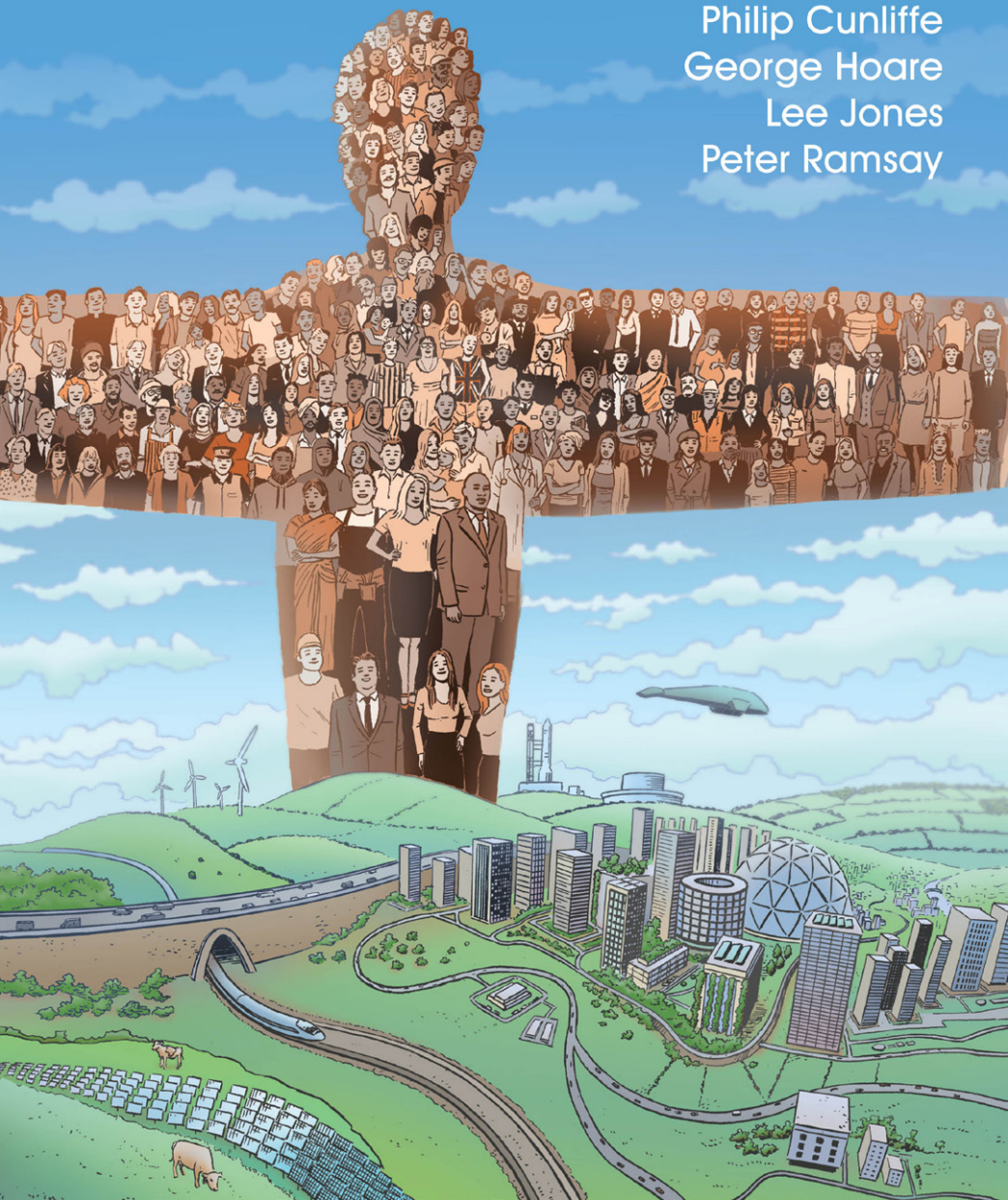
Taking Control

Sovereignty and Democracy After Brexit

Philip Cunliffe
George Hoare
Lee Jones
Peter Ramsay



Advanced praise for *Taking Control*

This is the most important book to come out of the struggles over Britain's membership of the EU, and it makes all other works on the subject look trivial. The authors provide a profound analysis of the issues involved and show how only thorough-going changes in Britain's political and constitutional arrangements will be able to respond to the challenges of this near-revolutionary moment.

Richard Tuck, Frank G. Thomson Professor of Government Theory, Harvard University, USA

The condition of post-Brexit Britain is grim. This excellent book shows that this has little to do with having lost the putative benefits of EU membership. Far more important is the British state's steady incapacitation and the decay of neoliberal political parties. The promise of "taking control" remains, but only if Britain undergoes a democratic and social transformation.

Costas Lapavitsas, Professor of Economics, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, UK

Brexit, this book forcefully argues, was no more than a first step in a long process of rebuilding a democratic nation-state, indeed a democratic nation, out of the ruins of a politics without national sovereignty. Sovereign democracy requires effective institutions of civic representation that disempower a political elite content with ruling the void. This book is a breakthrough for democratic theory and a milestone for political debates on the future of democracy.

Wolfgang Streeck, Professor and Emeritus Director, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne, Germany

A crucial book for understanding the Brexit paradox: why it failed catastrophically to deliver on its promise to re-democratise British politics, but why it remains a necessary precondition for achieving just that.

Thomas Fazi, journalist and co-author of *Reclaiming the State*

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First published in 2023 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
111 River Street
Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-5319-8
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-5320-4(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022949177

Typeset in 11 on 13pt Sabon
by Cheshire Typesetting Ltd, Cuddington, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

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politybooks.com

Contents

Preface

We finished writing this book on 9 September 2022, the day after the United Kingdom's longest reigning monarch died. Liz Truss had just become the prime minister, the war in Ukraine ground on, and inflation was accelerating worldwide after two years of lockdowns amid a global pandemic. Given such upheaval, the politics of Brexit may seem to be a subject of merely historical interest because the world has moved on. But to consign Brexit to history would be a mistake.

Brexit shares something of fundamental significance with the emergency regimes imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the Ukraine war and with the energy crisis. All are symptoms of the exhaustion and breakdown of the neoliberal world order; of the end of the post-political era that followed the end of the Cold War. And this means that Brexit is unfinished business politically. This is not merely because relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union (EU) remain unsettled. More importantly, it is because the political earthquake that Brexit caused in Britain has exposed the advanced decay and structural weakness of its old political order without prompting the collective effort needed to repair

or replace it. Understanding the reasons for Brexit and the unanswered political questions that it has raised therefore remains of the utmost importance. And this is true not only for the British but for anyone who wants to understand or transform the EU's remaining member-states.

This book is, therefore, very much about the present and future. But its origins lie in the political crisis following the 2016 EU referendum. In June 2018, the four authors were among the founders of The Full Brexit (thefullbrexit.com). This network brought together academics, journalists and others who supported leaving the European Union but were not conservative Eurosceptics. We supported the cause of democracy, presenting arguments that had enjoyed relatively little exposure in the Brexit wars that were dominated by right-leaning Eurosceptics and populists, on the one hand, and liberal and left Europhiles, on the other.

Although we cannot claim that the Full Brexit had much influence on the outcome, we worked hard to offer an account of those extraordinary political events that put the interests of working people at its heart. We flew the flag for those many voters who believed that restoring national sovereignty was only the necessary condition for a politics different from, and far more ambitious than, that imagined by Jacob Rees-Mogg or Nigel Farage. The Full Brexit was not a political party, and it contained a wide variety of left-leaning views. For the four of us, at least, it was a hugely invigorating intellectual and political engagement. Our discussions brought different theoretical perspectives to bear on the most urgent political and constitutional problems posed during that period of crisis. This book is the outcome of our thinking and writing during that project and since.

We are greatly indebted to everyone who contributed to The Full Brexit, especially to Christopher Bickerton, Mary Davis, Maurice Glasman, Pauline Hadaway, Costas Lapavitsas, Martin Loughlin, Danny Nicol, Anshu Srivastava, Wolfgang Streeck and Richard Tuck. We

doubt that any of them will agree with everything we have written here, but our discussions with them sustained us through that time, challenged our emerging perspective and influenced the analysis offered here. We are also very grateful to George Owers at Polity for commissioning this book and his colleagues for seeing it to press. In an increasingly intolerant climate, George made Polity's Politics list a rare space for important and necessary debate. We are also grateful to Ben Caswell, Alex Gourevitch, Aaron Keers, Jake Pier, Daniel Matthews-Ferrero, Sally Turner, Rob Wilson, Suke Wolton, and Polity's four anonymous reviewers for their comments on the manuscript. Thanks also to Michael Lightfoot and Jamie Grant for their fine graphic representation of the democratic Leviathan for which we argue, and to Suke Wolton for the index.

Taking Control draws on the insights of academics, including political scientists (especially Christopher Bickerton and Peter Mair), political historians (especially David Edgerton and James Heartfield) and constitutional theorists (especially Martin Loughlin and Richard Tuck). However, the book is not a detailed engagement with all the relevant scholarly debates. We wanted it to be accessible to any intelligent reader – whether a British citizen wondering how to make sense of the political chaos of recent years or a fellow European wanting to learn the lessons of Brexit for democracy in their own country. We have therefore produced a short, assertive account, using citations only where essential to support factual claims, or because we are relying on another writer's ideas, or to guide the reader to more detailed treatments of a particular argument.

Taking Control offers a political account of Brexit and the state of British democracy. We argue that leaving the EU was a necessary but insufficient step for building democratic national sovereignty. We explain why this is so, and we identify what more is needed to create a more democratic nation in which ordinary people can truly begin to take control of our collective life.

Introduction

The title of this book riffs on the famous slogan of the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 European Union referendum: 'Take back control'. That slogan summarized a widespread feeling in 2016 that the electorate had lost any real influence over the political life of Britain as an EU member-state. *Taking Control* embraces the democratic impulse of Dominic Cummings' masterpiece of political communication, but its implications are very different.

Our core argument is that there can be no going 'back' to national sovereignty. Many of the old ways in which the British people once sought to control our nation-state in the days before it became an EU member-state are gone, degraded by the very experience of member-statehood. The process of leaving the EU has only served to prove the exhaustion of British politics. The demand for national sovereignty that the electorate made in 2016 therefore poses tasks that, for the most part, still lie ahead of us. Brexit was a necessary condition of real national sovereignty, but it was not sufficient to restore it.

Indeed, as we wrote this book, the British state, despite having left the EU, seemed to be as far out of the control of its people as it had ever been. From March 2020, the British

people were subjected to emergency rule, authorized with barely any scrutiny or criticism by a compliant parliament in which the opposition parties' only complaint has been that restrictions on political, civil and social freedoms have not been far-reaching enough. The contingent reason for this was the COVID-19 pandemic. But, as we shall argue, the choices made by the British political elite in responding to the virus were characteristic of the political pathologies that had long afflicted Britain as a member-state of the EU, and that are all but universal across the West. The disastrous economic and public health impacts of that panicky and draconian technocratic repression will be felt for years to come. Solving these problems will require the re-engagement of the population in the political life of the nation, something that the EU was deliberately designed to frustrate.

Although the first four chapters of this book give an account of the recent past, the perspective of *Taking Control* is rigorously forward-looking. We discuss the nature of Britain as a member-state of the EU, the reasons why British voters voted against EU membership, and the tortured process of leaving the EU and its aftermath. But *Taking Control* is not an exhaustive history of Brexit. That story is told only to explain the circumstances that we find ourselves in now, so that in the last two chapters we can draw out some important lessons for those who want to find a way out of the political stagnation that accompanies EU member-statehood in Britain and beyond. Above all, we emphasize the critical importance of reviving national sovereignty if we are ever truly to take control of our lives together.

For liberals and leftists, who dominate our literary political culture, sovereignty is generally to be feared or derided. It is to be feared as the source of nationalism and war, derided as a hangover of a parochial past, out of touch with the realities of a globalized economy and a cosmopolitan worldview. We neither fear sovereignty nor hold it in contempt. We argue that it is only through

embracing the challenges of sovereignty that we can solve our contemporary political malaise. National sovereignty is ultimately a question of the authority of those public institutions through which we represent ourselves as a singular people, as opposed to a multitude of atomized, fearful, mutually hostile individuals, tribes or identities. The sovereignty of the people is also necessarily the sovereignty of the nation. The political authority of the nation-state is the precondition of democracy. Sovereign nations are not necessarily democratic, but no true democracy can exist without sovereignty. Democratic sovereignty involves all kinds of conflicts, but in democracy these conflicts are addressed to the problem of how we live together on the basis of our equality, as opposed to merely policing our differences. True respect for sovereignty also means respect for the sovereignty of other peoples too, and it is the only stable basis for true internationalism and peace.

Taking Control is therefore a political book. It is about the politics of Brexit and what they tell us about our current predicament. It is not a book about the economics or sociology of Brexit, although we touch on those subjects in passing. Our subject is not merely the particular political tendencies we discuss. Above all, it is the realm of politics as such, the realm in which our conflicts of interest are raised and resolved; how that realm has failed and fallen into disrepute in the years of EU membership; and what is to be done about that. We use the experience of Brexit to shed light on the intimate connection between national sovereignty, effective political representation and democratic self-government. Here, Brexit teaches wider lessons to anyone interested in inspiring the people of their own nation to take democratic control of its affairs, especially to those in Europe who realize that advancing the cause of democracy requires them to leave the EU.

The book's first two chapters explain the anti-democratic character of the EU and how Britain was drawn into it. They also provide the conceptual grounding for the rest of the book. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the struggle over Brexit,

and what it revealed about the degraded state of Britain's national democracy. The final two chapters discuss what must happen for EU member-states to overcome the void at the heart of their politics.

In chapter 1, we investigate the nature of the EU itself. We demonstrate firstly that neither Eurosceptics nor Europhiles understand the EU for what it really is, and that both sides have good reason to misrepresent it. The EU is neither a foreign superstate that dominates its member-states from without, nor a benign democratic pooling of their sovereignty. Its intergovernmental decision and law making is the external institutional form of the internal political transformation of European states – specifically, the retreat of governing classes from representing their own domestic constituencies, and the formation of a trans-national economic constitution that locks in neoliberal policies. European institutions permit national elites to look more to one another than to their fellow citizens for legitimation and support, and to evade responsibility and accountability for their policy decisions and outcomes. In other words, EU member-statehood is the form taken by the failure of representative democracy within Europe's nation-states. Member-statehood institutionalizes what Peter Mair called a 'void' between ruling elites and ordinary citizens. We contrast this political structure with that of national sovereignty, in which the state's authority derives from lawmakers' political relations with the people they claim to represent.

In chapter 2 we explain how this cosmopolitan political structure emerged in the UK context – though comparable stories could be told of the other member-states. We find the source of Britain's turn to member-statehood, and the emergence of the political void, in the decay of the British nation as a political association. In the early post-war decades, European integration was strictly limited by the strength of national democracy, with the left in particular rejecting international rule-making and championing national sovereignty in order to enact social and economic

change in response to popular demands. However, the crisis of the capitalist economy in the 1970s, and the subsequent defeat of the organized working class and the political left, led to the acceptance of the Thatcherite doctrine that 'There is no alternative' to the market. This stripped democratic politics of its capacity to represent societal interests and to present contending visions of the future, denuding both social-democratic and conservative politics of their old rationales. With similar developments all over Europe, the way was open for the EU as a project of 'Thatcherism in one continent'. The British nation-state was transformed into an EU member-state, as its domestic politics were hollowed out and national sovereignty decayed from within. The EU is thereby revealed not as a new form of supranational sovereignty or statehood but rather as the means by which Europe's elites govern the void where representative politics used to be.

Chapter 3 deals with the United Kingdom's 2016 EU referendum, exploring both the reasons behind the vote to Leave, and the elite's reactions to it. We recall the dramatic political shock that the vote delivered to the British political system, and how that shock fully exposed the void between the political class and the cultural elite, on the one hand, and the wider population, on the other. Most parliamentary representatives, despite having enacted the referendum in the first place, could not bring themselves to enact the outcome. The call for it to be run again, so as to get the 'right' result, was immediate. The shock was just as great for the cultural elite and the chattering classes – the journalists, academics, think-tankers, lawyers and literati who articulate the political life of the nation, and seek to form public opinion and influence the decisions of those tasked with political representation. Their knee-jerk explanations of the vote accused the majority of the electorate of ignorance, gullibility and racism. We demonstrate not only that these explanations were false but also that, when these slanders on the electorate are seen in the light of the actual reasons that people voted to Leave, they offer a window

into the political void. They reveal the liberal political and cultural elite's authoritarian repudiation of the very idea of accountability to the people – symbolizing the deep decay of Britain's representative democracy.

In chapter 4, we explore the three years of political crisis and chaos between the referendum and Britain's final departure from the EU. We argue that while the referendum victory for Leave was just enough to take Britain out of the EU, it was inadequate for the British people to 'take back control' of the state. This is because Britain's national sovereignty has not been extinguished by externally imposed restraints, but eroded by the withering of internal domestic representation. The referendum result had to be implemented by political representatives, but the parliamentary drama induced by the referendum only confirmed the utter exhaustion of Britain's representative politics. During this cold civil war, the Eurosceptics proved unable to impose themselves on the political process owing to the bankruptcy of their underlying Thatcherism, but the Remain majority in Parliament was no more able to resolve the crisis owing to the contradiction at the heart of its Europhile authoritarian liberalism. It tried to use parliamentary sovereignty to secure its minoritarian preference, but ultimately found that Parliament had no mandate higher than that given to it by the people. The remnants of the political left under Jeremy Corbyn dissolved themselves into the *ancien régime*, throwing in their lot with the authoritarian liberals and the state bureaucracy. The intervention of Brexit Party populists would prove decisive in forcing the Conservative Party to 'Get Brexit done', but neither the populists nor the Thatcherite Eurosceptics had an adequate vision for a sovereign Britain.

