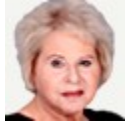


The Telegraph

If the era of democracy is over in Europe, it's time for Britain to get out

The condemnation of a national leader for being in touch with his people suggests the EU is back in the business of oligarchy



By Janet Daley

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In the midst of the general vilification of Viktor Orban, the Hungarian leader who has inspired moral outrage for his hard-line stand on the migrant crisis, you might have missed the vaguely sardonic mention in the news coverage of the leap in his popularity at home.

The voters who put him in office, it seems, hugely approve of the Orban policy. Imagine that: a European leader who actually chooses to represent the views of his own electorate rather than please the unelected commissioners of the EU. The obvious implication on the broadcast news was that this rise in approval within his own country was somehow indecent: a crass populist stance targeted deliberately at a benighted population. Either Mr Orban was a nasty piece of work who was opportunistically appealing to his countrymen's worst instincts, or the desires of the Hungarian people were beneath consideration – or both.

Let's just hang on a minute. Before we are pulled into self-righteous judgments about other peoples and their leaders, we might consider what is at stake. Maybe we need to ask precisely what elected governments are for in modern Europe, and whether a population has to sign up to certain assumptions and attitudes before it is entitled to democratic government. There is an unspoken argument here that goes beyond the immediate refugee problem or that other threat to EU unity, the future of the eurozone. If democratically mandated national leaders can be condemned for being **genuinely in tune with their own electorates**, what does this amount to?



Children look out from a bus near a collection point in Roszke, Hungary Photo: Reuters

Years ago, long before these latest crises developed, I suggested something that must have seemed at the time like doom-laden hyperbole. This was that the structure of the EU, with the unelected Commission at its head, might represent an effective end to the two-centuries-old experiment in European popular democracy. After the Second World War, there had been a conscious decision by the then-wisest minds on the Continent that mass democracy – which had reached a grotesque apotheosis in the elections of Hitler and Mussolini – had been a terrible mistake. It was time for a return to benign oligarchy. Europe must be ruled in future by an enlightened class of professional administrators who would ensure that the Mob, with its ancient hatreds and bloodthirsty prejudices, would never again run amok. The countries most responsible for the design of these structures that would consign popular democracy to obsolescence were Germany and France, which shared a historical sense of responsibility for the nationalist debacles of the first half of the last century.

They also shared, as it happened, fear and resentment of the global power of America – a fear enunciated very clearly by German Europhiles who were adamant that a European currency must be created to counteract the world dominance of the dollar. **And so was born the new Europe with its megalithic institutions** and a philosophy that was (who could doubt it now?) explicitly devised to prevent the impulses of the masses from seizing control over economic, social or military decisions.

We find ourselves joining in without a second thought when an elected head of government is pilloried for reflecting the views of those who elected him as if he were a reincarnation of Hitler or Mussolini when, in fact, he is upholding the EU's own asylum regulations, which Germany chose unilaterally to suspend.

So I repeat: what is it that we are accepting? That national governments are fit to rule only if they disregard their own populations' concerns and interests in favour of an EU consensus enforced by an unelected Commission? Of course, in this case there is not even a proper consensus: there is just a mandatory directive made necessary by a German decision – taken without consultation – to create an impromptu new policy on migration.

The bitterness of the division between the western European member states and the newer eastern ones over whether there should be a forced redistribution of migrants is not just a split between generous, liberal (and rich) countries, opposed to mean, resentful (and poor) ones. It arises from their very different historical experiences. Germany, the guilt-ridden rehabilitated criminal of the past, wishes to make amends to the world. The former Warsaw Pact countries, having only just discovered the joys of self-determination and democratic accountability, are adamant that they will not be dictated to by yet another autocratic supra-national body that treats them with contempt.

This split, and all the anger and threatened retribution that followed, might have been avoided if the EU had not been so utterly incompetent in its handling of the migration crisis. Had there been sensible, controlled systems put in place as soon as the scale of the problem became apparent, and as soon as it was clear that Greece and southern Italy – among the poorest regions of the EU – were bearing the consequences, the provocative diktats from the Commission might never have been needed. If the EU really was the rational, co-operative, consensual federation that its documents proclaim, why didn't it monitor its own borders, and establish orderly mechanisms for the efficient processing of migrants at the points of entry? Why didn't it establish clear priorities from the start: genuine war refugees coming first, and economic migrants (temporarily, at least) pushed to the back of the queue? Why were months wasted doing nothing at all as one human tragedy after another hit the headlines?

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And why did this hopeless vacuum and lack of direction end not with constructive agreement between member states but the impulsive action of Germany's leader? Germany, the very country that had been most concerned to ensure it would never again be seen as dominating its neighbours. In fact, Germany is also – for its own historically sound reasons – trying to dictate the economic policies of southern Europe. It demands austerity and opposes fiscal transfers to poorer states because of its Weimar experience of money-printing and inflation. The French economics minister, Emmanuel Macron, has called this a Thirty Years' War between Europe's northern Calvinists, who insist wealth must be earned, and its southern Catholics, who want solidarity at any price. Supporting the poorer states indefinitely and unconditionally would, Germany's government fears, undermine the German public's confidence in the euro. Oddly, it does not see this insistence that the poor south behaves in just the way that the rich, successful north has done as another form of domination.

But this is a much bigger matter than closer EU integration or the organisation of the eurozone. It amounts to nothing less than the question: does Europe want popular democracy any more? Is it prepared to trust the people – or peoples – of the Continent to govern themselves? If the answer is “yes”, there is a lot of historical baggage that will have to be accommodated – and that might be a slow, sometimes unpalatable business involving a great deal of patient argument. There are centuries-old cultural differences and generations of suspicion that will have to be overcome.

If, on the other hand, the philosopher-kings of the European Commission get their way, the final answer will be “no”, and the age of mass democracy is over. European attempts to make it work seem to have ended in one species of Terror after another. But that is not the British experience. This country has its own democratic history that is unbroken and unsullied. If the answer turns out to be “no”, then surely Britain and the EU must go their separate ways.