

## **Brexit, Brussels, Berlin**

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During the summer the negotiations between the European Union and Britain on the terms of the Brexit dragged on, mostly behind closed doors, and hardly anybody cared. The public was busy spending their holidays, and the issues on the table seemed complicated and technical, far removed from everyday experience. Not paying attention is, however, a mistake. What is being discussed between London and Brussels is nothing less than the nature of the European Union in the future: as a platform for cooperation between sovereign states or, alternatively, as a supranational government dictating to member states their domestic and foreign policies. This is what the pan-European eurofanatics want. Their fear is that the Brexit negotiations will result in a new kind of loose association between Britain and “Europe” – denounced by the Brussels commissariat as a “license for cherry-picking” – that would soon be attractive to other member countries as well. No “ever closer union among the European peoples” anymore, instead freely-chosen cooperation from case to case rather than binding one size fits all directives from above.

Why is this so important? A supranational European government would in principle not be a problem if it was and could be a democratic government. But this is not intended, nor is it now or in the foreseeable future possible. The European Union is a technocratic-cum-bureaucratic authority, combined in uncertain ways with a council of national heads of state and government and, importantly, a central bank. All three operate mostly in secrecy, and there is no parliament to deserve this name that could hold them accountable to a European electorate. And there is no prospect of this changing. The member states of the Union, all of them, are dead set against giving up their sovereignty – unlike their democracy. The need

“Europe” to put the technocratic critique of democratic rule – too “populist”, not “complex” enough, too slow to follow the movements of the markets, too unpredictable to encourage investment – in practice. “Europe” is there to enable them to work around their national electorates and their representatives and to make sure that, whatever happens, their countries stick to the creed of internationalization and “globalization”: free markets, free trade, free movement, free competition, no “state aids”, privatization, sound money, you name it. “Europe” is the chosen instrument to let your voters know that “there is no alternative” to neoliberal capitalism.

Here is where the Brexit comes in. Whatever else there may have been behind the vote, there was a strong desire especially by those excluded from the prosperity of the London “service sector” to restore popular sovereignty over the national government and make it again accountable to the British people – in particular, to its majority in the forgotten hinterlands of Britain. Major policies that a Corbyn government would have to adopt to carry out its mandate are likely to run up against the European treaties. To close the still widening gap between the top and the bottom of British society, Labour would need much more political wiggling space than allowed for by European Union rules. This is why incessant efforts are made to undo the outcome of the referendum. Within Britain, New Labour of old, Tony Blair and David Miliband in the lead, is demanding another vote, on the Brussels model: we let them vote until they get it right. They find non-negligible support among the upper middle classes, in particular bankers and academics. On the Conservative side, British businesses are afraid of having to work with a British government accountable to British voters, without the invisible but all the more powerful presence of Brussels functionaries.

Brussels, and also Berlin, are doing their best to make the British renounce the Brexit, formally or *de facto*, and return to the European flock. New reports come out every day predicting huge economic losses if Britain would leave in the end, to scare the British public into following the lures of New Labour and Old Business. Meanwhile the Brussels bureaucracy invents ever new ways, on procedure and on substance, to humiliate the British government. The hope is to drain its domestic support base and, even better, trigger a putsch among Tory MPs, removing May (whose talk about industrial democracy, industrial policy, better education, less inequality etc. they find suspicious anyway) and replacing her with *bona fide* supporters of business-as-capital. It is high time that other Europeans, the real-life Europeans, take sides with Britain by calling for reforms of the European Union that make it more democratic and more social, by returning political sovereignty to where political democracy is located, to national politics and parliaments.