By the time Brexit finally took place, all of the political traditions through which the British people had represented themselves in the twentieth century were revealed as empty vessels. For ordinary citizens, there was no way 'back' to control of the state. Britain had left the EU, but its domestic political void, and the weakness of the state's authority,

remained. Leave voters had successfully defended their political equality by ensuring the referendum result was respected, but an electorally victorious Conservative Party, far from renewing the internal relations of sovereignty, soon embraced the same emergency rule and sweeping restrictions on civil liberties adopted by most of the EU's member-states in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government's enthusiastic intervention in the Ukraine war marked a further collapse back into intergovernmentalism and a retreat from addressing deep-seated domestic problems. Neither form of emergency politics provided any lasting authority, with Boris Johnson's Conservative government imploding in mid-2022 despite the enormous parliamentary majority lent to it by Leave supporters just two years earlier.

In chapter 5, we argue that the lesson of Brexit for democrats, both in Britain and across Europe, is that reviving democratic representation is more than a matter of simply leaving the EU. Political revival requires the wholesale transformation of domestic political structures, and this task is inescapably a matter of nation building. The voiding of the old nation-state means it is not possible to go back to that nation, but only forwards to a new one – building a democratic state out of the contradictions of member-statehood. This requires reasserting the nation against the efforts of authoritarian liberals to discredit it, particularly their promotion of anti-democratic cosmopolitan ideology, and their claims that the nation can only entail racist warmongering. Democratic nationhood, we argue, is in fact the only basis on which an authentic internationalism can flourish. The costs of neglecting national sovereignty are clearly revealed in the failure of European populism. The chapter concludes by briefly responding to the criticisms that liberals, Marxists and conservatives might make of our proposal to constitute political nations.

In chapter 6, we illustrate the idea of constituting the nation by considering what might be involved in building a democratic British nation. We identify three related

contradictions that Brexit has revealed in the British state as a political association of its citizens. First, the vote demanded a reassertion of national sovereignty, but implementation fell to a governing class that neither understands nor wants to exercise that sovereignty, and which remains committed to supranational government. Second, Brexit has exposed fundamental territorial weaknesses in the state's domestic authority, especially in Northern Ireland, which the political class is committed to maintaining. Third, Brexit reasserted the legal supremacy of Parliament without doing anything to restore the political authority that Parliament needs to exercise sovereignty. Based on this analysis, we propose reforms to help resolve these contradictions and strengthen national sovereignty by further democratizing the state's existing constitution. These proposals include exiting from other global arrangements that constrain democratic accountability, particularly NATO; addressing the internal weakness of the British state's sovereignty in Northern Ireland by facilitating Irish reunification, and its weakness in Scotland by convincing Scottish voters to end devolution; and reforming Parliament and the party system to incentivize the emergence of new political ideas and bolster political representation. Since Britain's existing political traditions and parties are bankrupt and incapable of self-renewal, new ones must be created. This is a world-historical problem, afflicting not just Britain but all advanced democracies. Resolving it fully is beyond the scope of any book. Nonetheless, we end by outlining a substantive political perspective that emerges from the ruins of the old order – one that could inspire citizens to advance the democratic project of Brexit and fully take control of the state, and of our collective existence.

1

From Nation-States to Member-States

Despite the fact that Britain spent five years passionately debating its membership of the European Union (EU), the EU itself remains surprisingly poorly understood by all sides in British politics. For conservative Eurosceptics and populists, the EU is a sort of supranational nanny state, an unaccountable, foreign bureaucracy that imposes laws on its hapless member-states, depriving them of their sovereignty. For left and liberal Europhiles, it is a cosmopolitan peace project, 'pooling' sovereignty and locking in important social protections, without which we would be ravaged by neoliberalism. As we shall see, neither view is accurate.

The EU is best understood as the outgrowth of the decay of democratic representation within its member-states. As James Heartfield (2013: 12) puts it, 'European integration is driven by the decline of the political life of popular democracy [within] nation states . . . the bureaucratic institutions of the European Union are growing to fill the vacuum left by [their] shrinking political spheres.' The EU is not an external imposition but a mechanism developed by national elites through which to rule their societies in a post-democratic era. Europe's ruling elites have voluntarily

surrendered national sovereignty in order to lock in their preferred neoliberal policies against popular opposition, and to avoid having to be responsive to their own domestic constituents.

European integration has fundamentally transformed political relations in what was once the global heartland of democracy. For many decades, the basic unit of political life was the nation-state, which ruled over a national population. Elites drew their legitimacy from, and developed policy to appeal to, their citizens through systems of representative democracy with political parties strongly rooted in particular social constituencies. In the neoliberal era, however, Europe's ruling elites turned to European integration as a way to de-democratize policy making and lock in neoliberal policies. They increasingly drew legitimacy and policy direction not from their own citizens but from one another. The nation-state was hollowed out and a political 'void' replaced the authorizing political relations between government and citizenry (Mair 2013). Nation-states were transformed into member-states (Bickerton 2012).

Getting the EU wrong

Thatcherite Eurosceptics and left-liberal Europhiles have all misunderstood the EU's true nature. Britain's right-wing Eurosceptics, predominantly clustered in the Conservative Party and (before 2016) in the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), have seen the EU's growth as a supranational, federal superstate that threatens British culture and/or democracy through suffocating laws, directives and regulations. They therefore see political conflict as a struggle between beleaguered national politicians and overbearing EU bureaucrats, particularly the unelected Commission and the European Court of Justice (ECJ). From this perspective, the political problem, and the EU's democratic deficit, is located in Brussels, not London. The implication is that the United Kingdom only

had to leave this pernicious organization in order to regain its independence and self-confidence, allowing it to burst free from the EU's red tape and rediscover its true destiny as a buccaneering, twenty-first-century 'Global Britain'.

This theory simply does not correspond to the reality of the EU, nor have its breezy expectations proven remotely accurate. The EU is clearly not a supranational actor that has usurped power from member-states through a power-hungry bureaucracy (Bickerton 2016). The European Commission has only 25,000 employees, roughly the same as the BBC. Although these 'Eurocrats' certainly lack any democratic mandate, the notion that they can single-handedly dominate the governments and populations of EU member-states (around 450 million people) is simply not credible. There are also important limitations to the Commission's powers. Although only the Commission can initiate EU legislation, proposals cannot proceed without support from the Council, where member-states' elected leaders sit. Moreover, the law that they (and the European Parliament) produce is predominantly enforced not by the ECJ but by *domestic* courts and bureaucracies. The ECJ only takes up matters referred to it by national judiciaries.

The EU's most powerful institution is actually the Council, not the Commission or Court (Bickerton 2012, 2016; Heartfield 2013: 108–12). Comprising the heads of state or government of EU member-states, the Council makes all the key decisions in the EU. It decides who leads the Commission and on what terms. It can veto any Commission proposals and, through the 'trilogue' system, it determines around 80 per cent of EU law through closed-door discussion with the Commission and Parliament. Since the early 1990s, the Council has also weakened the Commission's power by creating '*de novo*' institutions that sit outside of the Commission's jurisdiction. These institutions, dominated by the member-states, now employ more officials than the Council, the European Parliament, and the ECJ combined (Bickerton and Jones 2018). Finally, as we saw during the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis and the

Brexit negotiations, the Council (or 'Council Guidelines') dictates the EU's political activities. Since the Council is a group of national politicians, its centrality means that the EU cannot simply be seen as something 'external' to, or autonomous from, member-states.

Left-leaning Europhiles prefer to see European integration as involving not the 'loss' of state sovereignty but rather its 'pooling' to achieve shared objectives. However, they fundamentally share Eurosceptics' view of the EU as an external fetter on member-states – they just see this in a more positive light. For liberals, the EU's supranational structures have encouraged international exchange, interdependence and cooperation between European countries, creating peace and prosperity in a continent once ravaged by extremism and war. Many on the left also emphasize the project of 'social' Europe, arguing that EU regulations lock in protections for workers and the environment, thereby preventing right-wing politicians from destroying the last vestiges of the post-war welfare state. Supporting the EU in this sense signalled a progressive identity: cosmopolitan 'openness' to the world and foreigners, and the possibility of mutual enrichment and improvement. By implication, opposing the EU can only signal 'closedness': a narrow, parochial 'little Englander' outlook, marked by the sort of xenophobic nationalism that fuelled earlier European wars. As chapter 3 will show, this liberal perception of the EU powerfully shaped reactions to the 2016 referendum result.

However, the Europhile perspective also bears scant relation to reality. During the Cold War, peace in Europe was secured not by the EU or its predecessor institutions but by the nuclear balance of terror between the United States and the Soviet Union and their military spheres of influence. The US sphere, institutionalized in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has expanded since the 1990s, provoking increasing conflict with Russia, and destabilizing international relations through interventions in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Libya. For the most part,

the EU has blindly gone along with this agenda, with its 'neighbourhood policy' towards Ukraine compounding NATO's provocation of Russia, for example (Mearsheimer 2014).

Far from embodying European solidarity and cooperation, the EU has bred conflict and division, particularly within the Eurozone. The 2011 Eurozone crisis was rooted in a structural mismatch between its constituent economies, with Germany in particular running a persistent trade surplus with the less-advanced southern European members (Lapavitsas 2018). If they had been monetarily sovereign, the latter could have addressed this by devaluing their currencies, which would curb imports while boosting exports. But within a monetary union, the mismatch can only be resolved by introducing a fiscal union to redistribute some of the unequal gains of trade and help promote industrial upgrading. However, again confounding right-wing Eurosceptic expectations, EU leaders rejected this: they wished to avoid the costs, economic and political, of establishing a true superstate. Instead, they forced the southern economies to undergo 'internal' adjustment, slashing state and welfare spending to reduce their labour costs. This has imposed colossal suffering and social dislocation, as well as feeding significant international resentments. Germans who did not wish to finance these so-called 'bailouts' characterized southern Europeans as lazy, feckless and corrupt, while embattled Greeks revived memories of the Second World War, demanding reparations for the Nazi occupation (Heartfield 2013: 4, 31, 57).

The EU's cosmopolitanism is also paper thin. European 'citizenship' amounts to little more than an EU national's right to vote in elections for local authorities if they reside in another EU member-state. Nothing more substantial has emerged (Wilkinson 2021: 148–9). Even in the European Parliament elections – where turnout since the 1990s has only once exceeded 50 per cent – there are no European-wide parties appealing to a European *demos*, only national parties that subsequently join EU-wide groupings. The

only place in Europe where a majority of people feel more attachment to the EU than to their region or nation is Budapest (Charron, Lapuente and Bauhr 2021).

Elsewhere, the flip side of thin internal cosmopolitanism is external barbarism. The EU maintains internal 'freedom of movement' not as a right of citizenship but to enable factors of production to move smoothly within the Single Market. This so-called 'right', however, applies exclusively to EU nationals; 'Fortress Europe' confronts migrants externally. Barbed-wire fences and FRONTEX naval patrols keep migrants at bay in the Balkans and Mediterranean respectively, while the EU pays the Turkish authorities and Libyan warlords billions of euros to intercept migrants travelling to Europe. As Hans Kundnani (2021) observes, under Ursula von der Leyen's self-proclaimed 'geopolitical Commission', the EU posits a 'European way of life' imperilled by non-white, non-Christian outsiders, in terms redolent of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*.

Nor has the EU been a strong guarantor of workers' rights. All the key labour rights in the United Kingdom were won domestically, well before the EU existed, during the period of relative trade union strength and militancy: the Equal Pay Act (1970), the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act (1974), the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974), the Employment Protection Act (1975), the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Race Relations Act (1976). British workplace standards have also remained consistently higher than the EU's minimum safeguards – where they exist. For example, as of 2016, the British minimum wage was the equivalent of €1,512 per month, well above the EU average of €821. The EU has no power to mandate an EU-wide minimum wage, and six member-states have none at all (Eurostat 2021).

Even where EU minima *are* set, this is typically at such a level that they have little practical effect. For example, the 1993 European Working Time Directive (EWTD) limited the working week to 48 hours and entitles workers to rest breaks and at least four weeks' paid holiday annually.

The British government opposed the EWTD, largely to allow the continued overworking of medical personnel, securing an opt-out from the 48-hour limit where workers agree. However, very few people benefited from the Directive because by 1993 Britons' average working week was already well below the minimum, at 38.2 hours (Office for National Statistics 2021a). This reflected trade unions' struggles for a 40-hour week, dating back to the 1880s (Davis 2018). For similar reasons, when Britain implemented the EWTD by establishing the first legal entitlement to paid holidays in 1998, the minimum was set at 5.8 weeks.

At best, then, EU regulations have established very low 'floors' below which protections could not fall, but the United Kingdom was rarely in any danger of actually doing so. This explains why measures like the EU's 2008 Temporary Agency Workers Directive have failed to prevent the emergence in Britain of a 'gig economy' characterized by precarity, low pay and bogus 'self-employment'. EU regulations clearly have proven to be a weak substitute for workers' own struggles.

At worst, the EU has actively undermined workers' rights. As the labour historian Mary Davis notes:

> The Lisbon Programme of 2000 effectively undermined [the 'social chapter' of the Maastricht Treaty] by insisting on 'flexicurity': more precarious work, supported by a social security 'safety net'. The Lisbon Treaty of 2008 reversed 'social Europe' completely by undermining [the] legal basis of workers' rights to employment contracts and negotiated collective agreements. This, coupled with the privatisation of public services, has clearly privileged the power of capital as being the dominant EU 'freedom'. (Davis 2018)

Indeed, the ECJ has consistently sided with employers, citing the provisions of the EU's directives on posted workers, services and business transfers. For example,

in the 2013 *Alemo-Herron* case, the ECJ nullified the United Kingdom's Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations of 1981, meaning that workers employed in a public service then being privatized lost their contractual rights. Similarly, the notorious 2007 *Viking* and *Laval* judgements, and the 2008 *Rüffert* case, upheld the right of transnational enterprises to employ imported workers on inferior terms to local ones, again undermining hard-won domestic protections (Davis 2018).

Economic constitutionalism and the rise of member-statehood

In contrast to Europhile mythology, EU regulation is actually deeply neoliberal in character. Yet, contrary to Euroscepticism, this is clearly no external imposition by a runaway supranational bureaucracy. National elites often present it in that way, the better to disguise their own role in EU decision making; but the truth is that the EU is a creature of the member-states themselves. Indeed, starting with Margaret Thatcher's championing of the 1986 Single European Act, British governments have been among the greatest promoters of this form of transnational market integration. This partly explains other member-states' bafflement and anger at Britain's attempt to renegotiate its membership in 2015, and the Brexit vote of 2016 (Rogers 2017). EU integration is a process by which European governments have bound their *own* hands; it is an expression of changes within member-states, rather than something external to them. The central process here is the transformation of democratic nation-states into post-democratic member-states (Bickerton 2012).

EU law and regulation effectively form an 'economic constitution' for Europe. This constitution specifies rules and procedures that lock in neoliberal policies, placing them beyond the scope of domestic democratic scrutiny and contestation (Gill 1998). At its core lie the 'four freedoms':

the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour. European governments have *willingly* abrogated their own right to regulate these flows across their borders. They have also renounced 'market-distorting' practices like 'state aid' to industry, adopted monetary and fiscal rules that constrain state intervention in the market, and committed to sectoral packages that promote the privatization of public services like transportation and health care (Streeck 2014: 103–16; Lapavitsas 2018). EU rules comprise *self-imposed* limits on the political sphere, creating and protecting markets from political 'interference' or 'distortion'.

These arrangements have a 'constitutional' character for two reasons. First, EU law is superior to national law created by elected legislatures, overriding it should they conflict. Individuals can use the courts to quash national legislation on the grounds that it conflicts with EU law, with the final judgement ultimately resting with the unelected lawyers of the European Court of Justice. The Court has consistently used this capacity to promote the four freedoms in pursuit of market integration (Scharpf 1999; Wilkinson 2021). Second, unlike mere domestic legislation, EU treaties are deliberately designed to be exceedingly difficult to change (Tuck 2020). This is an intrinsic feature of all codified constitutions, which exist to define the basic limits of social, political and economic life. As David Cameron found in 2015–16 when trying to change the terms of Britain's EU membership, EU rules are virtually impossible to amend. To achieve truly substantial change, treaty reform is necessary. The Lisbon Treaty prescribes an exceedingly tortuous procedure for this (see Box 1.1).

Contrary to those on the British and European left who argued that Britons should remain in the EU in order to improve it from within ('remain and reform'), there are insuperable barriers to enacting any progressive change in EU regulations (Jones 2019b). Even to get past step 4 of the reform process, pro-reform governments would need to be elected in 15 member-states. This is exceedingly

Box 1.1 Procedure to Revise EU Treaties

1. A proposal must emerge from a national government, the European Parliament, or the European Commission.
2. The Council discusses the proposal and passes it to the Council of Ministers, comprised of national heads of government.
3. The Council of Ministers consults the European Parliament, the Commission and (if the proposal touches on monetary matters) the European Central Bank.
4. The Council of Ministers votes on the proposal, with a simple majority required for it to progress further.
5. For any proposals suggesting fundamental change, the President of the European Council must then convene a 'Convention'. This must comprise representatives from national parliaments, national governments, the European Parliament, and the Commission, but the President decides how many of each is included.
6. The Convention discusses the proposal and develops, by consensus, a draft treaty text.
7. An intergovernmental conference convenes to discuss the text.
8. If the text is approved, it must be ratified by member-states in accordance with domestic law, e.g., through national parliaments or referendums.

