

After Brexit comes the battle for the soul of British democracy

Opponents of Brexit cannot afford to lick their wounds for long. The UK now enters a contest for the soul of its democracy. It must now be reconstituted. Such a renewal might one day presage the UK's return to Europe, writes Michael Cottakis (89 Initiative).

Earlier this month, European Parliament Brexit Coordinator, Guy Verhofstadt, visited the UK to meet with senior British officials. His purpose was to discuss post-Brexit citizens' rights. With a degree of optimism, Verhofstadt sought also to broach the feasibility of an [opt-in](#) to EU citizenship after Brexit.

Alas, for defeated Remainers, the Government will not accept Verhofstadt's proposals. The single greatest loss of civic rights is now in store. Indeed, the 31 January might one day merit recognition as the Great Loss of Rights – for millions of citizens (and entire countries) have now been stripped of their EU citizenship, against their will.

For the defeated mass movement to Remain, it is easy to feel that the war has been lost and continued struggle is futile. It is true that rejoining the European Union in the medium term represents a pipedream. Yet, it bears remembering that Brexit is part of a larger contest, to be waged over years, and around issues far deeper than mere membership of the European Union. Opponents of Brexit, or simply the direction the UK is now drifting in, cannot afford to lick their wounds for long. The UK now enters a contest for the soul of its democracy. Will it be inclusive or extractive? Tolerant or bigoted? Liberal or illiberal? Will it continue to privilege some over others, or can it be a beacon of equal opportunity between peoples? Addressing the paradoxes of the UK's democratic identity will determine the country's long-term international orientation, for a society reflects outwardly what it is on the inside. To this contest might the remnants of Remain now turn their attention and direct their hope.

Should liberal progressives lose the wider contest, not only will the UK be permanently shorn from its European home, but it will find itself in the abyss of a new dark age of moral decline, illiberalism, and isolation. Should the UK's liberal forces win through, all becomes possible again. Under such circumstances, Britain may well re-accede to the European Union within a decade or more.

It appears obvious that reform of the UK's democratic institutions will not happen with Boris Johnson as Prime Minister. But democratic awakenings often occur in direct affront to authoritarianism and immovability. Through the melding together of pro-democracy social movements, the UK's democratic institutions may yet be infused with new vitality, making these fit for purpose.

Several changes are necessary. First, the norms underpinning UK democracy must turn from ones of centralisation and exclusion to increasing regional autonomy, civic responsibility, and participation. Civic institutions permitting more direct involvement of citizens in decision-making are wholly necessary to improve legitimacy. A written constitution will prevent Prime Ministers, or Speakers, from riding roughshod over democratic norms. At its core, this should contain a new democratic settlement for the UK, forcing the major parties to blur their lines and become less adversarial.

The benefits and drawbacks of these reforms are oft-discussed and beyond the scope of this particular article. Instead, it focuses on several 'hows'.



The assembly movement

Citizen assemblies have been tested in countries like [Canada](#) or [Ireland](#), where the government is less centralised and citizen participation more historically embedded. At its core, the citizen assembly provides a forum for structured debate on local civic and political issues. It embodies the deliberative function of a local council or parliament. However, while a parliament is elected, a citizen assembly is comprised of randomly-selected citizens who serve for a designated period. Assemblies work to advise, to legitimise, or to inform government policy.

While the UK's well-known centralism and top-down decision-making processes are a firm feature of its democratic landscape, there is historical precedent for the use of similar popular initiatives. From Simon de Montfort to Emmeline Pankhurst, different variations have helped empower local communities and create demand-side pressure for constitutional reform, in defiance of an overbearing executive.

Learning from the Brexit debacle, a new assembly movement should immediately be advanced, mushrooming organically across the UK. This should be broad and decentralised, built through synergies between existing pro-democracy groups. The aim could be for a specified twenty or more assemblies in 2020, with more year-on-year. To achieve this, collaboration between local authorities and assembly organisers is critical. To ensure legitimacy, assemblies could be composed of equal numbers of Leavers and Remainers. Such a method would have the additional effect of bringing communities back together after three acridly adversarial years. The eventual vision might be for citizen assemblies established within each council. These could feed into a parliamentary 'House of Citizens', performing a similar function to the House of Lords.

Crowdsourcing a written constitution

The first function of citizen assemblies would be to debate a UK written constitution. All major parties bar the Conservatives now favour this. Opposition party leaders must, therefore, endorse and legitimise the assembly movement, harnessing it to crowdsource a written constitution in time for the 2024 election, when each major party should make its passage into law, via a referendum, a central manifesto promise. This process could be buttressed by a UK wide crowdsourcing campaign, similar to the more limited attempts of the [London School of Economics in 2015](#).

This proposal is neither radical, nor new. In the run-up to the 2015 General Election, all major political parties, except the Conservatives, supported '[a citizen-led constitutional process](#)', resulting in a written constitution. These demands should now be rekindled. A written constitution would set into law a new democratic architecture more conducive to the 21st century, including the role of the executive, citizen assemblies, and electoral law. It would also devote special attention to questions of devolution, seeking proportionate buy-in from England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Through a written constitution, the future territorial integrity of the UK might be safeguarded through the involvement of all devolved administrations.

A new electoral settlement

Crucially, a written constitution must include a broad new electoral settlement. Presently, the Conservatives look set to be the country's largest party for at least the coming decade. Both major parties have long rejected electoral reform, including calls for proportional representation. However, PR now represents the Labour Party's best chance of government. Indeed, it represents the only hope for several smaller parties – the Liberal Democrats, Greens, and others – of obtaining a significant parliamentary presence. All have been long-time advocates, and while the British public have traditionally been ambivalent, indications are that this may be changing. A recent poll shows that [56% may now back proportional representation](#). While PR would constrain the executive to some degree, it would force parties to seek far more accommodating solutions. Simply put, under PR a hard Brexit of the type facing the UK in 2020 would never be on the cards.

With just over four years to the next elections, Labour officials might take heed. A party seeking to ape Conservative populism on Europe and immigration simply to win back its traditional Northern seats would prove catastrophic for British democracy. Instead, Labour's strategy must be to include a new democratic settlement as its central manifesto promise. It might frame this as empowering the vulnerable working-class voter against the Tories. It must also show itself willing to cooperate with other parties, for without such cooperation, it cannot attain government.

Winning the battle for the soul of British democracy will not do away with the bigotry, illiberalism, and social conservatism of certain strata of society. Nonetheless, it would help contain these forces and nudge the country in a direction we can be prouder of. A United Kingdom based on the principles of greater democratic inclusion, representation, justice, and regional empowerment will be a country more comfortable with itself and with the fast-changing world around it. This will carry benefits in terms of social development and economic performance. Perhaps, ultimately, a UK built in this mould might choose to plough a different furrow in its international relations.

Today the UK prepares for a hard Brexit by the end of 2020 – at odds with public opinion and the national interest. For all its pomp and grandeur, British democracy has been exposed as weary and ailing. It must now be reconstituted. With [polls](#) on the eve of Brexit continuing to show clear support for remaining in the EU, for some, the hope is that such a renewal might one day presage a return to Europe.

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