

## The EU still hasn't understood that it is a totalitarian institution



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There you have it: a perfect summary of the European Union philosophy. In comments which were presumably made without embarrassment, a [clutch of senior EU officials last week provided the Telegraph with a concise summing up of how this thing works](#). The UK, they said, will be forced to give up on Brexit when faced with “the bureaucratic nightmare” in which it will be entrapped by the most vindictive (sorry, the toughest) negotiations that could be devised.

If I hadn't long passed the point of being shocked, I would find this breathtaking. Here it is, laid out in the most blithe, confident terms: the shameless contempt for a clear expression of democratic will, and the blatant use of the power of an unelected bureaucracy to undermine the intentions of a national government. Not to mention the utter, imperturbable belief in their own righteousness which justifies what might seem to the benighted oiks who think there is some sort of virtue in self-government, like an outrage.

There are two possibilities here. The first is that this supercilious confidence in the inevitable triumph of the EU steamroller is just bluster. In truth, the real power in Europe lies with the heads of national governments who are in rather closer touch with reality, having to submit themselves to electorates occasionally, than those obnoxious Commission officials who tend to do most shooting off at the mouth. Hence, Angela Merkel's less sanguine observation that the EU was “in a critical situation” (as is her Christian Democratic party, it turns out) and even, presenting a rather different face from the belligerent one he generally displays to a British audience, Jean-Claude Juncker's judgement that the EU was facing a “battle for survival”.

Even within the more rational, and less vociferous, of the Brussels apparat there is probably some understanding of the British historical tendency to remain undaunted (and even strengthened in their resolve) by threats. Surely, among the saner elements, there is an appreciation of the danger of popular unrest which is spreading like a virus in so many member states and which cannot simply be derided into extinction or crushed by fiat. Donald Tusk made much of his pronouncement that the Bratislava summit would need to produce a “sober and brutally honest assessment” of the current situation. So yes, maybe the arrogance of those anonymous officials who count on being able to bully the UK into dropping all this Brexit nonsense is nothing but – if you'll forgive the term – Dutch courage.

That is the more reassuring interpretation. The most egregious of the EU blowhards are just stomping around, making as much noise as possible and encouraging their underlings to brief the media in cocky terms designed to demoralise the UK side of the negotiations before they start. But there is another possibility. Maybe it's the supposed realists – the sombre, practical, hard-nosed wise heads who claim that they fully, absolutely, no doubt about it – comprehend the risks of the disjuncture between the present condition of the EU and the restiveness of its populations, who are putting on a show. Perhaps all that pious

reverence for democratic discontent and furrowed concentration on the mass defection from the ideal of “European unity” is a sham.

How, when you think of it, could it not be? The institutions of the EU were devised for precisely this purpose: to ensure that the People with their mad, dangerous ideas could never again get the upper hand. Britain, after all, allowed the mob to be heard on the sacred question of membership and look what happened. Every other member state with similarly deviant tendencies will now have to be taught a lesson by watching the British being taken down to the punishment cells where truly terrible things will be done (most of which we haven't thought of yet because we can't figure out how to do them without appalling consequences for ourselves).

But whoever is bluffing, there are some things that are indubitably true in all this. Certainly, the EU is, in Mr Juncker's own words, now in an “existential crisis”. It is also true, as his even more bellicose colleague Guy Verhofstadt – who is to be chief Brexit negotiator – likes to imply dismissively, that the UK question is a relatively minor factor in the crisis. (Mr Verhofstadt has been threatening dreadful retribution since David Davis described him as “Satan” when appearing at the foreign affairs select committee. Note to EU: that was a British joke.) The union is, in fact, split along its North-South axis over the euro and the devastating effect that economic union has had on the indebtedness of the Club Med countries. And it is split on its East-West axis by the consequences of mass migration, with some of the old Warsaw Pact states discovering that their new club has a penchant for issuing diktats too.

One of the more expeditious moves that the EU Commission has found it necessary to make is to drop the mandatory quotas of migrant settlement for those Eastern member states which were in open revolt. Even the ideologues in the Commission must occasionally give way to popular opinion, especially when it seems that failing to offer concessions might provoke the dreaded European spirit of nationalism. Which brings us to the heart of the matter. Nationalism is the monster that must be kept firmly locked in the cellar. There is, of course, sound historical justification for this, but the terrible crimes to which the febrile worship of nationhood gave rise in the last century have become bound up in an unreasoning fear of any sort of national identity or pride. What is worse is that this superstitious dread is breeding serious confusion about what is actually conducive to fascist demagoguery.

In his preposterously titled “state of the union address” – a term plagiarised from the democratically-elected United States presidency – Mr Juncker observed that it was splits in the union that “left space for galloping populism” and, he added, “we cannot accept that as populism doesn't solve problems, on the contrary it creates problems”. This analysis is exactly the opposite of the truth. It is not the splits that have produced populism, it is populism (by which he means, public anger) that produced the splits. Differences of opinion and conflicting interests do not, in themselves, give rise to the kind of neo-fascist movements which are stalking the streets of once-liberal European capitals like Berlin, where the far Right (AfD) is likely today to get its first seats in the regional parliament since Germany's reunification in 1990. It is the suppression of disagreement and difference that impels people into volatile extremism.

The divisions that are making a unified Europe impossible are being caused (or exacerbated) by the insistence on conformity to what the European project has decided are optimal attitudes: the demand, for example, that the countries of southern Europe adopt the financial rectitude and economic attitudes of Germany whose particular national tragedy in the last century was preceded by hyper-inflation. Or that the poorer Eastern bloc countries adopt the generous liberality of the richest countries of the West. Or that founder member states which, like France, were essential in forming the values of liberal

democracy, accept a pan-European oligarchy which is deliberately designed to ignore the differences between political cultures.

When some future Gibbon comes to chronicle the decline and fall of this modern European empire, it will be clear enough what went wrong: they enforced uniformity instead of trying to understand difference, and in the end, they revived exactly the hateful forces they had hoped to extinguish.