Source: European Parliament (2019)

unlikely, given the terminal decline of social-democratic parties within the EU. At step 5, the Council president can stuff the required 'Convention' with anti-reform personalities. At step 6, the reformers would have to reach 'consensus' with anti-reform governments. At step 7, conservative member-states would enjoy another opportunity to veto change, while at step 8 so would the parliaments or populations of most EU countries, depending on their laws on treaty ratification. Ireland's constitution, for example, requires treaties to be put to a popular referendum; this potentially allows a country of 4.8 million people to veto changes desired by up to 469 million other Europeans. As the Eurozone crisis revealed, the transnational solidarity required to effect change is also absent and even eroded by the effects of European integration. The Greek finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis (2017), found that

other 'progressive' governments – whatever they might say in public – inevitably backed severe neoliberal austerity behind closed doors.

What is lost with the EU's economic constitutionalism is not so much legal sovereignty but, rather, popular, national sovereignty. Formal legal sovereignty is retained because, while they cannot really change the way the EU operates, member-states can still withdraw from the whole arrangement – even if, as Brexit demonstrated, the process is so tortuous as to be extremely discouraging. But what has dissipated is the power of national populations to determine the priorities and rules by which they are governed. Once national executives commit their populations to EU rules and procedures, these can hardly be challenged or changed, as David Cameron demonstrated in 2015–16. Even a large majority voting directly against specific EU strictures – as in the 2015 Greek referendum on EU-imposed austerity – has no effect. As the then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker insisted, 'there can be no democratic choice against the European treaties' (Hewitt 2015). The political spirit of European integration is appropriately characterized as 'authoritarian liberalism': the interests and protection of private property are elevated over the will of democratic majorities (Wilkinson 2021). The political content of European integration is therefore the opposite of national sovereignty, even if the formal shell of legal sovereignty ultimately remains intact and can be asserted, as Britain has now done.

The EU is therefore not an external imposition but rather the expression of an internal transformation: of the European nation-state into an EU member-state (see Figure 1.1). Historically, the nation-state was a vertically integrated political unit: its political direction and legitimacy stemmed from the constitutive relationship between political representatives (above) and citizens (below). Political parties, trade unions and civic associations provided ways for ordinary citizens to exert control over public life, while political elites drew their legitimacy and direction from

representing their constituents, offering contending visions of how society should be taken forwards. But as Peter Mair (2013) has shown, from the 1980s onwards, all across Europe elites have withdrawn into the state and citizens have withdrawn into private life. Electoral participation and membership in political parties and trade unions have collapsed. Political parties have ceased to represent their traditional constituents and to offer competing political projects, becoming mere electoral machines focused on office seeking (Crouch 2000). A yawning 'void' has opened up where the relations of democratic representation used to be. Political elites now look less to their own citizens for legitimation and policy direction than to their relations with each other, mediated through the EU and other international institutions (Bickerton 2012; Heartfield 2013). The basic parameters of social, economic and political life are defined – indeed, constitutionalized – in European treaties, and important policy decisions are increasingly made by bureaucrats and ministers in intergovernmental consultations, not in national parliaments or in response to domestic political contestation. The vertically integrated nation-state has been transformed into a horizontally integrated member-state (Bickerton 2012).

The Council's institutional supremacy illustrates that national elites have not simply 'lost' power to supranational bureaucracies, but instead exercise it differently. Elites assemble and deliberate with their peers in European institutions, setting EU policy, then return home to impose this domestically, using national bureaucracies and national judiciaries. Because EU Council meetings are held in secret, without even minutes being taken, leaders can agree to policies that would be impossible to ratify domestically, presenting them as a European fait accompli that cannot be resisted (Bickerton 2016: 37–41). National leaders 'equip themselves in Brussels with internationally binding mandates that they can then use against domestic political opponents, especially workers', allowing them to 'circumvent' domestic political opposition (Streeck 2014:

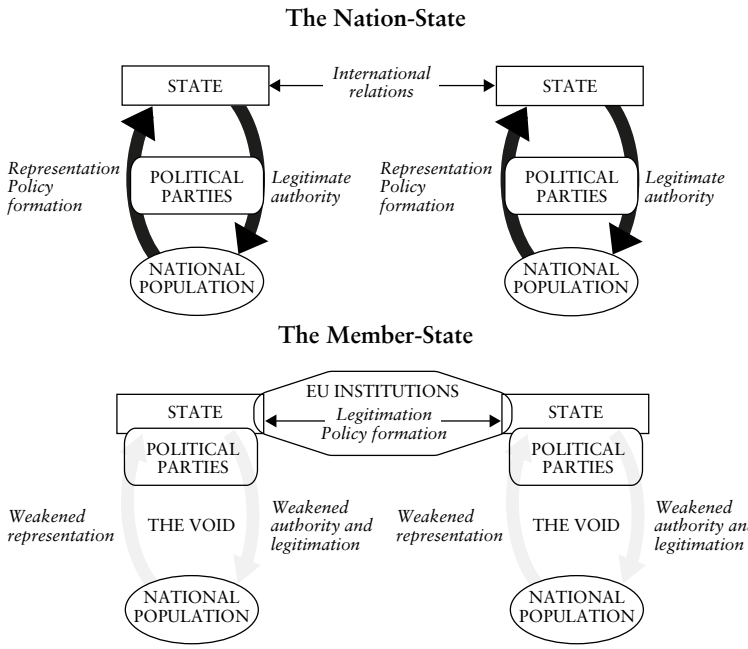

Figure 1.1 The Nation-State versus the Member-State

103–4). The EU's notorious 'democratic deficit' does not lie primarily in Brussels, therefore, but within its member-states. It is not a function of the weakness of the European Parliament so much as the weakness of national parliaments. Elected national leaders have 'transfer[red] some power to a supranational policy maker (thereby *appearing* weaker) in order to allow themselves to better withstand pressure from societal actors – first and foremost labour – by testifying that "this is Europe's will" (thereby becoming *stronger*)' (Mitchell and Fazi 2017: 145).

This fundamentally evasive character of member-statehood reveals why, contrary to the fears of conservative Eurosceptics, the EU is not and will not become a true European superstate. Member-statehood allows ruling elites to sidestep domestic political contestation and avoid accountability by shifting decision making to closed-door, inter-elite forums. The formation of a European superstate,

founded on a new European demos, would vitiate this evasion because people would rightly demand that any new state be established with a fully democratic, representative structure. Building a new superstate in Europe would make it very difficult to justify a neutered legislature, an over-mighty, unelected civil service, and ad hoc executive rule through a committee of regionally elected leaders. A new democratic constitution would instead entail direct elections for an accountable, sovereign parliament and government. But this would recreate the very problem that European elites are concerned to avoid: they would be forced to be responsive and accountable to their electors. The ideal shell for post-democratic, neoliberal politics is the member-state, not some putative superstate. The withered democratic structures of the member-state allow ruling elites to act with far greater impunity than either a traditional nation-state or a European superstate.

Nonetheless, as Bickerton (2012: 69) points out, while the EU member-state is 'hard', it is also 'hollow'. It is 'hard' because executives are strongly insulated from domestic political contestation. They are effectively empowered to make laws and decisions through consultations with their European counterparts rather than through debate in domestic parliaments or involving the wider public. Public policy making has thereby transformed into something closer to nineteenth-century-style diplomacy, conducted for the most part in secret (Anderson 2009). But this system is 'hollow' for precisely the same reason: as elites become more responsive to each other, their relationship with their own populations tends to wither. Every decision that national leaders return with from Brussels has the appearance of a 'foreign' imposition. With no choice available about the fundamental direction of society, political parties can no longer offer contending ideological visions of the public good or the national interest, only claims to manage the state bureaucracy better through minor, technocratic tweaks. The representative function of parliament is corroded as legislators cannot meaningfully channel any

popular grievances against the status quo, even if they wanted to. With fundamental decisions relocated elsewhere, national parliaments have become 'marginal to real politics', being left to debate 'issues that are more appropriate for a local council' (Edgerton 2018: 508).

The void at the heart of the member-state is deeply corrosive of their political authority and, therefore, of their national sovereignty. While EU member-states formally retain their *ultimate* legal autonomy – as Britain has proved, they *can* leave the EU, albeit with great difficulty – national sovereignty has more to it than that. Sovereignty has both legal and political dimensions but, at base, it is a quality of the relationship between the governors and the governed (Loughlin 2003). The state's sovereignty reflects the strength and character of the loyalty that citizens feel towards their institutions of self-government. Put simply, the state has authority insofar as the citizens believe it to be *their* state, its institutions having been authorized by them and acting on their behalf. This is what gives the state the power to enact and enforce laws: the people are satisfied that the state is acting with their consent, making them likelier to obey the law and to feel that the state's coercive power is legitimately deployed to enforce the law. Conversely, any weakening of this relationship between the citizenry and the state weakens sovereignty. The state may retain its formal powers but, insofar as the state fails to represent the citizenry, its law making appears arbitrary and its coercive powers merely authoritarian. Obedience may still be achieved, but fear plays an ever-greater role as political loyalty declines. It is this political aspect of sovereignty that has been overlooked by both Europhiles and Eurosceptics. Insofar as European integration has insulated law and government from democratic control, weakening their representative aspect, it has eroded member-states' domestic authority (Loughlin 2016). Consequently, while the legal shell of sovereignty remains, political sovereignty has ebbed away.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that mainstream opponents and proponents of EU membership largely misrepresent its true nature and, crucially, its relationship to democracy and sovereignty. Contrary to the claims of right-wing Eurosceptics and populists, the EU cannot be seen as some wholly foreign entity, sitting above nation-states and 'doing things' to them. Its core leadership comprises elected national leaders, and EU law is enforced primarily through domestic bureaucracies and judiciaries. Clearly, the EU is partially internal to its member-states. It is not an external imposition but a means by which national leaders have willingly tied their own hands and radically constricted the scope for their own domestic policy making. As chapter 2 will show, both Eurosceptics and Europhiles have played their own part in this process, making them incapable of recognizing the EU's true nature.

The EU is a de facto constitutional order for Europe. But, contrary to the claims of Europhiles, the content of this order is essentially anti-democratic authoritarian liberalism. The EU exists primarily to constitutionalize a neoliberal economic order – to prevent member-state governments from 'interfering' in or 'distorting' markets. Wolfgang Streeck (2014) has pointed out that the EU is, to a large extent, the regime envisaged by the founding father of neoliberalism, Friedrich Hayek. On the eve of the Second World War, Hayek (1939) called for European rules and institutions to enshrine free markets, which would 'limit to a great extent the scope of the economic policy of the individual states'. States would be stripped of their capacity to 'interfere' with 'economic life' – e.g., by protecting workers and raising taxes – while 'national organizations, whether trade unions, cartels, or professional associations', would lose the bargaining power derived from their 'monopolistic position'. The new European government would, Hayek insisted, be 'strictly limited in scope' because, unlike in

national communities, people would 'be reluctant to submit to any interference' by a remote government of multinational personnel. There could be no question of 'submission to the will of the majority', let alone 'socialist planning'. As Streeck comments (2014: 116), 'The purpose of the whole edifice . . . is to depoliticize the economy while at the same time de-democratizing politics.' In this sense, the EU has analogues in the World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Area and similar regional arrangements. Unlike them, however, it has cloaked itself in an aura of peace, progress and moral virtue – though one that, as we have shown, is thin at best.

When we see through this ideology, we see that the EU is really part of the transformation of European states under neoliberal globalization. It is simply the most developed example of broader attempts to govern global capitalism and the problems arising from it. In this system of regional or global governance, states do not lose their legal sovereignty to supranational bodies that intervene directly in their territories, as if they were colonies. Instead, political elites and technocrats agree agendas, rules and regulations internationally, and national institutions are required to impose these on domestic societies. In the EU and elsewhere, states therefore remain notionally 'sovereign' in a narrow, legal sense, and they may also remain formal democracies, in which the people still elect governments. But, because fundamental issues are increasingly decided in international forums, the scope for political contestation and popular control has narrowed dramatically. The question this raises is: why would democratically elected politicians willingly tie their own hands? Why would they limit their room for manoeuvre and their ability to respond flexibly to the demands of their own constituents? Why is there a void where their connection to the population used to be? Understanding this is the subject of our next chapter.

2
Voiding National Sovereignty

The story of European integration is normally told in terms of international treaties and expansions in its membership – from the 1957 Treaty of Rome, through the 1992 Maastricht Treaty to the 2008 Lisbon Treaty, and beyond. Applied to Britain, this story might plausibly feature Britain's shedding of empire and its post-imperial envy of Continental economic growth; De Gaulle's rebuffing of Britain's attempt to join the Common Market in 1967; Britain's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 and the 1975 referendum; Britain's forced exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992 – and so on. Such narratives suit both Eurosceptics and Europhiles because they primarily locate the motor of changes outside of Britain – whether as a bureaucratic, Continental project in which free-trading Britain was always a half-hearted participant, or as a blessed escape from Britain's shameful imperial past by institutionalizing cooperation with more progressive neighbours. But, as chapter 1 showed, the EU cannot be understood as something external to British politics. It is a mechanism by which democratically elected leaders have willingly sacrificed their autonomy.

This chapter explains why they did this. It underscores that Britain's transformation from a nation-state to an EU member-state was grounded not in changes in the state's external relations but in fundamental internal transformations of the British nation and its state structures. Drawing in particular on the work of James Heartfield (2013) and David Edgerton (2018), we tell this story historically, beginning with the immediate post-war decades. This period, marked by a commitment to national development and nationally based representative politics, entailed strong limitations on the extent of European integration, with the left especially hostile to any external fetters on democratic power. However, the neoliberal revolt of the 1980s effectively destroyed the project of national development and dealt mortal blows to national democracy by deliberately making the state less responsive to popular demands. This exhaustion and destruction of the post-war project was the necessary precondition for Britain's transformation into a member-state, where elites would willingly sacrifice their ability to pursue national economic and political objectives. The transformation cemented the epochal defeat of the organized working class and the political left, whose tattered remnants embraced neoliberalism and threw in their lot with the EU.

Building the nation

As Edgerton (2018) has convincingly argued, the truly *national* political history of Britain is surprisingly short, spanning the 1940s to the 1980s. Before the Second World War, the British state was more of an imperial entity than a national one. Its economy was remarkably globalized and its state structures, administration and elite attitudes were globally oriented, overwhelmingly liberal and cosmopolitan. Universal adult suffrage had only been established in 1928, and parliamentary politics, dominated by upper-class elites, was primarily focused on the empire and

free trade. Only under the post-war Labour government did British politics become decidedly national. Edgerton (2018: xixx) persuasively argues that Labour's 1945 election victory effectively marked a secession from a globalist, transnational structure. Before 1945, the idea of British nation was inextricably bound up with the British Empire, its 'nationhood' extending across the white dominions. In 1945, however, Britons turned away from Churchillian globalism in favour of a far more nationally oriented politics. Although both Conservative and Labour governments tried to keep the empire going as long as possible through the 1950s and 1960s, the people were far more interested in electing governments dedicated to improving domestic economic development, employment and living standards.

That Labour led this 'nationalization' of British politics will seem strange to many readers, given that most contemporary Labour politicians seem queasy about, if not positively antipathetic to, the idea of the British nation. But, as Edgerton shows, following a gradual split from social liberalism in the 1930s, by 1945 Labour was a firmly nationalist party – far more than a socialist one. Labour's critique of Britain's capitalist class in its manifestos of the 1940s and 1950s was not that they were capitalists, but that they were insufficiently British: they 'put themselves and their wishes above those of the whole nation'; conversely, Labour was 'the true party of the nation' which would 'put the nation first' by promoting economic development that would benefit all social classes (Edgerton 2018: 100–1, 194). By uniting much of the Scottish, English and Welsh working classes behind this vision, Labour fundamentally remade British politics. The pre-war, intra-elite, Liberal-versus-Conservative debates over empire and free trade were replaced by a class-based politics focused on questions of national development. As Edgerton observes:

> After 1945, there was a class-aligned politics which was national in new ways. The direction of the nation, [and] the definition of the national interest were the object of

> politics, and there was a national economy, and a national society, to direct . . . Each party presented itself as a national party, but in different ways . . . the Labour Party was now, and was long to be, the party of the national project, and the Conservative Party an uneasy mix of . . . empire, nation, free enterprise and, in the future, free trade. (Edgerton 2018: 43–4)

This 'national project' involved repurposing the wartime command-and-control systems for national economic planning, supported by the nationalization of strategic industries and utilities. Successive governments pursued the reduction of poverty and of regional and social disparities through industrial development, full employment and expanded welfare provision. This national project rose with the Labour Party and – as we shall see – also fell with it.

This period was also the peak of what Peter Mair (2013: 77–83) calls 'the century of mass politics'. In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, politics was characterized by mass-based political parties rooted in clearly defined social constituencies and a thriving associational life involving trade unions, churches and civic associations. Parties worked hard to cultivate 'natural' constituencies – the working classes for Labour, and the middle and business classes for the Conservatives – which produced a strong, mutual identification between the masses and the political elites representing their interests. The parties 'constituted the political voice of their constituencies, and derived both their strength and their legitimacy from that relationship' (Mair 2013: 81).

