

The 'Remainer' project: a crisis for what?

No one who demands that Brexit should be reversed or sabotaged ever admits that the course they advocate is reckless. The foundation of their position is that it is the safe option -- a return to the status quo preceding the 2016 Referendum, or as close to it as possible. Then, goes the story, our economy will be safe, our relationships with our EU neighbours secure, our standing in the world restored. We return to a pre-Referendum Garden of Eden.

This is rarely argued explicitly, and never in detail, but it is inescapably there by implication. Yet the idea that there is a normality to return to, a safe status quo, is a mirage. The EU is in a state of chronic political, financial and social instability. This is not Eurosceptic sour grapes: it is the view repeatedly and forcefully put by President Emmanuel Macron, who is widely regarded, not only by himself, as the man who can save the European project from collapse. Both in his book *Révolution* (2016) and in his important speech at the Sorbonne on 26 Sept 2017, he has described the EU as suffering an existential crisis, unable to remedy its glaring policy failures and in danger of losing the support of its peoples. The EU, he says, is 'too weak, too slow, too ineffective'.

The EU's instability is evident to all who can bring themselves to look. Spain -- the only country in Western Europe to hold elected politicians in jail -- is deadlocked over Catalonia. Comparable separatist movements have been engendered by the EU, whether deliberately or by default, in France, Italy, Belgium and of course the United Kingdom, and the EU has no idea how to cope with them. Italian politics teeter on the brink as elections approach in March, and its financial system trembles. Brussels is in conflict with Poland and Hungary. Greece is mired in political, economic and social depression. In Macron's dramatic words, 'we are indeed witnessing a European civil war.'

He proposes a solution, the traditional one in EU circles: 'more Europe'. When the EU is failing, it must be given more power to direct and where necessary coerce its member countries, as it has done in the past, most brutally in Italy and Greece, more subtly in Ireland, Spain and Portugal.

Macron has now lifted the ‘more Europe’ programme to an unprecedented level: ‘we cannot allow ourselves to keep the same habits, the same policies, the same vocabulary, the same budgets.’ He wants the EU to take ultimate control of financial policy, taxation, welfare, the labour market, immigration, defence, security and even aspects of education. He at least does not conceal the aim: to create, in his own words, a ‘Sovereign Europe’. The European nation states will cease to be sovereign, and their elected parliaments become regional councils.

This revolutionary centralization of power is not to be accompanied by significant democratization. Although it is to be pushed forward, in Macron’s vision, after a series of ‘conventions’ in the various states to give the go-ahead, the only significant institutional change is to have Britain’s former seats in the European Parliament filled on a Europe-wide basis. But he suggests no significant change in the real governance of the EU, dominated by the Commission (which he wants smaller) and the Council of Ministers, by which major decisions are taken in secret by officials and politicians, effectively unaccountable to their peoples.

How could a democratically elected French president advocate such a risky and widely unpopular course? The answer is contained in the second aspect of his plan: that the EU should effectively be run by a group of core states, probably the original ‘Six’ who joined in the 1950s, or even perhaps only five - France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg. This means, of course, in fact by France and Germany. They would push forward as fast as possible towards a fully integrated ‘Sovereign Europe’, and the rest would follow as best they could in the wake of the dominant group. There would be other satellites in more distant orbits, including, Macron hopes, Britain and the Francophone North African countries. If this looks rather like a Franco-German empire, it is because it draws on an old-established French geopolitical ambition, to create a ‘Europe of concentric circles’, which would fulfil France’s dream national strategy: keeping a tight hold on Germany and using a European pedestal to buttress its global role.

Of course, this may never happen. The other countries may refuse to follow Macron’s ambitious vision. But in that case Europe remains stuck with its chronic problems: economic inequalities between North and South, financial

precariousness, political tensions between East and West, diplomatic and military weakness, and above all decay of political legitimacy. There is no comfortable status quo, only a wait for the next crisis.

What will the EU have become in five or ten years' time? What exactly is it that Tony Blair, Philip Hammond, Keir Starmer, Kenneth Clarke, Peter Mandelson, Nick Clegg, Michael Heseltine, Anna Soubry, Chuka Umunna and the others want to bind us to? They are fond of challenging supporters of Brexit to predict the future. Let them take up the challenge themselves. Do they want Britain to adopt the Euro and cede democratic powers to Macron's 'Sovereign Europe'? Or would they be happy to keep Britain in an outer circle, as a follower of decisions made by others to determine our prosperity, social cohesion and security? Or would they try to block reform, and let the EU gradually disintegrate? Or don't they know what they want? One of the most striking features of the long and wearisome debate we have been gripped with is how rarely it has been about Europe, and how little Remainers seem to know about the institution they are so desperate to cling on to.

Obdurate Remainers are willing to ignite a political crisis in Britain by reversing or sabotaging the Referendum vote. They are ready to defy legally expressed popular sovereignty. They seem unworried at making the country a laughing stock throughout the world, shorn of any claim to influence inside or outside Europe. And for what great purpose are we to embark on this reckless course? To remain tied to an EU whose own future is completely unpredictable.

Do these people have a plan? Are they naïve? Or are they just irresponsible political wreckers?

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