

Opinion **Brexit**

## Brexit is about sovereignty and parliament must respect that

What many voters objected to was a supranational government making some of their laws

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Noel Malcolm JANUARY 25, 2019

If the UK is now on the brink of a constitutional crisis, one major reason is that a significant number of MPs still oppose any version of [Brexit](#), and seek a second referendum solely for the sake of reversing the decision of the last one. What is the thinking that underlies this?

A letter to one newspaper last week summed up a common assumption. “The people who voted for Brexit,” it said, “did not vote to leave Europe; they voted against the Establishment in Brussels and Whitehall.”

This may be an extreme formulation, worthy of George Orwell’s Ministry of Truth (“War is Peace”; “A vote to leave the EU was not a vote to leave the EU”), but it does encapsulate a common view: the Brexit vote was produced by a “populist” manipulation of other concerns. For the left, it was a cry of pain against “austerity”; for [Theresa May](#), it was the complaint of people “left behind” by globalisation.

These lines of explanation developed soon after the referendum, on the strength of research which showed that older, poorer or less educated people were more likely to have voted for Brexit. But those were just correlations; to jump from them to any one simple causation is to elide many possible complexities. Surveys might also show that beer-drinkers were more pro-Leave and wine-drinkers more pro-Remain; but what would that tell us about their actual reasons for voting as they did?

We do in fact have [survey data](#) about people's reasons for voting Leave. The most important reason was democracy. They said they wanted to live under laws made by the people they elected. Immigration came second. Neither point was about austerity or globalisation. What they objected to was a supranational government making some of their laws and lifting all immigration controls on the inhabitants of 27 other countries. This kind of government is a uniquely European project, not a "global" development at all.

Here we have the central issue which many Remainers, including the diehards in parliament, have generally avoided and perhaps never understood. If it is referred to at all, it is dismissed as a merely "ideological" concern. That is not an adequate response to the fundamental desire of millions of people to live in a normal self-governing democracy. And yet the incomprehension is quite widely shared internationally — by, for example, Americans who deprecate Brexit, even though they would never accept supranational government over their own country.

As for the accusation of populism, yes, [Nigel Farage](#) used populist rhetoric. But the country was not taken over by his UK Independence party in 2016. The main Leave campaign was run by two liberal Conservatives and an internationalist Labour MP, mostly putting arguments about the nature of the EU and the benefits of self-government.

A simple thought-experiment: imagine that the British establishment overall had been pro-Brexit. Would any Leave campaigners have used anti-elitist rhetoric then? Anti-elitism acquired rhetorical force because people were pro-Brexit (when the elites were not), and not the other way round.

Another argument wielded by Remainers today is that people were not voting then for what they may be getting now. "Nobody voted to become poorer", is the refrain. Yet 17.4m voted Leave despite hugely well-publicised predictions that this would indeed make them poorer; they did so primarily on non-economic grounds. So far as they considered economic factors, they seem to have disbelieved the worst-case predictions. But they may have thought also about possible long-term benefits: more global free trade, lifting the burden of some present EU regulations and avoiding the burden — unquantifiable, but significant — of all future ones.

Much of the criticism of a no-deal Brexit is about relatively short-term disruption. The voters' decision was for the long term, and essentially on matters of principle.

Remainer MPs now muddy these waters with a new principle of their own. Rhetorically, they cite the Leave slogan, "Take back control". But that was about returning powers to the UK. Whether a particular power belongs to the legislature or the executive is a matter for the UK constitution — the slogan cannot justify an unprecedented power-grab by the former over the latter.

Some warn that the referendum represents a sinister new force, plebiscitary democracy, which threatens to overturn the representative kind. Yet the use of referendums for exceptional constitutional decisions is an established part of our modern constitution. The referendum did not creep up on parliament from outside; it was created and legitimated by parliament itself.

To ignore the [referendum](#)'s decision now, postpone its implementation, or seek to reverse it, would therefore be, to use Mrs May's phrase, a betrayal of democracy itself.

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