Underpinning these developments – which were mirrored elsewhere in Western Europe and North America – were important changes in the global political economy, geopolitics, and the balance of class forces. The Great Depression of the 1930s had been an existential crisis for free trade and liberal economic governance, spurring mounting calls for national protection and economic development. The mobilization for total war from 1939

to 1945 also demonstrated that laissez-faire was not inevitable, and that planning could be used to direct society's resources towards collective ends. The threat of fascism and communism also convinced even conservative elites that significant concessions to the masses were essential to stabilize capitalist societies and states. The result was the great post-war class compromise. Capitalists ceded to workers greater political and trade union rights, full employment guarantees, rising wages and greater public provision of social welfare. In exchange, workers would operate through established political institutions, resolve industrial disputes through state-backed mediation, and forswear more radical political alternatives. International organizations, like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, were initially designed to support this arrangement by fostering national economic development. Markets were thereby 'embedded' – subordinated to collective social and political purposes (Ruggie 1982).

In this post-war heyday of the nation-state, European integration was strictly limited. In Britain, Labour's attachment to national social democracy made it openly hostile to European institutions. It was the Conservatives who favoured supranationalism and market integration as a way to lock in liberal economic governance so as to limit the new-found political power of organized labour (Griffiths 1993: 13–17). Labour was openly hostile to such schemes. It denounced the Council of Europe as a cabal of 'reactionary politicians' who wanted to use a European Convention on Human Rights to outlaw socialist policies (Duranti 2017: 103–4, 247). Britain ratified the Convention only after the Conservatives returned to power, and Labour opposed the Strasbourg court's jurisdiction until 1966. Conservatives also saw joining the European Community as a way to perpetuate Britain's fading imperial glories. From the late 1950s, leading Tories and civil servants warned that Britain would otherwise become a mere 'greater Sweden', as Britain's chief negotiator put it (Tombs 2022: 26–34). It was Edward Heath's Conservative

government that took Britain into the European Economic Community (EEC), without a popular referendum – which only followed under a Labour government in 1975. British trade unions boycotted European institutions throughout the 1970s, while Labour Members of the European Parliament refused to take their seats (Heartfield 2013: 97).

Labour's opposition to European integration was boldly stated as a defence of democracy and popular sovereignty. Clement Attlee flatly insisted that his government would 'suffer nothing to hinder it in carrying out the popular will' (Laski 1948: 102). In its manifesto on European integration, the Labour Party (1950) stated that it 'could never accept any commitments which limited its own or others' freedom to pursue democratic socialism, and to apply the economic controls necessary to achieve it'. While it would welcome a true 'European economic Union . . . based on international planning for full employment, social justice and stability', Labour insisted that 'international planning can only operate on the basis of national planning', and yet 'many European governments have not shown either the will or the ability to plan their own economies'. Given the right-wing character and constitutional constraints of other European governments, Labour rejected calls for a 'supranational authority to impose agreements', as this could only mean an attempt to impose 'laisser fair' (*sic*) on Britain. Likewise, it dismissed calls for a European Parliament, which would inevitably be 'anti-Socialist or non-Socialist in character'. 'No Socialist Government in Europe could submit to the authority of a body whose policies were decided by an anti-Socialist majority.' Labour also scorned the Conservatives' tendency to promote economic integration with Europe at international conferences, while failing to even mention these proposals to voters, let alone seek their democratic approval.

Clearly, then, the period from the 1940s to the 1970s was an era in which the notion of national sovereignty was valorized by the left. Popular demands from the lower

classes were channelled by trade unions and the Labour Party they had founded. That party, wishing to control the state and its policies in the interests of its electors, rejected anything that would limit its ability to do so. The British nation-state was meaningfully sovereign, not simply in terms of its legal autonomy from external structures but also in terms of the political authority generated by this responsive, representative form of government. This situation was fundamentally transformed by the global crisis of capitalism during the 1970s, and the neoliberal revolt that followed.

De-nationalization

In the 1970s, faltering profit rates, sharp increases in oil prices, the collapse of fixed currency-exchange rates, and rising wages combined to produce a decade of stagflation. Business sought to defend its profits by hiking prices and trying to suppress wages. But organized labour, strengthened through years of state backing and full employment, was able to resist, sparking intense industrial conflict and a prolonged political and economic crisis. This was eventually resolved by the new right under Margaret Thatcher, which tore up the class compromise – and, with it, the national project of economic development.

The 1970s crisis was ultimately rooted in a fundamental contradiction in the post-war growth model. The Keynesian promise of full employment and rising living standards was always difficult for capitalists to accommodate. Without constant productivity growth, rising wages eventually squeeze businesses' profits, while full employment also strengthens trade unions and makes it very difficult to discipline workers (Kalecki 1943). Consequently, when deteriorating global economic conditions compounded a growing crisis of profitability, businesses found it difficult to restore their profits by sacking workers or cutting their wages, and instead increased prices. But, in response, the

powerful trade unions demanded wage increases to match inflation, triggering a prices–wages spiral. In response, capital went on strike: businesses refused to invest in conditions that did not allow for healthy profits, resulting in 'stagflation'. Open class struggle returned. Growing trade union militancy effectively toppled the Heath government in 1974 and drove its Labour successor leftwards, yielding substantial expansions in welfare provisions and the major concessions on workers' rights mentioned in chapter 1. The crisis could only be resolved in one of two ways. First, the economy could have been transformed by basing it on something other than the accumulation of capital – but this was a task for which the western left was ill prepared, having long since accommodated itself to capitalism. Second, profits could be restored by curtailing wage growth, but this required neutering the labour movement.

Politically, ruling elites experienced this period as a 'crisis of rising expectations', which needed suppressing through weakening national democracy. The Trilateral Commission – a highly influential think tank advising the major capitalist governments – argued that people were simply making too many demands of employers and the state, making it 'difficult if not impossible for democratic governments to curtail spending, increase taxes, and control prices and wages'. The 'operations of the democratic process . . . have generated a breakdown of traditional means of social control, and a de-legitimization of political and other forms of authority, and an overload of demands on government'. The solution, therefore, was to enforce 'moderation in democracy' and the disengagement – 'non-involvement' – of civil society, including trade unions, from the political system; 'apathy' was preferable to uncontrollable militancy (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki 1975: 8, 40, 113–14, 164).

The 'new right' Thatcher government, elected in 1979, eventually resolved the crisis in precisely this way. Under Thatcher's leadership, the Conservatives tore up the post-war settlement. They launched a full-scale offensive against

the labour movement. Thatcher deliberately pursued recessionary policies that created mass unemployment to break the unions' power, and inflicted decisive defeats on striking workers, most notably the coalminers in 1984. Corporatist institutions were dismantled, expelling the unions from their footholds in the state, while new laws restricted their power to strike. The government also reduced what rudimentary popular control had been established over the economy after 1945 by privatizing state-owned enterprises, deregulating the economy and abolishing capital controls, allowing businesses to evade national constraints to invest overseas (Glyn 2007). Expanding the power of capital over workers necessarily involved destroying the old project of national development. Thatcher and her neoliberal allies 'believed in free trade and letting the private sector decide on investments, what machinery to buy, where to locate, and so on. The nation, as had been the case for the Liberals of old, should not be a factor' (Edgerton 2018: 447–8). In what Edgerton (2018: 442) calls the 'rulers' revolt' against the post-war settlement, the Tories promoted 'the transformation of the nation-state into a "competition state"', crafting institutions devoted not to national development but the promotion of international competitiveness (Cerny 1997: 251).

By the end of the 1980s, the defeated Labour Party had been converted to the same cause. Between 1974 and 1979, Labour governments had actually experimented with proto-neoliberal policies, imposing wage restraint and cutting spending in an attempt to restore capitalist profitability, even calling in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to give it cover. The left of the party fought a rearguard action, seizing the leadership under Michael Foot and fighting the 1983 election on a socialist manifesto. But in truth they had no real answer to the exhaustion of the post-war growth model, only doubling down on demonstrably failed policies. Under Neil Kinnock, and then Tony Blair, Labour effectively capitulated to Thatcher's insistence that 'there is no alternative' to the market. The

party abandoned its commitment to public ownership and national development, embracing neoliberalism. A similar process occurred across the advanced capitalist democracies and, with the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, this seemed to herald the 'end of history': the collapse of the left-vs-right ideological contestation that had hitherto animated political life (Fukuyama 1989).

The neoliberal revolt is what caused the voiding of representative democracy which, as noted in chapter 1, is the hallmark of the European member-state. In the early post-war decades, political parties had represented defined social constituencies, translating their interests into competing visions of how society should be organized. In the neoliberal era, all parties converged on a neoliberal agenda, in which social and economic transformation is seen as impossible. They competed not over contending visions of the future but rather over who is the most efficient administrator of the status quo. With ideological conflict and choice eradicated, political life contracted to technocratic questions of public policy. Parties no longer represent defined social constituencies, rooted in unions, churches or civic associations. They have detached themselves from their former bases, pitching to the centre ground and cultivating 'floating' voters through manifestos designed with the help of pollsters and focus groups. Increasingly delinked from the masses, the parties were hollowed out, becoming mere electoral machines, dominated by blandly similar, professional politicians. As Mair (2013: 89) observed, as elites retreated from their representative functions, 'What remains is a governing class'.

Abandoned by and disillusioned with their traditional representatives, citizens increasingly withdrew into private life, with electoral turnout, party membership, and other forms of political participation all collapsing (Mair 2013). The working class had particular reason to feel abandoned by the Labour Party as it moved rightwards and pitched to 'middle England'. By 2001, only 10 per cent of people felt that Labour represented working-class interests, while

48 per cent felt it was a middle-class party (Evans and Menon 2017: 29). This was clearly reflected in the party's changing membership and personnel. Whereas half of the first post-war Labour Cabinet had been manual workers, by the 2010s, just 3 per cent of Labour MPs came from a working-class background (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018: 107). Trade union membership collapsed from 21 per cent of the population in 1981 to just 8 per cent by 2000, now mostly in middle-class, white-collar unions (Heartfield 2013: 34). From a post-war peak of over a million in the 1950s, Labour Party membership withered to less than 180,000 by 2008. But the social bases of Conservatism, in the church and local Conservative Associations, also shrivelled. Conservative Party membership, nearly three million in the 1950s, plunged to around 160,000 by the 2010s (Bale, Webb and Poletti 2020: 8). Where once people had seen politicians, and the state they governed, as representing them, now they perceived a self-interested 'political class' (Allen 2018).

Ruling the void

The assault on post-war representative democracy has fundamentally transformed how elites govern society. Originally, they drew legitimacy and policy direction from their claim to represent particular societal interests, translating their demands and desires into an ideological vision of the national interest, and state action to implement that vision. With the shift to neoliberalism, elites instead rationalized their activity with reference to technical expertise and economic imperatives. This entailed a transformation in the way state power is organized, and that in turn encouraged European integration as a way for national elites to rule over the political void.

The hallmark of neoliberal governance is the depoliticization and de-democratization of public life (Crouch 2000). Issues that were once contested between parties

offering contending visions of the future are now mostly settled or reframed as purely technical questions (and, more recently, as cultural disputes). When there is no alternative to the market, the only remaining questions relate to the efficient regulation of market behaviour; and these are best left to experts. This entails a shift of decision-making power away from elected politicians towards agencies not under democratic control. As Tony Blair's constitutional reform minister, Lord Falconer, put it:

> What governs our approach is a clear desire to place power . . . not with [elected] politicians but with those best fitted in different ways to deploy it. Interest rates are not set by politicians in the Treasury, but by the Bank of England. Minimum wages are not determined by the Department of Trade and Industry, but by the Low Pay Commission. Membership of the House of Lords will be determined not in Downing Street but in an independent Appointments Commission (cited in Flinders and Buller 2006: 312).

Similarly, control over nationalized health care has been devolved to independent 'arms-length bodies', while the provision of public goods and services – from health care and utilities to transportation and higher education – is increasingly undertaken by private providers overseen by independent sectoral regulators (Leys 2001; Flinders and Buller 2006).

The effect of this reorganization of state power is to place vast swathes of decision making beyond the reach of democratic politics. This partly reflects neoliberal politicians' ideological belief that this is more efficient and beneficial for society. But it is also an attempt to lock in a particular set of policies while evading responsibility for their social and economic consequences. By outsourcing decision making to unelected bodies, ruling elites sought to move to an indirect governing relationship with citizens, trying to persuade them that elected politicians could '*no longer be reasonably held responsible*' for vast swathes of public policy (Flinders and Buller 2006: 296, original

emphasis). Elected politicians have deliberately made themselves powerless to enact change in order to avoid having to change anything. This allows them to ignore social demands and grievances while maintaining their position and status – just as the Trilateral Commission had recommended.

There is a crucial international or transnational dimension to these developments, the most important of which is the EU. Neoliberal governments have found that the 'externalization' of decision making complements their domestic efforts to de-democratize their societies. From the 1990s in particular, regional or global 'governance' institutions have proliferated, covering everything from trade, finance and banking to health, education and social policy. Contrary to conspiracy theories surrounding a 'new world order', this does not involve the establishment of a world government or organization with truly supranational, sovereign authority. Rather, it entails the development of technocratically determined 'best practices', rules, regulations and policy templates, which elites then enact in their respective domestic jurisdictions, with international organizations evaluating their progress against various metrics and benchmarks (Hameiri and Jones 2016). These arrangements do not take power away from state officials so much as change how that power is exercised. Although policy development and benchmarking may now include international organizations' bureaucracies, national elites and officials typically remain centrally involved. But, rather than developing policies through the process of representing their domestic constituents, they develop them through dialogue with one another, agreeing goals, processes and rules that they then impose upon their societies. The outward form of the nation-state persists, but governments increasingly take their direction and draw legitimacy from their relations with one another, rather than with their own citizens.

For politicians who are committed to neoliberal stasis, the benefit of this 'externalization' of policy making is

twofold. First, these transnational policy-making spaces are even further removed from democratic control than domestic regulatory bodies. Second, they provide an external force onto which blame can be shifted, allowing domestic resistance to be circumvented: national politicians can claim to be powerless to enact change because this or that international body sets the rules. An early example of this in the British context is the Labour government's turn to the IMF in 1976. At this time, the Labour right was seeking to impose wage restraint and spending cuts, which the left was resisting. The Callaghan government chose to bring in the IMF, which would impose these policies in exchange for a bridging loan, allowing it to 'override . . . mounting political opposition by presenting austerity as the only way forward' (Mitchell and Fazi 2017: 69).

The EU is simply the most advanced mechanism through which national elites have willingly tied their own hands in order to rule the void left by the demise of representative democracy. Particularly since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, European integration has been 'a process of self-imposed reduction of sovereignty by national elites aimed at constraining the ability of popular-democratic powers to influence economic policy, thus enabling the imposition of neoliberal policies that would otherwise not have been politically feasible' (Mitchell and Fazi 2017: 145).

But this was only possible once domestic political contestation had been neutralized. As noted earlier, the right had always favoured Hayekian-style European integration but it had been constrained by domestic demands for national development and by resistance from the left. Despite her later reputation as a Eurosceptic, Margaret Thatcher also pursued this policy: she campaigned strongly to remain within the EEC in the 1975 referendum, and enthusiastically championed the 1986 Single Market Act, which promoted a unified European market for goods, services, capital and labour. Conversely, left-Eurosceptics like Tony Benn, Barbara Castle and Peter Shaw backed withdrawal from the EEC on the grounds that, as Attlee

and others had argued, it would block socialist policies to address Britain's economic crisis. Their defeat in the 1975 referendum allowed Labour's then prime minister, Harold Wilson, to demote Benn and dilute his plans for greater state ownership and investment (Mitchell and Fazi 2017: 65). Michael Foot's 1983 manifesto again called for withdrawal from the EEC – but failed in the wake of Thatcher's victory in the 1982 Falklands War.

The left's eventual capitulation to European integration stemmed directly from its domestic defeat. Bloodied by the Thatcherite onslaught, in 1988 the Trades Union Congress assembled to hear Jacques Delors, president of the European Commission, offer them salvation. Delors promised to insert a 'social chapter' into the Maastricht Treaty, which would ensure social protections alongside market integration. Fearing total defeat at home, the unions threw in their lot with Europe (Heartfield 2013: 98–9). Ironically, the idea of 'social Europe' laid the foundation both for left-liberal Europhilia and conservative Euroscepticism. Delors' proposals horrified Thatcher, who insisted that she had 'not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European superstate exercising a new dominance from Brussels' (Thatcher 1988). She and her successor John Major fought ferociously – and successfully – to weaken the 'social chapter' and secure opt-outs for Britain. Defeated at home, the British left was clinging to a European life raft that was already full of holes. But, equally, some Conservatives had realized the risks of pursuing de-democratization through European integration: because this project was not under their exclusive control, it might develop in ways they disliked. The right was nonetheless so committed to European integration as a way of locking in its neoliberal policies that it was prepared to ditch Thatcher when she appeared to turn against it. When her increasingly strident Euroscepticism 'threatened a key policy of the Conservative elite, and the business elite – engagement in the EEC – she was forced

out', her downfall triggered by the resignation of Europhile Cabinet ministers over her opposition to Britain joining the Exchange Rate Mechanism and moves towards a common currency (Edgerton 2018: 437, 447).

