

Pandora's Box



KARL MARX made a surprising appearance at the anti-Tory demonstration in Manchester today. True, he was there in effigy only, and most certainly not in spirit. It must also be noted that because his hair had become floppy in the rain, he looked unnervingly like Boris Johnson.

In keeping with the intemperate mood of the times we were regaled with “Fucking Lying Tory Bastards”, “Arseholes Assemble”, which reminded me of “lynch her”, “stab him in the front, not in the back”; “It’s a coup!”, “Dictator”, “Nazi”, “Bollocks”, “Tory Twats”, and other choice epithets, issuing from the remainder camp.

Set beside these insults Boris Johnson’s “Surrender” and “Humbug” seemed rather tame. However, he is being arraigned for coarsening our political discourse, and “using language”, which apparently encourages Bexiters to threaten to rape and kill remainder Members of Parliament. This is asserted by MPs in impassioned and emotional

tirades to which, “Humbug” does seem an entirely reasonable response.

The country is severely divided along lines which unfortunately permit little nuance or subtle reasoning – we are all either “for” or “against” leaving the European Union. There is no middle way, it really is one thing or the other, and rational argument does seem to have disappeared. Of course, reasoned argument has been fraying around the edges on many issues for some time. In recent years I’ve been described as, a “bigot”, a “racist”, an “Islamophobe”, a “homophobe”, and a “wanker” – it’s true I have rejoiced in “wanker” because I know one has to be imaginative to be a good wanker – but the others I regard as absurd lies. Lies, which terminate arguments, rather than advance them.

It’s the same with the insults heaped upon Boris Johnson, and anybody who approves his determination to get us out of the European Union by 31st October. We have all been funnelled into the brutal binary of “In” or “Out”, “Leave” or “Remain”. This is the result, not of Boris Johnson’s use of language, but of the way that Parliament posed the question in the referendum:

Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?

The responses to the question are to be marked with a single X:

- Remain a member of the European Union
- Leave the European Union

The result in 2016 was 17.4 million for leaving and 16.1 million for remaining. It is true that Parliament is not bound by law to carry out the wishes of the majority expressed in referenda, but it was certainly assumed that it would in this case. Indeed, Parliament went on to trigger Article 50, and most MPs went on to

promise to abide by the decision of the referendum in the general election of 2017.

Subsequently, the remainers, those who want to prevent us from leaving the EU, have insisted that there “is no mandate to leave without a deal”. This is entirely true, because “deal” or “no deal” was not part of the question which voters were presented with in 2016. The hubbub over “no deal” has been got up by people who are implacably opposed to us leaving the European Union and is being cynically deployed as a means of attempting to sabotage the country’s exit from the EU.

This is why freelance millionaires, rogue Tories, LibDems, and the Labour Party, have gone on to invoke the Supreme Court against Boris Johnson. This has been followed by allegations of corruption levelled against him during his time as Mayor of London. Instigated by the remainder press, these allegations are now being investigated by the police, in an orchestrated campaign aimed at destabilising the minority government. In the next day or so attempts will be made to replace Johnson’s government with an ‘interim’ or ‘emergency’ administration committed to asking Brussels for an extension to keep us in the European Union.

All this is being done under the rubric of “defending democracy” from the decision of the majority who voted in the referendum. “Democracy” is, bizarrely, being said to reside with the minority – i.e. on behalf of those of us who’s preference lost out in 2016 in a free and fair election.

Now when Zeus cunningly gave Pandora, and her box, to Prometheus’ brother, he no doubt knew, that like Eve, who couldn’t resist the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, Pandora would open the bloody box, and all hell would break loose.

This is exactly what’s happened to us.

David Cameron opted for a referendum, did not specify a two-thirds majority, or any kind of run-off against various options – he simply gave us a binary choice. This was endorsed by Parliament and by most

of the MPs who are making such a ruckus with their protestations of innocence, as they heap all the blame on the Tory right and the Prime Minister.

They remind me of Adam whose attempts to blame the Woman when he was caught munching on the forbidden fruit, cut no ice at all with the Almighty. The disobedient pair were cast out of Paradise and there was an end to it.

Although Britain has never been a paradise it has certainly been a stable and law-governed democracy at least since 1928 (and in some respects since 1867). Now, this has been placed in jeopardy, firstly by those who set up the popular vote of the referendum – direct democracy – to rival the authority of Parliament, and secondly, by the antics of those striving to overturn the referendum majority.

It has been the case that millions of our people have always been sceptical about the depth of our democracy; the belief that politicians are “only out for themselves”, and “are never going to listen to the likes of us anyway”, is very common indeed. This point of view can only become more widespread and intractable if the referendum majority is overturned, and we fail to leave the European Union.

The threat to our democracy and to the legitimacy of our institutions is profound. I don't know whether riots and civil disorder will result from the machinations of the remainers – I doubt that they will. But I'm certain that millions of people will never vote again if we don't leave the EU. Millions of our citizens will reject the idea that we are a democracy of any sort if remainder parliamentarians are allowed to get away with brazenly rejecting the referendum majority – or if they're allowed to stage a so-called, 'People's Vote', in order get a result, more to their liking.

Things are becoming truly surreal. The Labour left has assumed the role of the doughty defenders of the 'rule of law', and respect for the judiciary, despite traditionally giving a free pass to lawless and tyrannical regimes the world over, when the tyrants in question are deemed anti-imperialist or socialist. It's

also been rather touching to see socialist concern being expressed for the welfare of an elderly lady, as if Boris, playing fast and loose with the truth, had miss-sold the Queen some double glazing.

This strangeness was taken further by Andrew Marr during an interview with Dame Helen Mirren, when he asked her what she thought about the predicament that the Queen has been placed in by Boris Johnson's proroguing of Parliament. On the strength of her having played Elizabeth II in a movie, she sagely referenced the immense and long experience of the Queen, and went on to offer some advice from Catherine the Great, another monarch she's playing in a movie. Mirren suggested that our politicians might benefit from the advice of Empress Catherine II of Russia to "praise loudly and scold quietly". I thought, I must be going mad, an actress is now recommending the advice of an eighteenth-century tyrant and autocrat, to help renew our democratic discourse.

Still, it's not all doom and gloom – I liked the t-shirt I saw today emblazoned with "Bum Boys Against Boris", and the placard that inscrutably proclaimed, "Flippin Eck"; there is some real humour at play here. And, we can only hope – as Pandora did – that things will turn out for the best. But this can only happen when it dawns on a wider public that neither shared sovereignty in the European Union, nor National Sovereignty outside of it, will address any of our fundamental problems.

We will have to grapple with rapid automation, the introduction of robots, and with the strengthening of globalisation. These twin pressures are eroding the capacity of governments to frame the terms of trade in a manner consistent with their freely determined policies. These are pressures that apply to confederations of states, every bit as much as to separate national entities.

The threats to democracy are legion, but most serious, is the attenuation of the power of elected governments autonomously to control or influence tax and investment regimes in the context of global

arrangements made possible by new technologies, new methods of transporting goods, and new means of communication.

The inescapable truth is that nothing short of a thorough-going analysis and understanding of the way in which the operations of modern capitalism are automatically, or spontaneously, undermining democracy, can free us from the inanities of the so-called Brexit debate.