



Britain's Democracy Is a Sham

By joining the European Union, Britain has lost some of its greatness – and its sovereignty.

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European countries have joined the European integration process for different reasons. Germany wanted to expiate its World War II guilt, France wanted to enhance its global influence, Poland wanted protection from Russian expansionism and Romania wanted a less corrupt government. Great Britain wanted easier access to a free trade area called the European Economic Community. It was the membership of that community that the British people approved in a 1974 referendum. No more, no less.

On Thursday, the British people will decide if they wish to remain in an organization that only faintly resembles the former European Economic Community. Over time, a humble free trade area evolved into a supranational entity that at least superficially resembles a federal state. The European Union has its own flag, anthem, currency, president (five of them, actually) and a diplomatic service. It is only natural that the British electorate should be given an opportunity to reflect on the changes that have taken place over the last 42 years.

Before joining the European Economic Community, Britain was a sovereign and democratic polity. Its governing institutions stretched back a thousand years and were the envy of the world. The island gave us representative democracy, rule of law, abolition of slavery, the English language and the Industrial Revolution. It saved Europe from Louis XIV and Napoleon during the French ascendancy, and from Wilhelm II and Hitler during the German ascendancy. As such, it must surely count, along with ancient Greece, as among the most consequential of nations.

But Britain lost some of its greatness. The country was exhausted from fighting two world wars. It lost confidence after its imperial possessions gained independence. Most seriously, Britain was suffering from the socialist rot. Its centrally planned wartime economy was never fully liberalized, with food rationing persisting into the 1950s. In the meantime, West Germany, which was obliterated by allied bombing during World War II, but revived by Ludwig Erhard's free market reforms, powered ahead of Britain in terms of standard of living.

And so, Britain threw in its lot with the nascent EU. That proved to be a bit of a Faustian bargain. In exchange for access to the common market, Britain had to accept an external tariff and, over time, a deluge of regulations from power-hungry Brussels. The former makes imports more expensive in Britain, while the latter makes British exports less competitive globally. Most

importantly, the British people, who struggled for their political rights for centuries (even beheading a king in the process), lost much of their political freedom.

As the European integration process deepened, ever more so-called competences were ceded by the EU member states to Brussels. Today, the EU has a say in almost everything, from agricultural production and labor regulations to the strength of European showers and electric consumption of European vacuum cleaners.

A defining feature of democracy is the ability of the electorate to choose and replace the government through free and fair elections. The choice, however, needs to be a meaningful one. What is the point of being able to choose between two or more candidates, if none of them can effect specific policy changes? That question is at the core of the upcoming referendum on British exit from the EU.

Truth be told, democracy in Europe is a bit of a sham. People still cast their votes for their favorite candidates, but the former know that the latter are powerless to change decisions made by the unelected, unknown and unaccountable bureaucracy in Brussels.

The EU, it is vital to understand, is undemocratic not by accident, but by design. Politicians in Brussels know that there is no public support for so-called deeper integration. Jean-Claude Juncker, the current president of the EU Commission, summed up the decision-making behind the introduction of the single currency thusly: "We decide on something, leave it lying around and wait and see what happens. If no one kicks up a fuss, because most people don't understand what has been decided, we continue step by step until there is no turning back."

The people of Europe are sick and tired of being ignored, and none more so than the British. On Thursday, the British people will be able to choose whether to regain full sovereignty, or remain in the EU. Should they choose the former, other countries will be sure to follow.

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