The Tories genuinely believed that their neoliberal revolt was necessary to restore Britain's national greatness. But by tearing up the post-war settlement, they were also destroying the British nation as a political association. They abandoned the national project, through which the masses had found representation in the state, but could only replace it with EU member-statehood – an evasive method of ruling the void they had created. Their conservative 'restoration' actually entailed the destruction of the institutions through which Britain had once represented itself as a nation. The crushing of the unions and Labour Party destroyed the channels through which millions of working people had been incorporated into national politics. Attempts to reincorporate them through imperial flag-waving came to naught. Thatcher's victory over Argentina in the Falklands, a full-scale international war over some sparsely inhabited moorland in the South Atlantic, only proved how long gone the British Empire really was. The attempts by Thatcher and her successor John Major to revive 'Victorian values' also came to nothing. Major's government remained mired in sleaze, while societal attitudes on racial, sex and homosexual equality only became more liberal. The monarchy, once an august symbol of national order and greatness, was reduced in dignity only to the person of Elizabeth II, as the wider royal family degenerated into an unedifying soap opera. The Church of England, once dubbed the Tory Party at prayer, also withered. The United Kingdom itself was visibly fraying by the late 1980s, with continued war in Northern Ireland and de-industrialization spurring demands for devolution in Scotland. Even British business failed to prosper in this new, harshly competitive world. As Edgerton (2018: 469) notes, 'Global capitalism was unleashed into the United Kingdom, but British capitalism itself suffered. What had

been unleashed was not British entrepreneurial genius, but that of foreigners'.

For the Tories, the EU provided not only the means of governing this widening void where associational life and representative politics used to be, but also a means to evade responsibility for their actions. The EU's Thatcherism-in-one-continent necessarily entailed that markets, while liberated from democratic control nationally, would nonetheless require regulation at the continental level. This created the appearance of a meddling 'Brussels bureaucracy' which would, moreover, be controlled only partially by the British government. And it would allow Thatcherites to displace their frustration at – and avoid responsibility for – the world they had created by endlessly blaming 'Europe' for Britain's social and economic woes. This persistent and contradictory disgruntlement – ultimately grounded in political evasion – was the source of the Euroscepticism that would steadily erode the Conservatives' cohesion and political support, leading ultimately to the 2016 EU referendum.

Ultimately, it was New Labour, not the Conservatives, who provided the government best suited to member-statehood. By 1997, Labour under Tony Blair had liberated itself from the party's old commitment to socialism, fully accepting the basic parameters of neoliberalism. Indeed, Blair pushed this agenda where even Thatcher had feared to tread, advancing the marketization and privatization of health care and education, and accelerating the transfer of power to unelected authorities. By 'externalizing' policy making, EU membership helped to cover Labour's retreat from social democracy (Bonefeld and Burnham 1996; Bonefeld 2002). The effect of this, concealed beneath repeated electoral successes amid dwindling turnout, was that Labour lost five and a half million voters from 1997 to 2010 as working-class voters, feeling abandoned by the party, abandoned it in turn.

New Labour was also unconstrained by the Tories' threadbare imperial nationalism with European cosmo-

politanism providing moral cover for Blair to abandon Labour's old national project (Glasman 2016). Blair's ideological guru, Anthony Giddens (1998), had correctly observed that the old ideologies of left and right were exhausted. In their place, he promoted a 'Third Way', in which the state's role was not to transform society but to help citizen-consumers realize their individual identities. Europe became a source of cosmopolitan values and consumption for the burgeoning middle class to which New Labour turned for electoral support. In contrast to the fusty old nation and outdated notions of economic nationalism and social class, Europe offered 'café culture' and 'modernization'. Britain was repositioned as less a nation than a global brand: 'Cool Britannia'. Liberated from the petty, parochial concerns of the working class, Blair also pursued a post-imperial globalist agenda, championing further European integration, EU and NATO expansion, and 'humanitarian' military interventions from Africa through the Balkans to the Middle East.

Where Thatcher had destroyed the post-war national project but failed to revive older national traditions, so Blair's abandonment of Labour's old state socialism for neoliberalism corroded popular loyalty to the most important institution through which Britons had represented themselves as a sovereign nation-state: parliament. As meaningful ideological competition between the parliamentary parties ended, partisan loyalty collapsed. After the 2008 global financial crisis, the parties had nothing to offer the public beyond different shades of austerity, while the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal firmly cemented the cynical popular view that MPs were only in politics for their personal gain. The hung parliament of 2010 expressed the loss of public faith in all the main parties. Prime Minister David Cameron, the self-styled heir to Blair, doubled down on neoliberalism through austerity, deepening the rot. By the time of Brexit, only the battered National Health Service, the emergency services and the armed forces still commanded overwhelming popularity

as *national* institutions, although the royal family also remained popular with a smaller majority. Barely a third of the population rated parliament (M. Smith 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter has traced Britain's particular transformation from a democratic nation-state into a post-democratic member-state. A comparable story can be told of other Western European countries, notwithstanding their unique national trajectories (Heartfield 2013: 81–103). The common theme in all cases is that the apparent strength of European integration is actually a result of the weakening of domestic democratic politics. When Britain had a lively and fraught national democracy, European integration was necessarily limited, because politicians – especially on the left – needed flexibility to respond to the demands of domestic constituents and pursue the project of national economic development. The British state was not merely legally but also politically sovereign, drawing authority from the political parties' representation of the citizenry. Thatcher's neoliberal revolt destroyed this arrangement, paving the way for the rise of member-statehood. To defuse growing working-class demands and restore the conditions for capitalist profitability, the labour movement was smashed and the state de-democratized. Decision making was increasingly de-politicized and hived off to non-democratic institutions, allowing neoliberal politicians to evade responsibility for social and economic outcomes. The externalization of policy making, most notably through the EU, mirrored and reinforced this de-politicization and de-democratization of public life. European integration is the way in which post-democratic elites have sought to rule the void left by the decline of representative democracy.

Although the EU has cemented the victory of neoliberalism on a continental scale, this has come at tremendous political and social cost. By placing all major questions

of political, economic and social life beyond the scope of democratic contestation, European integration has made 'There is no alternative' the national motto of every member-state. But the voiding of representative democracy has simultaneously undermined nation-states as political communities and fatally undermined traditional political parties. Across Europe, as politicians retreated into the state and international institutions, they have lost the authority they once derived from representing the people. Feeling abandoned and resentful, citizens withdrew from political life, their relations with ruling elites increasingly characterized by mutual hostility and contempt (Guilluy 2019: 103–5). Through the 1990s and 2000s, there was mounting establishment alarm at political disengagement and anti-political sentiment (Hay 2013). Despite the veneer of stability and elite consensus, this was a political system in serious decay.

This decay eventually led to an electoral revolt against member-statehood. In the void between rulers and ruled, populist challengers began to flourish – first the British National Party and then, more significantly, the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Initially, UKIP voters were overwhelmingly disgruntled ex-Conservatives but, by the 2010s, two-thirds were defectors from other political parties, reflecting generalized disaffection with the entire political class (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017: 143). UKIP channelled growing anger at politicians' failure to represent citizens' concerns over economic stagnation, public services and immigration. Moreover, it rightly linked this unresponsiveness to Britain's EU membership – albeit in the misleading form of Euroscepticism, misrepresenting the EU as a foreign bureaucracy, rather than an expression of domestic elites' retreat from democratic representation. By 2005, all of Britain's major political parties felt compelled to promise a popular referendum on any further transfer of powers to European institutions (Evans and Menon 2017: 8). When Gordon Brown reneged on this promise in 2008 by signing the Lisbon Treaty

(containing a reworked EU constitution, rejected by voters in France and the Netherlands) without a referendum, this emblematized a haughty elite determined to ignore their own voters. UKIP went on to win the 2014 European Parliament elections, seize hundreds of local council seats and attract two defecting Tory MPs. This existential threat to the Conservatives forced David Cameron to promise an in/out referendum in his 2015 manifesto (Oliver 2017: 395).

The stage was set for Brexit. Far from expressing some kind of cunning right-wing plot, as some liberals and leftists misleadingly claim, the 2016 EU referendum actually arose from the internal contradictions and limits of member-statehood. Elites had evaded national democracy and accountability by relocating decision making to international forums, but they had not re-founded their authority on a new European demos underpinning a new European superstate. To do so would only have recreated the problems of democratic accountability from which they were trying to escape at home. The member-state was instead a halfway house: the old institutions of national democracy remained, but hollowed out and bypassed, while elites drew policy inspiration and legitimacy from one another. This could only be a recipe for popular alienation and anger, which would eventually find electoral expression.

3
The Vote

On 23 June 2016, on a turnout of 72.2 per cent, British citizens voted to leave the European Union by 51.9 to 48.1 per cent. Defying pollsters' predictions, the result sent shockwaves through the political and cultural establishment and triggered a prolonged political crisis. How this crisis eventually played out is the subject of the next chapter. This chapter focuses on reactions to the vote itself, and what they revealed about Britain's hollowed-out national democracy.

We start with a brief account of the referendum campaigns and how these reflected the dynamics described in chapters 1 and 2. Eurosceptics' inability to recognize the true anti-democratic character of the EU, and their own culpability for it, led the Leave campaigns to neglect the EU itself and focus overwhelmingly on immigration. Remainers were unable to make a positive case for the undemocratic and unreformable EU, and instead crafted a campaign based on fear and political disengagement. The voters' rejection of the Remain campaign – that had been supported by almost the entire British establishment – also illustrated the withered ties between that establishment and the wider population, especially in contrast to the 1975 referendum.

Rather than reflecting on this void and what might be done to fill it, however, the dominant response was horror and repudiation. There were immediate calls to ignore or rerun the vote, including in Parliament itself. These were supported by the liberal cultural establishment. Reflecting their own isolation and alienation from the Leave-voting masses, they could only understand the referendum result as a display of ignorance, gullibility and racism. Far from explaining the vote, these narratives were fundamentally about de-legitimizing it. They were expressions of the voiding of national democracy discussed in chapter 2, as those on the elite side of the void recoiled from their fellow citizens.

Finally, we explain why Leave voters did support exiting the EU. We argue that immigration was central to debates over Britain's EU membership, not because of xenophobia or racism – which all evidence shows to have been in steady decline over decades – but because it was where the political void between rulers and ruled had crystallized most clearly. Leavers voted for greater democracy and accountability – the very thing that ultra-Remainers were determined to deny them.

Campaigning in the void

The most striking aspect of the referendum campaign was how little the realities of the EU were actually discussed. The Remain side concentrated almost entirely on predicting catastrophe should Britain leave. The Leave campaigns offered a more positive vision of the future but, reflecting their predominantly right-wing Euroscepticism, they grasped neither the EU's true nature nor its connection to domestic democratic decay. They also struggled to rebut Remain's 'Project Fear', and they spent most of their time discussing free trade and immigration.

The Remain campaign leaders, apparently recognizing that the EU was a fundamentally elitist project, had no

positive case to make for staying within it. As long-serving British Eurocrat Ivan Rogers (2017) observed, continued membership was a hard sell for the Thatcherites who had once championed European integration because market integration had stalled and the EU's attention was fixated on the Eurozone crisis, at the cost of non-Eurozone members. Meanwhile, public support for European integration, never particularly strong in the first place, had been eroded by mass immigration following EU expansion into Eastern Europe, the case for which 'was never really made to the public' (Rogers 2017). In a sign of just how rigid the EU's economic constitution is, Prime Minister David Cameron failed to persuade his fellow leaders to change the EU's migration rules in the run-up to the referendum, leaving him to spin a few minor concessions as a 'reformed EU'. In short, 'the defenders of the *ancien régime* could no longer mount a defence . . . that worked even in their own world'; they 'could not marshal . . . convincing arguments to remain' (Rogers 2017). Cameron privately admitted that he was asking people to endorse 'immigration levels they don't want and an EU they don't love' (Oliver 2017: 320).

Remainers consequently fell back on the time-honoured politics of the void, combining fear, machine politics and technocracy while relying on continued voter disengagement. In the neoliberal era, fear has increasingly been used to manipulate voters as politicians can no longer rely on partisan loyalties or rally support through offering competing visions of society (Furedi 2007; Ramsay 2012). Another consequence of the void is that political leaders, lacking organic relationships with electors, increasingly rely on polling, focus groups and strategists to discern what the public think, and they devise campaigns accordingly, focusing narrowly on biddable 'swing' voters (Mair 2013: 84). A final element is the dominance of technocracy over representation. All of these tendencies manifested in the Remain campaign. Their polling suggested that around a quarter of people were swing voters, who would most

Box 3.1 Remainer Campaign Predictions vs Reality

Prediction	Reality
Immediate recession and loss of 1.5 to 5.5 per cent of GDP by 2019 (International Monetary Fund)	No recession; GDP rose continuously until the COVID-19 pandemic
Immediate £30bn tax hikes and spending cuts if Leave won (Treasury, Chancellor George Osborne)	No emergency budget; government spending rose from £756.8bn to £810.2bn from 2016 to 2019
Budgetary 'black hole' would prolong austerity by two years due to £20–40bn in lost tax revenue (Institute for Fiscal Studies)	Tax receipts increased continuously until COVID-19 pandemic, from £568bn in 2015–16 to £633.4bn in 2019–20
Brexit induced recession would be 'very dangerous' for NHS (NHS Chief Executive Simon Stevens), forcing budget cuts (Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt)	NHS spending increased from £113.7bn to £125.3bn from 2016 to 2019
Households would be £3,700 poorer (Confederation of British Industry) or £4,300 worse off in 15 years (government pamphlet)	Average real-terms household disposable income grew 0.7 per cent from 2016 to 2021
Averages wages would fall £38 per week by 2030 (Trades Union Congress [TUC])	Average weekly wages rose by £44 from June 2016 to December 2019
Unemployment would increase by 520,000–820,000 (Treasury, Prime Minister David Cameron) or to 8 per cent (Cameron)	From June 2016 to January 2020, one million additional jobs were created; the employment rate rose from 74.5 to 76.6 per cent
50,000 manufacturing jobs would be lost (Alan Johnson, head of Labour's Remain campaign)	Manufacturing employment rose by 92,000 from 2016 to 2019
Workers' rights to holidays, maternity leave, equal pay and treatment 'at risk' (Cameron, TUC)	No change to workers' rights, which all pre-existed and exceeded EU minimums

Box 3.1 (*cont.*)

Prediction	Reality
House prices would fall by 10–18 per cent (Treasury, Osborne)	House prices increased by an average of 4.1 per cent per year from 2016 to 2021
Trade would fall by £250bn (ex-Chancellor Alistair Darling)	By May 2021, monthly UK trade was £7.3bn higher than in June 2016
Risk to peace in Western Europe (Cameron)	No wars in Western Europe
'[T]he destruction of not only the EU but also Western political civilization in its entirety' (EU Council President Donald Tusk)	EU (sadly) still exists; western civilization still intact

Sources: Allen (2016); Mason and Osborne (2016); Dickson (2017); Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017: 37–8, 44–5, 49–52); HM Treasury (2019); IBISWorld (2021); Office for National Statistics (2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2021f); Steerpike (2021); HM Revenue & Customs (2021)

likely be convinced by 'cold, hard economic facts'. This led Remainers to devise a campaign based entirely on the risks of leaving the EU (Oliver 2017: 84; also 42, 114, 252, 293, 310, 378). This involved increasingly outlandish predictions of immediate disaster if Britain were to leave. Many of these were disproven (see Box 3.1), with economic disaster only following the COVID-19 lockdowns and the escalating war in Ukraine. However, Project Fear clearly influenced many Remain voters (see Table 3.1). The entire campaign, resting heavily on technocratic experts rather than the degraded authority of politicians, emblematized politics at the end of history. Elites unable to offer any inspiring vision of the future can justify stasis only by claiming that 'any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion' (Fisher 2009: 5). Indeed, Remain's success actively relied on continued popular despair. It was critical that those citizens who had ceased voting – because they believed 'that nothing they can do will change anything'

Table 3.1 Exit Polling: Voters' Own Explanations Compared

Remain	*Leave*
The risks of voting to leave the EU looked too great when it came to things like the economy, jobs and prices – 43 per cent	The principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK – 49 per cent
Access to the Single Market, while out of the euro and no-borders area, giving the best of both worlds – 31 per cent	Voting to Leave offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders – 33 per cent
A feeling that we would become more isolated by leaving – 17 per cent	Remaining meant little or no choice about how the EU expanded its membership or powers – 13 per cent

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls (2016)

– remained disengaged since these voters favoured Brexit by 18 per cent (Oliver 2017: 274, also 384).

