

## **The EU's contempt for democracy**

By Brendan O'Neill, Spiked 11 July 2015

It seems finally to have dawned on Europe's observing classes that the EU might not be the whiter-than-white embodiment of democracy, liberty and nice things in general that they thought it was. Following EU institutions' use of blackmail and harassment to try to get the Greek people to accept a stern bailout package, and Greek voters' big, fat, brave 'NO' to this external warping of their affairs, liberal sections of the European press have had a pretty healthy smattering of that thing they normally treat as a pathology when it's expressed by a fat man with an En-ger-land tattoo on his forearm: Euroscepticism. As one clearly miffed liberal editorialist in Britain put it, maybe 'the dream of continental solidarity and interdependence is coming to an end'.

Yet even as these one-time Europhiles side, for the first time, with a national population that has found itself on the receiving end of the EU's barbs and threats, still they overlook the depth of the EU's hostility to the democratic impulse. They're treating what has been done to Greece as an aberration, a twisting of what the EU is *meant* to be about. As Fintan O'Toole, who 'has always supported the European project', put it in the *Irish Times*: 'The project has taken a decisive turn away from democracy.' This is wrong. Really wrong. The problem with the EU is that it was never democratic. In fact, it arose precisely as a means for Europe's political classes to insulate themselves from public pressure and take decisions in a technocratic rather than democratic fashion. The EU's treatment of Greece is not a deviation from the EU project – it's a continuation of it, a realisation of it.

### **Essentially they used blackmail**

It is genuinely alarming how Brussels- and Strasbourg-based bodies have treated Greece, especially its demos. Essentially they used blackmail – a threat to withhold emergency funds for a beleaguered nation – as a way to force Greeks to accept the very austerity measures they voted *against* when they chose the left collective Syriza as their government just six months ago.

From raising taxes, including sales taxes, to slashing pensions, the content of the EU bailout package was by its nature undemocratic, since it went against some of the values Greeks had already democratically voted for. And the manner in which officials tried to foist the bailout package on the Greek people was undemocratic, too. Prior to Greece's referendum on the bailout at the weekend, Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament, said that, whatever the result, 'Syriza's time [is] over'. Syriza should resign, he said, and Greece should be 'bridged with a technocratic government, so that we can continue to negotiate'. Such contempt for democracy. That the Greek people voted by 61.3 per cent to 38.7 per cent against the bailout package, and implicitly against Schulz and Co's oligarchical conviction that *they* should determine Greece's future, was a brilliant, inspiring assertion of democratic rights in the face of external hectoring.

### **Questioning the EU's behaviour**

So it is understandable that in media circles in Europe, including among the most pro-EU, there has been discomfort, concern, a new willingness to question the EU's behaviour. The *New Statesman* wonders what has happened to 'the European Union [that] brought peace and

prosperity to the people of Europe'. A writer for the *Herald* in Glasgow spoke for many among the post-nationalist, post-border, post-modern set when he said 'those of us who believed that the EU was a great achievement of enlightened internationalism... have been forced to think again'. 'Where is the Social Europe?', he asked; why has it been replaced by 'pig-headed bureaucrats'? Even at the *Guardian*, for 20 years effectively a propaganda sheet for Brussels, there have been mutterings that perhaps 'the disaster of the Euro [is] strangling the larger European project it was meant to serve'.

### **EU institutions have been sneering at democracy**

The only possible response to such Greek-related handwringing is: where have you people been for the past two decades? For EU institutions have been sneering at democracy, and problematising voters, for years now. From the EU's imposition of diplomatic sanctions on member state Austria in 2000 after a significant number of its voters gave their ballots to the far-right Joerg Haider to the constant cajoling of the Irish people into accepting EU constitutions that they democratically rejected, the EU's hostility to the choices made and ideas held by national populations has been palpable, and grown more intense, in the post-Cold War period.

Where were these media sympathisers with Greece in 2001, for example, when Irish voters had the temerity to reject the EU-expanding Nice Treaty and were widely demonised for having done so? They were branded by officials and media as 'ungrateful', 'ignorant of the issues', 'backward'. *Libération*, the French daily now posing as concerned-about-the-EU and pro-Greece, accused the Irish people of 'treachery' and wondered how they could be 'so ungrateful'. The Irish were made to vote on Nice again, in 2002, and this time, after a campaign of extraordinary blackmail (in essence: 'we pay your way, so do what we say'), they approved Nice. Where were these worriers about democracy in Europe in 2005, when French and Dutch voters voted against the EU Constitution and were met with a barrage of abuse for having done so? One MEP denounced the No voters as 'an odd bunch of racists, xenophobes, nationalists, communists... and the generally pissed-off' – a view then largely shared in much of the press now so concerned about the EU's treatment of the Greek demos.

