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Why Britain's Leave Campaign Isn't 'Trumpism With A British Accent'

Brexit wasn't an attack on trade or openness, it was a vote of self-confidence in Britain's ability to thrive outside the European Union, and an attack on an anti-democratic technocracy.

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United Kingdom voters sent shockwaves around the world when they backed Brexit on June 23. Within hours of the result, journalists and commentators were roundly decrying the supposed rise of Donald Trump-style politics across both sides of the Atlantic.

This attempt to link the result of a U.K. referendum with U.S. domestic politics has continued in the weeks since, with the latest culprit being the Cato Institute's Johan Norberg. Writing in Reason this month, Norberg laments the widespread support for Brexit among U.S. libertarians, claiming "This is Trump, only in British English and full sentences."

But Brexit wasn't an attack on trade or openness, it was a vote of self-confidence in Britain's ability to thrive outside the European Union (E.U.), and an attack on an anti-democratic technocracy, whose contempt for popular sovereignty has resulted in the rise of both far-left and far-right parties across Europe.

Undoubtedly, the Vote Leave campaign benefited from both an anti-establishment sentiment and concern about unchecked immigration. But the similarities with Trump end there.

Survey Some Major Differences

The Vote Leave campaign was not led by a bombastic political outsider, but by a former London mayor and old-Etonian, Boris Johnson, and a senior member of the conservative government, Michael Gove.

Far from championing an anti-trade agenda, Vote Leave, and even the unofficial campaign led by Nigel Farage, unanimously supported continued trade with Europe. They also championed the possibility of stronger trade relations with countries outside Europe Brexit would make possible. This was a crucial aspect of the campaign, and has been vindicated since the vote took place, with 11 countries expressing interest in signing free trade agreements with an independent U.K.

But the central planks of Vote Leave campaign were the principles of democratic accountability and popular sovereignty, encapsulated in the campaign slogan "take back control." This was also the single biggest reason Brexit voters cited, with a comprehensive analysis by Lord Ashcroft

Polls finding that almost half (49 percent) of Brexit supporters said their main reason for voting to leave the E.U. was “the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK.” Only one third (33 percent) said the main reason was that leaving “offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders.”

This isn't to deny that Brexit campaigners made un-libertarian statements—these are politicians we're talking about. But equating this to the anti-trade, pro-wall Trump campaign is an overreach, to say the least. So then why does Norberg claim U.S. libertarians are wrong to celebrate the result?

E.U. Bureaucracy Is In Regulations, Not Staff

Norberg ascribes the support for Brexit amongst U.S. libertarians to “Americans’ overly simplistic comparison of the E.U. to the U.S. federal government.” Citing the size of the E.U. bureaucracy — the E.U. commission employs a mere 33,000 people, less than the U.S. Social Security Administration — and its budget as a percentage of Europe’s GDP — just 1 percent, compared to the 20 percent of GDP for the U.S. federal government — Norberg argues that the negative influence of the E.U. is exaggerated, and that national governments are a far greater cause of red tape.

This is not an accurate comparison. The E.U.’s influence is predominantly exercised through laws and directives to member states, not through programs run out of Brussels directly.

A clearer picture of E.U. influence is the percentage of U.K. laws that originate in Brussels. Estimates for this range widely, from 13 to 65 percent. According to the House of Commons Library, this huge discrepancy exists because “there is no totally accurate, rational or useful way of calculating the percentage of national laws based on or influenced by the EU.” Whatever the exact figure, the scope of E.U. influence clearly exceeds Norberg’s suggestion.

He is, however, correct in his assessment that the E.U. is “in no way equal” to the U.S. federal government. The latter, for all its faults, is a democratic institution, whilst the E.U. is thoroughly anti-democratic.

Not only is the legislative power in Brussels invested in the unelected European Commission — the elected E.U. parliament is largely impotent — it also has a long history of ignoring referendum results that don't go its way. This occurred when French and Dutch voters rejected the E.U. constitutional treaty, which was later renamed the Lisbon Treaty and implemented anyway. Only the Irish were given a vote on ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (because their constitution required it), and they were pressured to vote a second time after they gave the “wrong answer” on the first attempt.

This same contempt for voters has arisen in the wake of Brexit, with several pro-E.U. politicians and lawyers calling for the vote to be ignored. Even worse examples of the E.U.’s contempt for democracy are the de facto coups in Italy and Greece, where E.U. pressure led to the replacement of democratically elected governments in 2011. Taking the place of elected politicians were former E.U. Commissioner Mario Monti, in the case of Italy, and former vice president of the European Central Bank Lucas Papademos, in the case of Greece. Neither had been elected, nor had they ever stood for national office in their respective countries.

With this record, it's little wonder why voters in the U.K. — a country with a long and cherished history of parliamentary democracy — turned out in the highest numbers since 1992 to deliver a mandate for Brexit.

Sustained Progress Requires Consent of the Governed

None of this discounts Norberg's arguments that the E.U. has encouraged openness among member states. Nor that membership has been a net benefit to their economies over time — although this is hard to see in the case of Greece, or other southern European nations whose economies the Euro crisis has devastated.

But this highlights the key lesson we must learn from the state of the European project: Riding roughshod over public sentiment to impose openness on separate, distinct, and often skeptical national electorates will inevitably backfire. Sustained progress requires democratic acceptance.

Whether through ignorance or contempt for this fact, the E.U.'s approach has led to the rise of extremist politics across the continent, whether Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government in Hungary, Syriza and to a lesser extent the Golden Dawn in Greece, the National Front in France, or the many other extremist parties throughout Europe. All have benefited from an anti-E.U. backlash more similar to Trump than Brexit ever was.

If the European Union learns this lesson and implements desperately needed reforms, then its best days may yet be ahead of it. If it doesn't, then Brexit will be the least of its problems. Either way, U.K. voters were right to vote Leave, and libertarians in the United States (and elsewhere) are right to celebrate.