

DON MILLIGAN'S
Off The cuff

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Democracy . . . Schamocracy



GOD HELP US! Jeremy Corbyn is now fighting 'manfully' in defence of something called "British Democracy". #StopTheCoup shouts Momentum as it plans to protect us from the result of the referendum by mobilising thousands of protesters to block the streets and close the bridges. John McDonnell has joined in the fun with a nice piece of historical nostalgia:

The British people have stood up to dictators before and they will stand up to this one as well.

The idea that Boris Johnson is a dictator who deserves to share Mussolini's fate – strung up on a lamppost – because he's attempting to remove six-days from the Parliamentary timetable is plainly absurd. Yet many on the left, who cannot distinguish

between tanks on the streets, soldiers firing on unarmed civilians, the wholesale murder of political opponents by police, or rearranging Parliamentary debates, are bellowing, "It's a *coup d'état!*".

But what do they know? Left wing partisanship in this regard rests upon invincible ignorance, blithely unaware that every extension of the franchise in Britain from 1832 to 1928, bar one, was carried out by Tories. The single exception was that carried out by Lloyd George in 1918. The killings at St Peter's Field in Manchester in 1819, and the brutal suppression of Chartism during the 1840s had rather less to do with winning the vote than meets the eye. It is true, of course, that fear of a turbulent working class in the 1860s, and again at the close of the World War in 1918, was the greatest spur to granting full citizenship to working people. But this was a process of incorporation, not of resistance or transformation.

Democracy in Britain came gradually to pass with the establishment of the rule of law – a system where rulers and ruled alike are subject to common restraints, private property is held to be sacred, and robust contract law is the lintel supporting the entire edifice. Along with these elements came freedom, with few restraints, to criticise, attack, and lampoon, those in power. Only after these elements had been achieved, and had come through, battered but intact, by the Terror of the revolution in France, followed by the upheavals brought by machine production and the invention of railways, did the issue of popular representation, of legal of trade unions, and the incorporation of the labouring classes as full citizens, come to the fore.

The result is that despite retention of an established church and hereditary monarchy, which legitimates and camouflages the supervision of the judiciary and the composition of the House of Lords, by a monied oligarchy, popular sovereignty has emerged as the basis of our constitution. The people are regarded as sovereign.

Parliament, in particular the House of Commons, derives its prior authority and legitimacy from the electorate, and from nowhere else.

Our present predicament is that this sovereign parliament voted to have a referendum on membership of the European Union. Parliament established a simple-majority referendum without qualifications. The people were to decide on the question, should Britain leave the EU or remain within it? The electorate, by a majority of over a million, voted to leave. They instructed Parliament to take Britain out of the European Union.

Parliament duly started the process of leaving by invoking Article 50. In the subsequent general election in June 2017 both the Labour Party and the Tories stood on manifestos pledged to respect popular sovereignty by implementing the decision to leave. Since then, of course, most of the political establishment and the civil service have done everything they possibly can to wreck and undermine the decision of the electorate at the referendum.

Most recently, we have heard the cry, “There is no mandate to leave without a deal!”. Indeed, there is not. The only mandate is the mandate to leave the European Union dictated by popular sovereignty in the referendum and at the subsequent general election. The question put in the referendum was not qualified in any way on what arrangements could be negotiated with Brussels. It was yes or no, in or out. Perhaps it should have been conducted differently, perhaps a two-thirds majority should have been required for a leave vote to take effect, perhaps we should not have had a referendum at all. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps.

What we did do was consult the electorate and they voted by a small but clear majority to leave the EU. Since then the split in the ruling oligarchy has become clearer and the conflict sharper. Big business, the professions, senior public employees, and the intelligentsia, have set their faces against popular sovereignty, paradoxically by calling for a second referendum in the hope of reversing the result, and

manoeuvring against *Any deal* with the spurious cry “There is no mandate for No Deal!” as a means of ‘respecting’ popular sovereignty, while doing everything they can to undermine the decision of the electorate.

On the other side of the elite we have those committed to representing the interests of small business, independent enterprises, sole traders and the like, together with the manual (and often unskilled) working class.

This fundamental struggle between big business and their well-established networks of influence within the state bureaucracy, on the one hand, and the mass of small capitalists and independent business people, on the other, is about how to respond to globalisation. Big business, state functionaries, and most trade unions officials, want Britain to ‘share’ sovereignty in the European Union as a buttress against the rising power of China, India, and others, while the entrepreneurs of the leave camp believe that deregulation of employment and trading arrangements – unbridled capitalism – is the best or only way for Britain to seek to survive the emergence of a situation in which investment and commercial society appears to be slipping beyond the leash of effective national controls.

These tensions are figured by the remain side, as their sophisticated world openness, enlightened liberalism, and commitment to European solidarity. And, on the leave side, by celebration of spirited national independence, and can-do entrepreneurial flair, underpinned by a determination to take back control. Brexit has certainly opened up a cultural conflict in which both sides claim to represent “our” democracy. Remain, representing the real, true, or fundamental interests of the people, regardless of how the people actually vote. And leave, by simply insisting upon the crude expression of popular sovereignty demonstrated at the referendum and in the ballot box.

So, we have now arrived at the spectacle of those who seek to defy the result of the referendum,

and the manifestos of the main parties at the last general election, figuring themselves as defenders of democracy, against those insisting upon implementing the will of the majority. To make the world even more *topsy turvy* we have a far left committed to endorsing the authorities in Caracas and Havana joining Jeremy Corbyn in defending “our” democracy by lining up with big business and broadly middle-class or professional interests, against small business, entrepreneurial, and broadly lower paid working-class people.

We’re certainly in a pickle.

Boris Johnson has astonished Jeremy Corbyn and the left by attempting to arrange the Parliamentary timetable to his advantage. He is trying to set things up so that Corbyn, and the remainers, cannot continue to undermine popular sovereignty. The frankly barmy hyperbole of describing the government’s move as a “*coup d’état*” is produced by a sense of desperation. Clearly, the proposed prorogation and a timely Queen’s Speech, is a piece of sharp political practice by the government designed by Dominic Cummings to frustrate the remainers’ attempt to keep Britain in the European Union. But a dictatorial move? It is not.

There have, of course, been constitutional *coup d’état* in the past. The removal of Gough Whitlam’s Labour Government by Sir John Kerr, the Governor-General of Australia, in 1975 springs readily to mind. However, this action was immediately followed by a general election in which the opposition leader, Malcolm Fraser, won by a landslide. The notion of popular sovereignty was sustained despite the monarchical intervention of the Governor-General.

Nothing similar is happening in Britain today. The ruling oligarchy is grievously divided by the split between remainers and leavers, and it is the leavers who are defending popular sovereignty by attempting to use all legal means at their disposal to implement the result of the referendum.