The Leave campaigns – Vote Leave, fronted by Tories Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, and Leave.EU, led by UKIP's Nigel Farage – tried to offer a more positive prospect of life outside the EU, but this was limited by their shared Thatcherite ideology. As we saw in chapter 2, the left had abandoned its opposition to European integration, leaving Euroscepticism as the property of Thatcherites. Their critique of the EU hinged entirely on cost–benefit analyses for the British economy (Hannan 2016). First, unlike most other member-states, Britain traded more with non-EU countries than EU economies, and the trend was towards greater divergence. Second, the British economy is heavily services dominated, and yet the EU's progress in liberalizing trade in services was slow. Third, the United Kingdom had shared cultural, linguistic and legal traditions with a wider 'Anglosphere'. Consequently, Britain often had fundamentally different interests to Continental member-states and was repeatedly being outvoted on key matters, despite being the second-largest budgetary contributor – a fact underscored by

Cameron's failure to secure any major concessions in his renegotiation of British membership in 2015–2016. In its own narrow terms, the Eurosceptics' argument was persuasive. Indeed, elite Remainers themselves admitted that they could not muster convincing counter-arguments, and many also opposed further European integration (Rogers 2017; Daddow 2018). This was why they had so little to motivate voters beyond Project Fear. The trouble for the Eurosceptics, however, was that most voters cared little about international trade. Thatcherites had nothing to offer them but more doses of the neoliberal medicine that had already sickened them: more deregulation, freer trade, and more economic integration with the Commonwealth. Just 6 per cent of people supported the Thatcherite vision of 'Singapore-on-Thames' against large majorities favouring higher taxes and spending (Eaton 2018).

To gain popular support, therefore, the Leave campaigns were compelled to broaden their appeal, connecting EU membership to a wider set of popular grievances. Vote Leave's slogan, 'Take back control', raised wider themes of democracy, sovereignty and control over daily life, which clearly resonated with voters in a way that trade simply did not (see Table 3.1). Leave.EU, having grown out of UKIP, already had experience of making this connection between wider grievances and Britain's EU membership. But the establishment Vote Leave campaign was also driven in the same direction. Led by Tory Cabinet ministers, Vote Leave ended up attacking the Tory government's own record. The 'experts' who had previously been relied upon to tell us that there was no alternative to austerity now had to be dismissed because they were prophesying disaster if people voted Leave. After years of running down the National Health Service (NHS), Vote Leave had to promise higher healthcare spending. And, despite wanting to ignore immigration, they were pushed into addressing it. This was very far from being an inspiring vision for post-Brexit Britain. Nonetheless, the very act of campaigning for a sharp break with the status quo forced Vote Leave into a populist

attack on the old order of which they were still very much part.

This populist turn was especially marked with respect to immigration, which only deepened the rancour and polarization emerging from the campaign. Increasingly hammered on economic questions by the Remain side, Vote Leave was forced to campaign on immigration, implausibly claiming, for example, that Turkey would soon join the EU, unleashing more migrants into Europe. Leave.EU unveiled an infamous 'Breaking Point' poster depicting migrants crossing into Europe, which critics immediately likened to Nazi propaganda. On the same day, the Remain-supporting Labour Member of Parliament (MP) Jo Cox was killed by a far-right fanatic. This shocking event cemented the view of many Remainers that the referendum had become a 'battle for the soul of the country' between decent, 'sensible' people who favoured 'openness' and respect for experts, and those who preferred to 'seal themselves off and walk away' (Oliver 2017: 292, 360). Project Fear expanded into warnings of rampant racism and even fascism if Leave won (Seymour 2016; Toynbee 2016). To avoid appearing racist, it was necessary to vote Remain (Srivastava 2018).

The vote itself was a striking rejection of the political class, and indeed the wider intellectual, cultural and business elite that campaigned for Remain. With the sole exception of UKIP, every major political party – and 75 per cent of parliamentarians – had campaigned to Remain (Press Association 2016). They had been backed by big business, the Treasury, the Bank of England, all the universities, 90 per cent of academics, retired military and spy chiefs, the International Monetary Fund, and the president of the United States, to name but a few. Still, 52 per cent of voters – comprising a majority in 63 per cent of electoral constituencies – had voted to leave (Hanretty 2017). This included 2.8 million habitual non-voters, many of whom voted for the first time. The Labour politician Roy Jenkins had famously explained the 'Yes' vote in the 1975

referendum on EEC membership by saying that 'the people took the advice of people they were used to following'. In 2016, reflecting the void that had emerged between rulers and ruled, far fewer citizens were used to following anyone. Nor were voters confident that their elected representatives would do as they instructed. Just a quarter expected a Leave vote would lead to an unconditional departure from the EU, while a startling 26 per cent – and 46 per cent of Leavers – expected the referendum to be rigged (Dahlgreen 2015; Bienkov 2016). The vote laid bare the enormous gulf between the electorate and the political elite.

Slandering the voters

The Remain elite's response to the referendum arguably justified many Leavers' suspicions. Labour MPs almost immediately called on Parliament to ignore the result and filed motions for a second referendum (Davies 2016; Lammy 2016). By 29 June, four million people had signed a petition demanding a rerun of the vote. In the months and years that followed, Remainer legislators and businesspeople would launch legal challenges designed to frustrate Brexit, while a 'People's Vote' campaign demanded another referendum to overturn the first.

These manoeuvres were justified by a relentless attack on Leave voters' intellect and morality by politicians, journalists, academics and cultural figures. The tone was set immediately after the referendum by the *New Statesman*'s contributing editor, Laurie Penny, in a column entitled 'I want my country back'. Penny argued that Leave had 'lied about their key campaign statements', bamboozling foolish voters. 'Well done turkeys', she sneered, 'Santa's on his way'. She also characterized the vote as a 'referendum on the modern world' in which

> prejudice, propaganda, naked xenophobia and callous fear-mongering have won out over . . . common sense . . .

> [T]he frightened, parochial lizard-brain of Britain voted out . . . There's a precedent for what happens when Svengalis with aggressively terrible haircuts are allowed to appeal to parochialism and fear in the teeth of a global recession . . . I'm no longer at all worried about risking hyperbole or unoriginality when referencing all that Nazi history . . . I'm just frightened. I'm frightened that those who wanted 'their' country back will get their wish, and it will turn out to be a hostile, inhospitable place for immigrants, ethnic minorities, queer people . . . tens of millions are going to suffer. Real people are going to hurt. Real people are going to die . . . it won't be long before a new Kristallnacht . . . (Penny 2016)

In short, Leave voters were idiots, racists, or both. In reality, of course, most were neither. These claims revealed more about the Remainer elite than Leave voters, exposing the elite's lack of understanding of their fellow citizens and their strikingly anti-democratic sentiments.

'Low-information voters'?

Sometimes the claim that Leave voters were essentially stupid – and, consequently, their votes should not count – was explicit. Many Remainers claimed that people 'didn't understand what they were voting for', while academics claimed Brexit had been 'caused by low levels of education' because Leave voters tended to be less educated than Remainers (Stone 2017). At times, the claim was more implicit, in arguments that the Leave campaigns had bamboozled voters with 'lies and false promises, and . . . opaque manipulative campaigning techniques paid for by "dark money"' (Grayling 2017).

The focus on stupidity and lies reflected the Remain campaign's own post-democratic preoccupation with expertise. Their experts had 'shown' that leaving the EU would be disastrous; only a liar could claim otherwise and, by extension, only an ignorant fool could vote Leave. During the campaign, Remain leaders were horrified at

'how much Leave propaganda' voters had 'swallowed', denouncing their opponents' 'lies' (Oliver 2017: 344, 386). They were particularly incensed by the exaggerated claim, emblazoned on a bus, that the UK sent £350m weekly to the EU that would be better spent on the National Health Service, which supposedly fooled 'legions of people across the country' (Oliver 2017: 240). The media often reinforced this narrative. The day after the referendum, for example, it was widely reported that 'many Britons may not even know what they had actually voted for' because they were 'frantically Googling "What is the EU?"' (Fung 2016).

These claims are not, however, borne out by the evidence. Reflecting the void between rulers and ruled, voters were highly sceptical of the campaigns, with almost half stating that both were lying and only 9 per cent believing that politicians would honour the promises being made (Electoral Reform Society 2016; Evans and Menon 2017: 82). Unsurprisingly, then, there is little evidence of the infamous £350m claim actually cutting through: as Table 3.1 shows, Leave voters' motivations did not even include NHS funding. Conversely, Remain voters clearly *were* influenced by Project Fear, much of which was highly misleading – so if anyone was 'bamboozled' it was arguably them. Reflecting their scepticism of the political class, voters consulted diverse sources of information when making their minds up (Electoral Reform Society 2016). Far from bamboozling gullible voters, supposedly charismatic leaders like Boris Johnson or Nigel Farage had little discernible effect, or even pushed people to support the opposition (Electoral Reform Society 2016). Despite their variable educational levels, experimental research showed that Leave and Remain voters were equally knowledgeable about the EU (Carl 2019). Only about a thousand people Googled 'What is the EU?' the day after the referendum – not the millions that media coverage implied (McGoogan 2016).

Nor is there any convincing evidence that Leave won by committing electoral fraud, despite this being repeated so

frequently that it is now practically common sense. This idea was promoted relentlessly by the media, especially the *Guardian* columnist Carole Cadwalladr, winning her the Orwell Prize and many other elite plaudits. It is still regularly recycled – without any supporting evidence – in academic publications (e.g., Crouch 2020: 114; Murdock 2020). The basic argument is that Leave won illegitimately: it illegally over-spent; it received 'dark money' from Russia; it used manipulative online techniques developed by the company Cambridge Analytica; Russian social media bots swung the vote – and so on. These claims, now thoroughly investigated, were without foundation.

Lengthy Electoral Commission (EC) investigations into illegal expenditure came to very little. In March 2018, the EC ruled that Leave.EU had under-reported its spending by £77,830, fining it £61,000 and referring its chief executive to the police. But in September 2019, the police dropped all charges, saying there was no evidence of criminal activity (PA Media 2019). In July 2018, the EC ruled that Vote Leave had exceeded its £7m spending cap by routing £675,315 through a pro-Brexit youth group founded by Darren Grimes. The EC fined Grimes £20,000 and referred him and Vote Leave's Alan Halsall to the police. However, in July 2019, Grimes was acquitted and his fine quashed, and the police dropped all charges against Halsall in May 2020. In June 2021, the EC's new boss apologized for its 'horrible' treatment of Grimes, saying 'What happened to him should not have happened' (Malnick 2021).

Even if these individuals had been convicted, however, it is simply not plausible that the amounts of money involved 'could have been decisive', as arch-Remainer Lord Adonis insisted, or could 'make all the difference', as Vote Leave 'whistle-blower' Shahmir Sanni claimed (BBC News 2018). Ignored was the fact that Remain campaigners had vastly outspent Leavers, by £19,309,588 to £13,332,569 (Electoral Commission 2019). If we add on the £9.3m cost of the government's pro-Remain leaflet – sent to every household in violation of EC advice – Remain outspent

Leave by more than two to one. Since Remain still lost, the quantity of campaign spending cannot have been decisive.

Claims about electoral subversion involving 'dark money', shady tech firms and foreign powers appear equally dubious. The 'dark money' claims revolve around Arron Banks, an associate of Nigel Farage. Cadwalladr and others claim that Banks was not the true source of his £8.4m donation to Leave.EU, suggesting that it originated in Russia or elsewhere – insinuations repeated even in the report of a parliamentary inquiry (DCMS Committee 2019: 47–50). But following a lengthy investigation, the police concluded in September 2019 that there was 'no evidence' of criminal wrongdoing (PA Media 2019).

Related claims about Russian subversion also appear baseless. Remainer elites certainly fomented Russophobia during the campaign, with David Cameron claiming that Russian President Vladimir Putin 'might be happy' if Leave won, and the official Remain campaign accusing the Kremlin of secretly backing Brexit (BBC News 2016). But the best that a parliamentary inquiry could come up with was that 'Kremlin-aligned media', like Russia Today and Sputnik, had published 261 anti-EU articles (DCMS Committee 2019: 71) – a paltry contribution to the tens of thousands of articles published during the campaign. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) investigation into Cambridge Analytica also found that Russian IP addresses had accessed its data, referring this to the National Crime Agency – but they found nothing to prosecute. Beyond this, the ICO 'did not find any additional evidence of Russian involvement' in the referendum (Denham 2020: 3). While criticizing the lack of a dedicated government investigation, Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (2020: 12–14) also discovered no evidence of Russian subversion. Academic research found that Russian bots posted just 6,000 tweets during the campaign – 0.0002 per cent of all Brexit-related tweets – and around a third of these were pro-Remain (Gorodnichenko, Pham and Talavera 2018). Another study 'found little evidence

of Russian content', concluding that 'Russian Twitter accounts ... contributed relatively little to the overall Brexit conversation' (Narayanan et al. 2017: 1, 4).

Other claims about illicit online manipulation fell similarly flat. Cadwalladr and others claimed that Cambridge Analytica had illegally helped Leave.EU by harvesting Facebook users' data, then targeting them with advertisements. However, a lengthy EC investigation actually found that Leave.EU's relationship with Cambridge Analytica 'did not develop beyond initial scoping work' (BBC News 2018). A three-year ICO investigation also confirmed that Cambridge Analytica '[was] not involved in the EU referendum campaign' (Denham 2020: 2). The ICO did fine Leave.EU – but only because their newsletter advertised insurance without subscribers' consent (Information Commissioner's Office 2018: 44–8). The ICO also found that Leave campaigners had paid the digital marketing firm Aggregate IQ £1.5m to place 2,823 Facebook advertisements. But the Remain camp had also used this perfectly legal technique. The ICO found no links between Aggregate IQ and Cambridge Analytica and discovered 'no evidence of unlawful activity' (Information Commissioner's Office 2018: 42).

Years of wild accusations about the referendum being rigged or subverted came to naught while undermining faith in British democracy. But perhaps that was the point. Underlying this campaign was a fundamentally elitist view: that most people are too stupid or uneducated to be entrusted with important decisions; they are vulnerable to manipulation and lies, which only their social betters can see through. This strikes at the heart of the equality of citizens that is the foundation of democracy. Authoritarian elites have used such arguments for centuries to legitimize anti-majoritarian measures. After 2016, they were used for the same reason – by people who mostly considered themselves to be liberal progressives or on the political left.

These attitudes were themselves a symptom of the social void that has emerged alongside the political void discussed

in chapters 1 and 2. Many Remainers expressed shock at the referendum result, asserting that they had never met anyone who intended to vote Leave. This speaks to the decline of social mobility and mixing that has accompanied neoliberalism. As social inequalities have hardened, and citizens have withdrawn from public into private life, they are increasingly atomized and limited to small social bubbles that can easily become echo chambers. This apparently makes it easy for those on the elite side of the void to believe the worst possible things about their fellow citizens on the other side.

A 'referendum on the modern world'?

The second way in which Remainer elites sought to delegitimize the referendum was to slander Leave voters as racists and xenophobes. This again reflected their own understanding of the campaign: Leave campaigners were liars, so Leave voters must be stupid; likewise, since the Leave campaign opposed immigration, Leave voters must be racist, too – perhaps even fascist. This is another distorted representation of reality. The Leave campaigns were ugly at times, and immigration was highly significant. But there are simply not enough racists or fascists in Britain to account for the referendum outcome. That some Remainers believed otherwise exposes both their ignorance of their own nation and their repudiation of it.

Many Remainers believed that the referendum campaign had 'unleashed demons' (Oliver 2017), warning of resurgent fascism should Leave win. *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee (2016), for example, stated that 'National socialism will no doubt carry a new name – but it's there in the making', while far-left author Richard Seymour (2016) welcomed us to 'Weimar Britain'. This might have been excused as an emotional overreaction to the shocking murder of Jo Cox. But time prompted no reconsideration of these claims: if anything, Remainer elites doubled down. In the weeks after the referendum, an 'epidemic' of hate

crime was widely reported, apparently confirming Penny's (2016) fears of 'another Kristallnacht'. Five years on, the Runnymede Trust (2021: 15), speaking for English civil society organizations, told the United Nations that 'There has been a steady rise in hate crime against BME groups since the referendum.' The Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole (2018) became a Remainer favourite for his attacks on Brexit as a fit of imperial nostalgia. The author Ben Judah (2016) agreed that the Leave vote was the 'last gasp of empire', reflecting a 'fantasy of revived greatness' and 'a rejection of ethnic change'.

Academics – almost 90 per cent of whom had voted Remain (Morgan 2016) – made similar arguments. Liberals attributed the Leave vote to a 'cultural backlash' against progressive, modern values (Norris and Inglehart 2016). Decolonial and other leftist writers foregrounded white supremacy, racism and imperial nostalgia (e.g., Bhambra 2018; Shilliam 2018; Virdee and McGeever 2018; Dorling and Tomlinson 2019). They argued that Leavers' expressed concerns about democracy and sovereignty were simply code for tougher immigration control, reflecting a desire for 'cultural and racial homogeneity' (Virdee and McGeever 2018: 803).

As the Brexit crisis reached its peak in 2019, commentary became even more frantic. David Lammy MP famously denounced Tory Eurosceptics as being 'worse than Nazis' (Elgot 2019), while the Hansard Society warned that the United Kingdom was 'poised to embrace authoritarianism' (Walker 2019). When Prime Minister Boris Johnson prorogued Parliament, crowds mobilized to denounce 'fascism', egged on by *Independent* columnist Patrick Cockburn (2019) warning of 'a slow-moving *coup d'état* . . . in which a demagogic nationalist populist authoritarian leader vaults into power through quasi-democratic means'. When Johnson won the 2019 general election, the journalist Paul Mason (2019) declared that 'Brexit is [now] certain', demanding popular mobilization to 'stop a one-party racist state', while prominent Cambridge

academic Priyamvada Gopal (2019) described Johnson's government as a 'vicious right-wing regime voted in on ethnonationalism'.

