



## **Democracy is being dismantled by a “cabinet of horrors” – an interview with Molly Scott-Cato MEP**

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September 10, 2019

feel like I have fallen into a John le Carré novel,” she reflects. “I hate spy movies, but I’m now thinking we are living in one. I hate all these lies. These people are worse than spies: spies believe in their country and have a code of honour. With these people it’s always about self-interest”.

Molly Scott Cato is the Green MEP for South West England, an Oxford alumna, a Quaker, and a former professor of strategy and sustainability at the University of Roehampton. She is also on the front line, defending democracy.

She tells me, “I cannot lie at all - it’s a handicap in life. When people start lying I get utterly confused about what is going on.” This is why Molly has published two websites recently –[The Brexit Syndicate](#) and the [Cabinet of Horrors](#), to track the lies, and trace their provenance. The websites provide a clear evidence trail between the billionaire far right extremists in the United States, the fake think tanks they fund, and Boris Johnson and his government.

An ideological war

“Just look at [Liz Truss](#),” says Scott-Cato of the Secretary of State for International Trade. “It would be easy to dismiss her as an intellectual lightweight. She is sufficiently vacuous, ambitious and vain to be of use to these fake think tanks, she is a tool. [Dominic Raab](#) is the same. It is about ideology, and stupidity. Truss does not have an analysis of what is actually going on. She thinks these people have just happened to recognise her for her talent. Stupid.”

Let’s be specific. [Charles Koch](#) is among the richest people in the United States of America. His father Fred invented (and was [accused of stealing](#)) oil refinery technology and set up his own business. Fred built oil refineries for the butcher Joe Stalin and [Adolf Hitler](#), it is claimed, but took fright at the threat of Russian Communism and returned to the US to join white supremacists and other extremists to fight a ‘war of ideas’.

This ideological war continues today, with Charles and his Koch Industries funnelling hundreds of millions of dollars into think tanks that attack regulation, taxation and climate change science. They founded Americans for Prosperity, which has [spent \\$1billion](#) during recent US elections. Now the ‘Kochtopus’ is undermining British democracy. Charles was instrumental in founding the Institute of Economic Affairs in 1955 and setting up its [climate denier unit](#). Truss recently founded the [Free Enterprise Group](#), the “parliamentary wing” of the IEA. She has also flown to the US to meet a smorgasbord of [Koch funded think tanks](#), including the Cato Institute, at taxpayers’ expense.

Scott-Cato told me: “Now, these think tanks - the Atlas Foundation in the US and others funded by the Kochs - they hand pick cabinet members. The prime movers in British politics today are not politicians, or corporations, or the NGOs, but undemocratic oligarchs and their think tanks. This is like the Yeltsin era in Soviet Russia. A small number of players have secured an enormous amount of power, and they resent democracy.”

Things are changing so quickly right now. A no deal Brexit still looms. I interviewed Molly by phone the day before the announcement of the proroguing of Parliament. Days later, the prime minister was expelling dissenting Tory MPs with decades of service and attempting, unsuccessfully, to goad the opposition into a blitzkrieg election. But this is about so much more than the day to day shocks, it's about the new doctrine.

“This is a new era. As campaigners, we used to say, ‘the rules are bad and in the interests of the rich’. But now we are clinging on to any rules at all. Those people [who populate] the power structures that we have grown up with have not grasped what is going on. Power has just vanished [from democratic institutions]. We are still making law in the European Union, but in Brussels we are protected somewhat from what is happening in the US and the UK. People have not grasped what is going on.”

How democracy dies

What is going on – Scott-Cato says - is the rise of fascism.

She quotes Hannah Arendt, the Jewish philosopher and political theorist who studied Nazi ideology, as saying: “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.” She also references the work of Umberto Eco, *Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt*.

The MEP points to particular threats to democracy in the UK today. The flood of money from billionaire extremists in the US is chief among them. This money is funding and promoting politicians whose careers, whose television personalities, have been built on lies and bullying. “Politicians have always been accused of lying. They would basically promise something and then they would have had to compromise. That is not Boris Johnson. Now they are using truth - the lack of truth - as a weapon.”

She says: “This government is really dangerous; it is undermining democracy. The rot will spread. It has become normalised. Talking about a coup has been normalised. Cabinet members are contravening the safeguards needed to make democracy work. Look at [Priti Patel](#). She organised clandestine meetings to open a back channel with a foreign power. And she is then promoted to the cabinet.” This is just one example among many on the Cabinet of Horrors website.

“We need to be clear about which rule is being broken here. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt’s *How Democracies Die* is important. There are all sorts of rules about what civil servants do. Ministers must have civil servants minute meetings. But look at Truss. Do we know who she met and what was said? That is critical. The civil servant is the person who maintains the boundary between self interest, political interest, and the duties of the minister of the Crown. That has now gone.”

Molly is concerned about the breakdown of a rules based system and of norms both on a domestic and at an international scale. Here in the UK this takes the form of the politicisation of the civil service. The Brexit faction of the Tory party blame “remainder” civil servants for leaking documents, faking statistics, and supporting “project fear”.

Politicising members of the civil service in this way undermines their authority, which they need in order to maintain the mechanics of the state and keep this separate from the machinery of a political party. “These powers need to be separate but that distinction does not exist any more. The civil service is diminished by accusations of political bias. And the accusations are just lies. Civil servants are reduced to being in the mud-pit like everyone else.”

Dark money and the power behind the throne

All this is taking place against a background of huge amounts of dark money, secret donations, polluting politics. This cash often comes from people with vested interests, often from people overseas who do not benefit from our welfare state system or pay UK taxes. Scott-Cato is concerned that we do not know who funded and paid for the referendum campaigns, who is spending millions on social media, and who funds the fake think tanks influencing voters.