Where were these EU-rethinkers when, in 2006 and 2007, the elected leaders of Slovakia, Poland and Hungary were all pressured by Brussels publicly to renounce some of their more extreme political views or risk being 'in breach of EU obligations'? Or in 2008, when the ungrateful Irish once again rejected an EU treaty – Lisbon – and one EU official spoke for many when he texted this message to his colleagues: 'The Irish people – the bastards – have spoken?' Even when, in 2011, the EU foisted utterly unelected, technocratic governments on both Greece and Italy – which should have been the real giveaway in terms of the EU's contempt for democracy – there was not nearly as much fury as there ought to have been. There was discomfort, sure, and some editorial protesting – expressions of hope that these techno-governments wouldn't last too long. But there was nowhere near the self-questioning among EU-lovers that we've seen in recent days. Indeed, an article in the *Guardian*, headlined 'In defence of Europe's technocrats', warned readers that if they opposed the unelected governments in Greece and Italy then they would be on the same side as 'those arch-contrarians at *spiked*'. Yes, just four years ago opposing the EU's imposition of unelected rulers was treated as a marker for contrarianism.

### **EU treating national electorates with naked contempt**

So the EU has been treating national electorates with naked contempt for two decades now. And the answer to the question ‘Where was today’s EU-concerned lobby back then?’ is that they played a key role in echoing the EU’s distaste for the rough-and-tumble and awkwardness of open, testy, angry democratic debate and its preference for the cool-headed, expert-driven politics of the removed EU chamber, and in fact helped to enforce it. The chattering classes of Europe have for years pathologised opposition to the EU, treating it as symptomatic of a narrow nationalistic, racist mindset. Such opposition has even been referred to as ‘Europhobia’, suggesting it is a mental malaise, a sickness in the brains of ‘the generally pissed-off’. Such pathologisation of dissent and debate on the EU, such an intellectual ringfencing of the EU from ridicule, has unquestionably made it easier for the EU to enforce its writ against Eastern Europeans with the wrong political views, Western Europeans who reject new EU treaties, and, yes, against Greeks in recent years. Until the Greeks rebelled at the weekend. That the same chattering classes are now posing as sudden critics of the EU and defenders of the rebelling Greeks shows that what they lack in critical consistency they more than make up for with brass neck.

### **Europe’s financial institutions force their values on to Greeks**

There is anger right now that Europe’s financial institutions are trying to force their values on to Greeks. But for years EU institutions have been imposing their *cultural* and *political* values on apparently backward, ungrateful plebs who think and vote the ‘wrong’ way – why is that okay? What we can see in Greece is the playing-out of the very essence of the EU. This isn’t the EU gone wrong, but staying consistent, believing it has the authority to override the desires of national electorates. This is essentially what the EU emerged to do: provide a new space for Europe’s national political elites that would allow them to execute decision-making in a post-democratic fashion; which would help them solve their profound feeling of illegitimacy at home, among their own publics, by allowing them to pool together behind closed doors to ‘get things done’. The EU project is fundamentally anti-political, and therefore anti-democratic, believing bureaucrats are more trustworthy than the masses. The openly expressed idea that Greece would be better off ignoring its stupid, grasping public and being ruled by a technocracy is alarming, and repulsive, but it is not remotely surprising when one looks at what the EU has done before, and what it is all about.

This is why, since we were founded in 2001, *spiked* has devoted so much energy to criticising the EU and exposing its contemptuous assaults on voters in Ireland, Holland, France, Hungary, Greece and elsewhere: because we value democracy and the right of peoples to determine their own affairs. Our slogan has been ‘For Europe, Against the EU’. It’s precisely because we love Europe, and think there should be more cross-border solidarity and interaction, that we oppose the oligarchical EU, which has divided Europe, not united it, and destroyed democracy, not expanded it. The current media sympathy for Greece is too late, and, more importantly, too little. It isn’t enough to worry about this one instance of alleged ‘neoliberal bullying’ of a people in Europe – we must expose every act of EU elitism, and put the case for real politics, however ugly it sometimes gets, over the tyranny of expertise and consensus preferred by the EU and the new clerisies of Europe which, even now, support it.

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