These arguments were divorced from reality. Racism and far-right politics are exceedingly marginal forces in contemporary Britain. Measuring racism is obviously difficult – partly because, due to the *success* of anti-racism, prejudiced people are reluctant to disclose their attitudes. Nonetheless, as one survey of extensive polling data concludes, Britons 'have become avowedly more open-minded in their attitudes towards race since the mid-2000s' (Kaur-Ballagan 2020). For instance, from 2009 to 2020, the proportion saying they would be happy for their child to marry someone of a different ethnicity increased from 75 to 89 per cent. From 2006 to 2020, the number of people agreeing that 'to be truly British you have to be white' declined from 10 per cent to just 4 per cent (Kaur-Ballagan 2020). In the World Values Survey, which compares attitudes around the globe, Britain ranks in the most tolerant cluster, where between zero per cent and 4.9 per cent of people would object to living alongside someone from a different ethnicity. This compares favourably to most other European nations, including Germany (5–9.9 per cent), Italy (10–14.9 per cent) or France (20–29.9 per cent) (Inglehart et al. 2014). European Commission research places Britons third in Europe, narrowly behind the Swedes and Danish, 'in saying that they would be happy to have an immigrant as a neighbour, colleague, friend or family relation' (Eurobarometer 2018).

These liberal attitudes are also borne out in how people behave, not merely what they say. By 2011, in a population where 14 per cent of people are non-white, almost 10 per cent of couples were of mixed ethnicity, up from 7 per cent in 2001 (Office for National Statistics 2014). Discrimination at work and in public service provision has contracted sharply thanks to the 'equal opportunities revolution' (Heartfield 2017). Every ethnic group, 'apart from Roma and Black Caribbeans, do better in compulsory

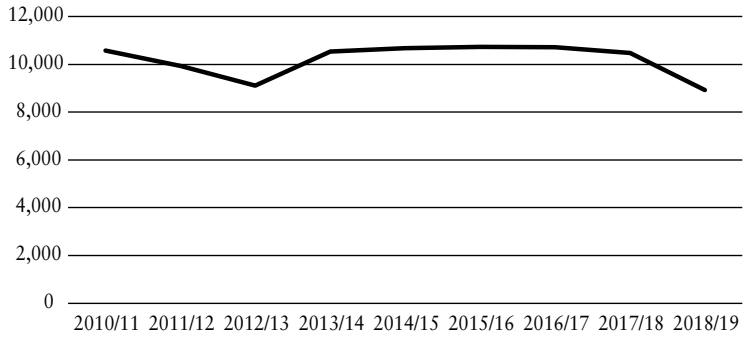

Figure 3.1 Convictions for Racially and Religiously Aggravated Offences (England and Wales)

Source: Crown Prosecution Service (2016: 20, 2019b: 33). Note: (a) in case of data discrepancies, higher reported figures are used; (b) conviction rates for hate crimes are almost identical to those for standard crimes (Crown Prosecution Service 2019a)

education than the White British . . . the ethnicity pay gap has almost disappeared and . . . 16% of minorities are represented in the highest social class compared with just 13% of the White British' (Goodhart 2021).

Contrary to talk of a post-referendum hate crime epidemic, convictions have actually remained broadly flat over the past decade (see Figure 3.1). Alarmist commentary was fuelled by increased *reporting* of hate crimes or 'non-crime hate incidents'. This is an inappropriate measure for two reasons. First, reporting is subjective and requires no proof. As the College of Policing's (no date) operational guidance states: 'The victim [*sic*] does not have to justify or provide evidence of their belief [that a hate crime occurred]'. Officers 'should not directly challenge this perception' and must file reports even where 'supporting evidence is not found'. Second, state officials and campaigners actively encourage reporting, which explains why reports increase annually, yet convictions remain flat. After the referendum, many organizations incited reporting, collating dubious 'evidence' that collapses under close scrutiny (L. Jones 2016). The Crime Survey of England and Wales, which

provides a more robust estimation, finds that hate crime actually fell by 38 per cent from 2008–9 to 2018–19 (Home Office 2020). Obviously, even one hate crime is too many. The Leave victory probably did embolden a small minority of racists and xenophobes to abuse innocent people, who deserve sympathy and solidarity – and, indeed, communities quickly rallied around them. However, six years on, there is little evidence of increased hate crime – and certainly no sign of Kristallnacht.

Similarly, although post-Brexit immigration has remained high while becoming less white, there has been no public backlash. Recent skilled migration has been driven by arrivals from India, Nigeria and the Philippines, while student visa numbers are led by Indians, Nigerians and Pakistanis (Portes 2022). No racist reaction against this is evident. There was widespread hostility to the state's mistreatment of the Windrush generation, some of whom were deported after decades of residency for lacking required paperwork. The Conservative government's decision to offer permanent residency to all Hong Kong British National Overseas passport holders also commanded strong majority support (Cooper 2021).

Meanwhile, the number of British people voting for white supremacist, fascist or far-right parties remains tiny, especially compared to EU countries. In the 2019 general election, the British National Party (BNP) received just 510 votes, while UKIP, which lurched sharply rightwards after the EU referendum, got just 22,817. Nearly 14 million voted Conservative but to describe them as 'far-right' or 'ethno-nationalist' is inaccurate. Comparative analysis of party manifestos places them at 6.2 on a –100/+100 scale, where –100 is entirely left-wing and +100 entirely right-wing (Volkens et al. 2020). Hard-right parties are far more successful elsewhere in the EU (see Table 3.2). They are currently in government in Poland, Hungary and Austria, and are the second- or third-largest parties in Spain, Finland, Italy and Sweden. National Rally leader Marine Le Pen is routinely the presidential runner-up in

Table 3.2 Right-Wing Populist Parties' Electoral Results (Lower-House Legislature)

Party (Country)	*Share of Vote (Year)*
Fidesz (Hungary)	50.10 (2022)
Law and Justice (Poland)	43.50 (2020)
Swiss People's Party (Switzerland)	25.60 (2019)
Brothers of Italy (Italy)	26.00 (2022)
Sweden Democrats (Sweden)	20.50 (2022)
National Rally (France)	18.70 (2022)
Vox (Spain)	15.10 (2019)
Alternative for Germany (Germany)	10.30 (2021)
The League (Italy)	8.80 (2022)
UK Independence Party (United Kingdom)	0.07 (2019)

Source: National electoral bodies' websites

France. EU membership is clearly no safeguard against far-right politics; indeed, it seems to flourish in the void created by EU member-statehood. In July 2021, hard-right leaders from 16 member-states decided their agenda was compatible with EU membership, adopting a 'remain and reform' position (Gotev 2021). In August 2022, the hard-right coalition predicted to win power in Italy (following the collapse of Eurocrat Mario Draghi's administration) pledged 'full adhesion to the European integration process' and loyalty to NATO (Kazmin 2022). Elitist intergovernmentalism is clearly no prophylactic against the far right, and nor are right-wing populists the antidote to it. If anything, the democratic revolt of Brexit has provided a respite from the far-right politics plaguing Europe's member-states.

Clearly, Remainer elites' understanding of Leave voters was at odds with reality. Standing on one side of the social and political void, they could simply not understand those on the other – indeed, they recoiled from their fellow citizens in disgust. 'People proud of their open-minded cosmopolitanism seemed unable to sympathize with their neighbours,' as Robert Tombs observed (2022: 95). This was not merely a question of misunderstanding. Slandering

Leave voters as racists was also critical to de-legitimize their votes. Authoritarian liberals routinely deploy accusations of racism and fascism when confronted by any plebeian rebellion against the status quo – from Brexit, to the *gilets jaunes*, to anti-lockdown protests (Guilluy 2019: 94–9). This is a powerful ideological manoeuvre for two reasons. First, it thoroughly discredits the revolt, precisely because the success of anti-racism (which authoritarian liberals implicitly deny) makes accusations of racism extremely toxic, isolating the rebels from potential supporters. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it turns the anti-democratic attempt to impose a minority preference into a moral virtue by presenting it as a defence of oppressed minorities. Matthew Crawford points out that, as the ties that once bound national politics together have disintegrated:

> [the] idea of a common good has given way to a partition of citizens along the lines of a moral hierarchy . . . [which affords the] decision-making class . . . exemptions from democratic scruple . . . Very simply: if the nation is fundamentally racist, sexist and homophobic, I owe it nothing. More than that, *conscience* demands that I repudiate it. (Crawford 2020)

Any societal progress must also be denied, because 'denunciation of "society" would be awkward to maintain and, crucially, *my own conscience would lose its self-certifying independence from the community*. My wish to be free of the demands of society would look like mere selfishness' (emphasis in the original).

This explains why Brexiters had to be smeared for four years as 'gammon', 'fat old racists' and 'sh*tbag racist w*nkers' (*sic*), as the Labour MP Neil Coyle charmingly put it (Knaggs 2022).

The void explains the vote

If most Leavers were neither stupid nor racist, what does explain their vote? We argue that it expressed deep dissatisfaction with the state of British democracy, which voters correctly intuited was linked to Britain's EU membership. Vote Leave's slogan 'Take back control' resonated with millions of people – especially working-class citizens – because, in the post-democratic era, they increasingly felt little sense of control over the state, politics, or even their everyday existence. Immigration was a particular flashpoint, not because of widespread racism but because it crystallized the political void between citizens and their elected representatives.

By the time of the referendum, the decay of representative democracy, described in chapters 1 and 2, had produced widespread political disaffection. As Table 3.3 shows, across a host of measures large majorities of citizens felt ignored by, and alienated from, those who ostensibly claimed to represent them in Parliament. Of course, many politically alienated people still voted Remain, but this does not mean that alienation was not at work (cf. Fox 2021). Many Remainers also felt disaffected – and, as we shall see, also favoured lower immigration – but (thanks to Project Fear) they prioritized concerns about the economy when deciding how to vote. Leavers were those who felt so strongly dissatisfied that they were willing to take substantial risks in order to 'take back control'.

The strong class basis to the Leave revolt is fundamental here. Because working-class people had suffered most from the neoliberal revolt, economically and politically, they had less of a stake in the status quo and were more willing to take a risk to improve their fate. This is reflected in the data on class, levels of political disengagement and the Brexit vote. By 2012, working-class people were more than twice as likely as middle-class professionals and graduates to believe that they had no say in government (Eatwell and

Table 3.3 Polling on Political Disenchantment

Statement	*Response (2016 unless stated)*
People like me don't have any say about what the government does	28 per cent disagreed (2015)
I have not much/no influence on national decision making	85 per cent agreed
I don't think the government cares much what people like me think	23 per cent disagreed (2015)
Traditional parties and politicians don't care about people like me	58 per cent agreed
Do you identify fairly/very strongly with a political party?	37 per cent said yes (2014)
If I opposed an unjust harmful law, Parliament would give serious attention to my demands	75 per cent thought this very or fairly unlikely (2015)
Can government be trusted to do the right thing just about always/most of the time?	17 per cent agreed; 32 per cent 'almost never' (2013)
Politicians can be trusted to tell the truth	15 per cent agreed
Government ministers can be trusted to tell the truth	20 per cent agreed
The UK/EU system of government works well	33/21 per cent agreed

Sources: Simpson (2015); IPSOS Mori (2016, 2017); Hansard Society (2016)

Goodwin 2018: 124). By 2016, people from the 'AB' social classes were almost twice as certain to vote as those from the 'CE' classes (Hansard Society 2016: 19). Over half of all workers and non-degree-holders had stopped voting entirely, 'a natural response to . . . alienation and voicelessness' (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018: 255). This is a general tendency across Europe's member-states (Gallego 2007; Mayer et al. 2015). However, in contrast to the meaningless choice offered in general elections, Brexit seemed to offer a unique opportunity to shake up the status quo. This explains why, contrary to the Remain campaign's hopes, so many habitual non-voters participated, and also

why the referendum was the most class-correlated vote in decades (Butcher 2019). While 57 per cent of managers and professionals voted to remain, 64 per cent of skilled manual, low-skilled white-collar, and unskilled manual workers voted to leave (Lord Ashcroft 2016).

Importantly, the EU was not unfairly 'scapegoated' for these 'domestic' political problems, as many Remainers suggest. As chapters 1 and 2 explained, European integration is not 'external' to domestic politics; it grows directly from elites' retreat from representing the masses. The EU is a constitutional system which helps national elites to evade domestic accountability and impose policies that would be difficult or impossible to enact in a purely domestic setting. The transformation of nation-states into member-states is therefore bound up with the radical narrowing of political ideology and inter-party competition, fuelling citizens' judgement that politicians were 'all the same' and did not represent them.

In the years prior to the referendum, polling shows that people across Europe could see that the EU exists to benefit capitalist interests and the professional-managerial elites clustered around them. From 1975 to 2009, polls routinely found that most people saw European integration as exacerbating inequality (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018: 214). Seventy-one per cent of European political and business elites saw EU membership as benefiting people like them, compared to just 34 per cent of the wider public – 74 per cent of whom also affirmed that politicians 'did not care' what they thought, versus 51 per cent for elites (Raines, Goodwin and Cutts 2017: 11, 13–14). Unsurprisingly, then, as the professional-managerial classes increasingly supported and identified with European integration, the working class and poorly educated became increasingly opposed to it (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017: 62–3; Hugrée, Penissat and Spire 2020: 108). The British were particularly Eurosceptic, with polling since the 1990s showing that only 30–40 per cent felt membership was a good thing (Evans and Menon 2017: 17–18). Nevertheless,

the Brexit vote was strikingly 'European' insofar as the poorest voters were most hostile to the EU, while the wealthiest were mostly in favour (Tombs 2022: 61–7).

On the very rare occasions when European citizens have been allowed to vote directly on the EU, majorities have typically rejected it – followed by elite manoeuvres to overturn the verdict. In 2005, the French and Dutch rejected the EU Constitution in national referenda. Elites simply repackaged the content into the Lisbon Treaty, which would not be subject to mandatory referenda in most member-states. To justify not holding discretionary referenda, elites disparaged them as 'capricious, simplistic, nationalistic, negative and divisive', unleashing 'virulent' forces portending 'fascism' (Waterfield and Bickerton 2008: 9–10). However, in Ireland a referendum was legally required, and the majority again voted 'No' in 2008. In a harbinger of the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum, Irish elites blamed the result on popular ignorance and backward attitudes on immigration and abortion, despite evidence that the majority had voted 'No' primarily because they did not trust the technocratic establishment's instruction to vote 'Yes' (Waterfield and Bickerton 2008: 14–16). The Irish were made to vote again until they produced the 'correct' result (Jerzak 2014). In a 2015 referendum, Greeks voted overwhelmingly to reject EU-imposed austerity, but the Syriza government quickly capitulated. For all their bashing of Leavers as narrow-minded Little Englanders, most Remainers seemed strangely ignorant of these events elsewhere in Europe. It is hardly surprising that many Leavers suspected that their vote would not be respected. Brexit is the first time that a popular revolt against the EU's transnational constitutionalism has been sustained against subsequent elite reaction.

Foregrounding the decay of democratic representation also helps us to understand the role that immigration played in the 2016 referendum. Immigration had become a flashpoint in British politics, not because of rampant racism or fascism but because it crystallized the void between rulers

and ruled. While large majorities favoured lowering immigration, British politicians facilitated the exact opposite, hiding behind EU rules to justify their refusal to respect the majority's wishes, with many deriding their critics as racists.

Like it or not, immigration has never been popular. Since regular polling began in 1989, support for the view that 'there are too many immigrants' in Britain has always exceeded 50 per cent, averaging 65 per cent and peaking at nearly 80 per cent in 2008 (Swift 2019: 54). By 2016, 69 per cent felt immigration was too high, including half of those intending to vote Remain (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017: 11–12). An overwhelming majority of pre-1990 immigrants also wanted to see immigration reduced (Swift 2019: 52). Unless we wish to class half of Remainers and many ethnic-minority immigrants as racist and xenophobic, the Remainer explanation of the Leave vote is clearly untenable.

Anti-immigration sentiment has been attributed to both cultural and economic factors. Some foreground voters' concern with rapid social change, highlighting that the strongest Leave-voting areas had experienced the *fastest increases* in immigration, not the highest *absolute numbers* of arrivals (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018: 166). Others foreground perceived economic competition. Historically, trade unions and the Labour Party were generally anti-immigration because increasing the labour supply allowed bosses to drive down pay. Although cultural change has clearly attenuated the racist and xenophobic attitudes that often accompanied this position, neoliberal policies – including those associated with EU membership – have undoubtedly reinforced the sense that immigrants are economic competitors. Working-class collective institutions have been destroyed or hollowed out, workers are exposed to intensifying economic competition, and the public provision of housing and services has dwindled. Statistical research shows that the long-term economic distress arising from these changes is directly linked to anti-immigration

sentiment, as expressed in the Brexit vote (Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras and Bowler 2019; Abreu and Öner 2020). The same picture emerges from qualitative research undertaken by the tiny handful of academics concerned to understand, rather than merely deride, working-class communities (McKenzie 2017a, 2017b; Mahoney and Kearon 2018; Telford and Wistow 2020). This explains why, as one such study notes, 'commonly the post-industrial white working-class is opposed to immigrat*ion* whilst, however, being positively predisposed towards immig*rants*' (Dawson 2018: 5, emphasis added).

Concerns about social integration and economic competition certainly figure far more strongly in opinion polling than alleged desires for white supremacy or ethnonational homogeneity. The proportion of people insisting that immigrants should be white or Christian is small and declining, whereas concerns about cultural integration and immigrants' skill levels are high and rising (see Table 3.4). This suggests concern about low-skilled immigration fuelling fierce competition at the bottom end of the labour market. Conversely, even among those favouring lower immigration overall, 76 per cent favour *more* high-skilled immigration – which would make no sense if people were primarily concerned to keep Britain white (Connor and Ruiz 2019).