Internationally, she points to the fact that Donald Trump has effectively sabotaged the World Trade Organisation (WTO). “The international rules based order is another site of attack. The US president is dismantling the rules based system. Trump is refusing to make an appointment to appellant body of WTO. His trade war with China is illegal but he began by breaking the WTO so that he can get away with it.”

So who is behind this new epoch of political turmoil? Molly is not afraid to name names, indeed that is the primary function of the websites she has set up.

Daniel Hannan, a hardline free market Conservative MEP, worked with the Cato Institute to publish a proposed Free Trade Agreement between the UK and the US. This clearly signalled to compliant ministers what the billionaire philanthropists wanted in return for their generous support. It also set the terms of the public debate.

She also points to Arron Banks, who (largely thanks to investigations by openDemocracy) is known to voters as having funnelled cash and capacity to the Vote Leave campaign. “I think he has the low cunning of a political operator. He and Andy Wigmore play the cheeky chappies but lots of thinking goes on there. [Nigel] Farage the same. While many in the cabinet are tools, greedy tools, Banks, Wigmore and Richard Tice are the most skillful ones.”

She also speculates about the role of Putin, and Russia, but acknowledges there is less hard evidence for this hypothesis. She says: “There is the Russia connection. Imagine you are Putin and you want to undermine the liberal democracy of the West. You would look to someone like Boris Johnson, who is desperate for power, sociopathic, superficial and you would manipulate him. The same with Trump. This is a thought experiment.”

We are the ones we’ve been waiting for

So having identified the problem, where can we find a solution? We know who the perpetrators are in this international drama, and we can easily determine who the victims will be. But where are the rescuers? Surely our democratic institutions - political parties, civil service, police - will defend us. But Scott-Cato is deeply concerned and distressed about what’s happening to the

institutions of Western democracy that are supposed to protect the UK from the corruption and despotism we see in Russia, China - and in the United States.

The first line of defence is the Conservative party itself, which (now the Tories have finally come clean about the number of members it has) turns out to have seen a steady decline in party membership to significantly below 100,000. Further, this membership was increasingly old, financially secure and racist – leaving the party vulnerable to Farage’s influence, and later the infiltration of UKIP and Brexit party supporters.

The more liberal wing of the Tories is outnumbered, outflanked, and now for 22 of its MPs are whipless, floating free of the party. “I know Tories, and the decent ones are emotionally trashed by it all - they have dedicated 20 years, often 40 years to that party. They hold a belief in self-responsibility, that kind of understanding of the world that I don’t personally agree with. And suddenly there are these complete monsters taking over your party and wrecking everything.”

She adds: “People are fearful. These are bullies. You know the type of Tory. They’re a nice person, they assume other people are nice people, they have no understanding of the distribution of wealth and power that makes everything terribly unfair. The whole thing now is about vile nastiness and this is just horrible for you. They have been pushed out. David Gauke MP, who is a good example of a straight down the line, intelligent Tory, is disturbed by what is going on.”

She says that the National Crime Agency, the Electoral Commission, and the Metropolitan Police are all missing in action. There is now a judicial review to discover why the Met has not brought charges against those breaking electoral laws. “This is nefarious, illegal activity. But so few politicians are willing to stand up and be counted on this.” Years of austerity have hollowed out institutions like the National Crime Agency and the Environment Agency that are supposed to keep us safe, and keep politicians honest.

This BrexitInc series of openDemocracy articles was commissioned to examine the nexus of power between government, its agencies, the legal system, civil society - and the corporations. To identify the ways corporations lobby government to secure deregulation. But now the world has been turned upside down, are the corporates playing a role in upholding the rule of law, the rules based system, the social norms that mean their capital is protected and viable?

No. “I think as corporates they have been asleep on the watch,” says Molly. “In the 1930s, most corporations in Germany asked, ‘which way can we continue to make profits’. They went with the Nazis, and indeed the war made some of them a lot of money. So what if you are Waitrose now? The truth is very few companies have come forward. I have had private conversations - with industry, with agriculture, with finance. They were all very clear about what Brexit would do for them - before, during and since - but will not come out and say so. ‘It’s not our place to take a position.’”

Civil society is in crisis: no-one is coming to save us. So we are going to have to save ourselves. Molly argues that it is citizens who are the solution to the current crisis, and not just through the ballot box. Coming together to form and defend civil society is the best, and only, form of defence.

I ask Molly where the solution lies. “It’s up to you,” she states. And then she gives three important ways that we as citizens must act now.

She begins, “If someone is being rude to a black person on the train, it is your job to challenge that person even if you do get punched in the face. We must always challenge behaviour and speech which is othering certain groups.”

The Green MEP also calls on people to “join an institution, even if it's dance class”. She explains: “The point is being part of an institution itself, the social contact, the experience of democracy, learning about your own power. It’s training for being a democratic citizen. Obviously a trade union is a good institution to be a member of, so is a political party, so is a co-operative. You have a stake in society. Join the local chess club, all those things are good. Building up civil society is good.”

But ultimately, the solution is political: “We have to get rid of this government before it does more damage.”

I leave the interview reflecting. We know that fascism is on the rise internationally. We have seen a weak, egotistical, paranoid president in the United States holding the door ajar for racists and demagogues. It happened in Russia. It’s happening in Brazil. And there was no reason why the same thing could not happen here. But to hear an MEP, a professor of strategy and sustainability, speak so eloquently to this threat is a wake-up call. It’s time to join a union. It’s time to get punched in the face.