in the populist hubbub about “restoring British sovereignty” by disentangling ourselves from the single market.

Although there are indeed nasty elements on both sides of this dispute there can be little doubt that the Brexit camp represents the most right wing and reactionary elements of our politics and society. Their reliance upon blaming migrants and refugees for low wages, pressures on the NHS, the housing shortage, and difficulty in securing school places, underlines this feature of our politics.

For all the Brexit campaign’s celebration of Britain’s sovereign democracy there is a fundamentally anti-democratic spirit underlying their populism. Nigel Farage expressed this best when he said:

“If people feel that we’ve lost control of our borders - and we have lost control of our borders – and voting changes nothing. Then violence is the next step.”

Like Enoch Powell who “saw” the River Thames, “foaming with much blood”, Farage is not *advocating violence*, but he knows exactly what he doing when he predicts it. He’s saying either we win, or they’ll be

trouble; so much for his democratic credentials. Plainly, the need to “get our country back” is inspired by reactionary, atavistic, anti-democratic notions concerning the integrity of Britain’s national existence.

Whatever the result on Friday we are going to have to deal with the manifestly false claims concerning migration, and the nature of the elite, presented by Johnson, Farage, and their conservative libertarian allies. Their lies and poisonous bad faith will not simply evaporate; conspiratorial notions concerning “the elite” and populist nationalism, will have to be roundly defeated if we are to have any hope of deepening democracy and social solidarity.