For many years, however, British government policy has been starkly opposed to the majority's preferences.

Table 3.4 Changing Concerns about Immigration

Percentage saying that it is important for immigrants to . . .	*2002*	*2014*	*Change*
. . . be committed to Britain's way of life	78	84	+6
. . . be able to speak English	77	87	+10
. . . have work skills that Britain needs	71	81	+10
. . . have good educational qualifications	63	74	+11
. . . come from a Christian background	19	16	–3
. . . be white	11	7	–5

Source: Clery, Curtice and Harding (2017: 135)

Under New Labour, immigration doubled between 1997 and 2005. From 2004 to 2016, the number of immigrants estimated to be living in Britain rose from 5,258,000 to 9,153,000 – an average annual increase of 324,583 (Vargas-Silva and Walsh 2020). Perhaps more people could have been won over to this unprecedented influx through open debate and active measures to address their concerns. In practice, however, the government did little to help integrate immigrants into British society, instead promoting the laissez-faire ideology of multiculturalism. Also lacking was any industrial policy or the massive investment in housing or public services required to accommodate millions of additional people. Reflecting the emergence of a neoliberal state that had abandoned responsibility for socio-economic outcomes, the task of absorbing the newcomers was effectively left to the market and local communities. This merely compounded a profound sense of whole communities having been abandoned by the political establishment (McKenzie 2017b; Watson 2018; Bromley-Davenport, MacLeavy and Manley 2019; Telford and Wistow 2020).

Again, the EU was central, not peripheral, to all this. It was both a dominant source of migrant labour and the means by which elected governments evaded accountability for adopting a fundamentally unpopular policy. Through constitutionalizing the EU's 'four freedoms' – the free movement of labour, capital, goods and services – member-states have willingly sacrificed control over intra-EU migration. By 2016, an estimated 37 per cent of immigrants in Britain (3,537,000) were EU nationals, about 41 per cent of whom came from the eight relatively poor countries that joined the EU in 2004 (Vargas-Silva and Walsh 2020). Importantly, the Labour government had declined to impose transitional controls on these flows. According to Britain's former EU ambassador, Ivan Rogers, the governor of the independent Bank of England had successfully lobbied against controls to 'help lower wage growth and inflation . . . [and] keep interest rates

low' (Asthana 2017). Because it is impossible to win votes for high immigration on this basis, politicians instead downplayed the issue and hid behind EU rules. Prime Minister Tony Blair (2004), while claiming that the Eastern European influx would be small, insisted that Britain had no choice anyway. Due to EU expansion, 'every member country of the EU – not just the UK' *had* to accept these migrants. Any attempt to avoid this, Blair asserted, would merely generate illegal immigration.

This epitomizes the way in which European integration has undermined representative democracy in member-states. First, national elites agree to rules that will bind their hands, thereby locking in unpopular policies that would be difficult or impossible to impose in a purely domestic setting. Second, when opponents object, elites point fatalistically to European rules, saying that they are powerless to act. This was not just a problem for the Labour Party. In 2016, David Cameron was also forced to concede that even his 'reformed' version of EU membership 'would not enable him to meet his [election manifesto] promise of returning [annual] net migration to the "tens of thousands"' (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017: 25). The clash between democratic accountability and EU member-statehood could not be clearer.

Insofar as the pro-immigration minority tried to legitimize their position, their main argument was that immigrants were net contributors to UK gross domestic product (GDP). Since statistical analyses generally bear this out, Remainers frequently conclude that anti-immigration voters must be either ignorant or racist. But this does not follow. Given low investment and stagnating productivity under neoliberalism, Britain's anaemic GDP growth really *has* been heavily driven by population growth. However, abstract talk of overall contributions to 'the economy' ignores the uneven *distributional* impact of this dubious 'growth model' across society (Watson 2018). Ready access to low-skilled workers incentivizes firms to invest in 'labour-intense but low value-added industries' while

'disincentivizing investment in capital-intense industries', concentrating employment growth in 'low-paying jobs in the service sector' (Berry 2014: 2–3). Mass immigration fuels the rise of low-paid, precarious, poor-quality employment – a major source of popular grievances. Likewise, the Migration Advisory Committee's (2018) review of the academic evidence found that, while immigration did not affect *average* wages or employment levels, the impact was positive for higher-educated groups but negative for lower-educated ones. Conversely, after Brexit, even the arch-Remainer *Economist* magazine observed that 'low-paid workers are enjoying their first taste of bargaining power in almost 20 years' (*Economist* 2021). Distributional concerns explain the experience of one academic who asserted that Brexit would reduce British GDP during a referendum campaign debate in Newcastle. One audience member retorted: 'That's your bloody GDP, not mine.' As he later reflected, many voters felt that 'pro-Remain politicians . . . were describing a reality from another planet . . . And the data bear out such cynicism' (Evans and Menon 2017: 62).

But for many years the political void meant that these concerns could not be represented in public debate. This was a dramatic shift from the politics of the nation-state. Historically, Labour and the trade unions had represented workers' immediate interests in controlling the labour supply by opposing immigration. Conservatives had also pitched to anti-immigration sentiment, often in openly racist terms. Only the far left agitated for open borders, arguing that employers were using racism to divide workers. However, this all changed with the shift to neoliberalism. From the 1980s onwards, as the power of organized labour waned, employers lost interest in using racism to divide the working class, preferring to promote 'flexible' labour markets and open borders, and converting to the cause of anti-racism (Heartfield 2017). All the major parties followed suit, accepting the deregulation of national borders as part of European integration. The old

Trotskyist position – that all immigration controls were racist – was now appropriated by neoliberals to justify this about-turn. This was part of a wider shift towards 'progressive neoliberalism', in which pro-market policies are justified as enhancing equal opportunities (Fraser 2019). The appeal of this ideology to the professional-managerial class that now monopolized public life made it virtually impossible for the ostensible representatives of the working class to argue for immigration control. When the Labour Party produced a mug with the slogan 'Controls on immigration' for the 2010 general election, it was widely denounced on the left as racist. But it was also simply not credible, given that Labour simultaneously remained committed to the open borders associated with EU membership.

Remainers would likely object at this point that voters' 'legitimate concerns' around immigration actually dominated British political debate for at least a decade prior to Brexit. But this is true only in a very narrow sense. Tony Blair (2004) drew the terrain very carefully in a landmark speech to the Confederation of British Industry. He acknowledged rising 'concern' about immigration, which the centre-left worried would entail 'prejudice' and 'racism'. But, Blair said, 'we cannot simply dismiss any concern about immigration as racism . . . what has put immigration back up the agenda – with public concern at its highest since the 1970s – is that there are real, not imagined, abuses of the system that lead to a sense of genuine unfairness.'

Blair specified these 'abuses' very narrowly, as misuse of the asylum system, illegal immigration and benefit scrounging, and he promised to address these issues to restore faith in the system. The scope of citizens' 'legitimate concerns' was thereby limited to a few thousand annual cases of 'abuse', leaving the vastly larger issue of *legal* immigration untouched – indeed, untouchable. Blair placed this question firmly beyond debate, asserting that using immigrants to 'fill labour shortages' was 'essential to our economy'

and 'nothing more than common sense' – and, anyway, Britain had no choice but to accept EU migrants.

This attempt to narrow the scope of legitimate democratic debate had two negative consequences. First, it unleashed a highly punitive regime against refugees and illegal immigrants, which persists today. They are made to bear the brunt for a wider anti-immigration sentiment that finds little political expression. Second, it deliberately denied representation to the majority's political opinion; indeed, it effectively branded that opinion racist. This created a widening gap between rulers and ruled into which stepped far-right activists and right-wing populists, including the BNP and UKIP, and groups like Britain First and the English Defence League (Ford and Goodwin 2014; Winlow, Hall and Treadwell 2017). UKIP in particular underscored the link between governments' failure to control immigration and Britain's EU membership (Evans and Menon 2017: 19). Statistical analysis shows that support for UKIP, and subsequently for Leave, was driven by two concerns: first, British governments were failing to deliver what people were demanding – not just on immigration but also on the economy and public services – and, second, they had sacrificed the sovereignty needed to address these problems (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017). The voters were not wrong.

This crisis of representation also explains the post-referendum collapse in both UKIP support and anti-immigration sentiment – which would be mysterious if claims of surging white supremacism were accurate. UKIP support peaked at 12.6 per cent in the 2015 general election; by 2019, it had collapsed to 0.07 per cent. Since 2016, UKIP has lost half of its membership and been through 12 leaders and acting leaders. Its turn to far-right, anti-Islam politics has consigned it to oblivion, with voters mostly defecting to the Conservatives (directly, or via the Brexit Party). This implies that UKIP voters primarily wanted a government that heeded their wishes to leave the EU and curb immigration; this achieved, they abandoned UKIP.

Moreover, attitudes to immigration have relaxed since the referendum, again suggesting a concern with control, not race. By late 2021, 46 per cent of people were broadly positive about immigration, with only 28 per cent broadly negative – 'almost an exact reversal of responses in 2015' (Rolfe 2021). This was not because overall immigration had fallen – it had not – but because political elites were now addressing the issue. Control and fairness clearly mattered far more than overall numbers. Voters are 'twice as likely to prefer an immigration system that prioritises control, whether or not this reduces numbers (44%), over one that reduces migration to the UK' (Rolfe 2021). This continued dependence on immigrant labour nonetheless denotes a continued failure, characteristic of the member-state, to educate and train its own citizens. The state is similarly failing to build necessary housing, infrastructure and public services. Eventually, there may be a backlash against these failures (see Goodwin 2022). But it will clearly not be the racist reaction that some Remainers imagined.

Foregrounding the crisis of representation also helps to explain why Leave voters tended to hold more conservative attitudes than Remainers. This has been confirmed in many studies, fuelling the claim that Brexit was a backlash against liberal values (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2016). But this argument is problematic in two ways. First, correlation is not causation. One 'study' found that Leave voting was correlated with obesity, but (unsurprisingly) struggled to explain why being fat should lead one to vote against EU membership (Ormosi 2016). Similarly, although support for the death penalty may have been a strong predictor of Leave voting, there is no conceivable direct link between the death penalty and EU membership. Such associations only make sense when placed in a wider sociopolitical context, which many quantitative researchers fail to do.

It is unsurprising that, like poorer citizens, conservative-minded people felt a particularly keen sense of being unrepresented by political elites. By the time of the referendum, both main parties had converged around progressive

neoliberalism. For example, it was a Conservative-led government that legalized gay marriage in 2014 and proposed legalizing gender self-identification in 2017. However, British politicians have often pursued cultural liberalization without popular debate or involvement. The earlier decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967, and the abolition of the death penalty in 1965, for example, did not feature in party manifestos but were achieved through private members' bills. This is often seen as a clever way to achieve progressive social change when public opinion does not favour it. The disadvantage, however, is that conservative citizens may feel ignored and unrepresented (Ford and Goodwin 2014). If politicians instead won over the electorate through public debate, this problem would not arise. Yet again, the underlying problem is the minority's desire to impose its will on the majority, rather than treating them as political equals.

More importantly, the 'conservatism' of Leave voters has been consistently misrepresented. Much has been made of their supposed 'nostalgia' for a time 'where passports were blue, faces were white and the map was coloured imperial pink', as ex-Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable put it. However, as this chapter has shown, there is scant evidence of such racist-imperialist sentiment; even older voters had very little connection with the empire. Insofar as Leave voters were nostalgic for a remembered past, it was a more recent one: the post-1945 settlement. In the early post-war decades, working-class people experienced full employment and unprecedented rises in living standards, and were actually represented by strong trade unions and the Labour Party, creating a strong sense of community, solidarity and empowerment. Given the devastation they have experienced since the 1980s, it is hardly surprising that older working-class citizens look back on the post-war era with fondness.

Conclusion

This chapter has debunked mainstream, Remainer explanations of the 2016 referendum outcome and argued that the Leave victory instead reflects the decay of representative democracy, as set out in chapters 1 and 2. Remainers' attempts to explain the vote do not reflect reality. There is no evidence that the referendum was rigged or subverted. Nor were Brexit voters motivated by hatred and racism. These explanations are truly ideological: distortions of reality that are passionately believed in because they legitimize ultra-Remainers' determination to ignore and overturn the referendum result by branding their fellow citizens as idiots, troglodytes, or both. The void explains both the outcome of the referendum and the reactions to it. It explains why, unlike in 1975, most people were not prepared to follow the political establishment's instruction to vote Remain, and instead revolted against the status quo. It explains their vote as a demand for sovereignty and control after years of being ignored and unrepresented. And it explains the reaction to that vote by Remainers: it was an inexplicable shock to them because of the material, political and cultural distance between them and millions of their fellow citizens. The void can also explain why immigration was such a major flashpoint, despite the secular decline in racist and xenophobic attitudes.

Although the vote was a tremendous expression of desire for democratic sovereignty, the EU referendum was nonetheless politically limited in two key respects. First, as discussed above, the campaigns failed to expose the EU's true nature or the deep causes of Britain's political malaise. This is unsurprising, given that both sides were actually complicit in the creation of this malaise, as explained in chapter 2. Right-wing Eurosceptics identified a lack of democracy, but they had nothing to fill the void: people had not voted for 'Singapore-on-Thames' or 'Global Britain' but for something quite different. Second,

however, this 'something' remained ill defined and lacking in political expression. The referendum was a top-down political consultation whose result would now have to be enacted by the same political elite that had failed to represent the people. This set the scene for a prolonged political crisis – the subject of our next chapter.

4

Leaving the EU, Remaining in the Void

The vote to leave the EU provoked four years of political trauma, worse than anything the United Kingdom had experienced since the Irish Home Rule crisis over a century earlier. By 2020, Britain had left the EU and a Brexiter government had secured an overwhelming parliamentary majority. Superficially, this might seem a resounding triumph for the Tory Eurosceptics and Brexit Party populists who fought to enact the referendum result, against the opposition of Remainer liberals and their Corbynite outriders. But a more careful inspection of the crisis reveals the utter exhaustion of all the political tendencies that fought it out. While Remainers proved incapable of preventing Brexit, Eurosceptics and populists were equally unable to meet the challenge of restoring national sovereignty and reviving the state's democratic authority. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic – involving the suspension of parliamentary democracy and prolonged rule by decree – powerfully demonstrated how much further we still have to travel if we are truly to 'take control'.

The central problem of representation posed itself immediately after the vote. Rather than accepting the result and beginning a constructive debate about how to

implement it, the Remainer elite repudiated the referendum they had asked for, arguing that it was non-binding or should be rerun. When Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn quickly accepted the result, his own MPs sought to oust him. Remainers' hostility to the Leave vote – and Leave voters – led to a degree of rancour and hysteria not seen in British politics for decades. Their nakedly anti-democratic rhetoric and manoeuvring exacerbated the polarization created by the referendum, with 'Leave' and 'Remain' identities becoming far more important to voters than party affiliation, even after Britain finally left the EU (Evans and Schaffner 2019; Sivathasan 2021).

However, the Brexit crisis was not simply created by embittered 'Remoaners', as some Brexiters suggest. The deeper problem was that *all* of the main parliamentary parties were, in one way or another, responsible for the void of political representation, and they had no means to overcome it. Even those challenging them – the extra-parliamentary populists – had no answer to this central problem.

Although this chapter is organized chronologically in three broad phases, it does not pretend to be an exhaustive political history of Brexit. Our purpose is to show how the overall course and outcome of the Brexit crisis – whose main events are summarized in Box 4.1 – were shaped by the demise of Britain's political traditions. The weakness of Tory Euroscepticism reveals the redundancy of Thatcherism, while the failure of Remain to thwart Brexit exposes liberalism and socialism as empty, authoritarian husks. The populists who emerged to challenge these established traditions, despite being critical in securing Brexit, had nothing with which to fill the void.

We begin with the period from the EU referendum in June 2016 to the failure of Theresa May's EU Withdrawal Agreement at the end of 2018. During this period, Tory Eurosceptics, despite their apparent triumph in the referendum, were unable to set the terms for Brexit. They failed to seize control of the Conservative Party or the govern-

ment, leaving Brexit's implementation to a Remainer-led government. The main reason for their weakness is that, as Thatcherites, they could not grasp the problem of the void because they were among its chief causes. They were mavericks within the governing class, whose narrow obsession with deregulation and free trade rendered them unable to understand the real causes of the Brexit vote or the political weaknesses of the British state – weaknesses that the EU exploited in the withdrawal negotiations. The Eurosceptics rejected the resultant Withdrawal Agreement but had nothing else to offer instead.

This led to the second phase of the crisis: the chaotic impasse lasting from the parliamentary defeat of May's Withdrawal Agreement in January 2019 to the European Parliament elections of May 2019. This period exposed the contradictions and weakness of the two main Remainer tendencies: authoritarian liberalism and Corbynite socialism. Remainers hoped to enact a second referendum in which a wearied electorate would vote to stay in the EU, but they were unable to do so due to a fundamental contradiction in their position. Remainer MPs relied on the sovereignty of Parliament to overturn the EU referendum, but discovered that Parliament's political authority was no more than an expression of its popular mandate – and too many citizens insisted that their original vote must be respected. During this period, the Corbynites fell into line with the Blairites they ostensibly despised, sealing their doom electorally and exposing their own commitments to socialism as an empty posture.

The Brexit Party's victory in the European Parliament elections broke the impasse, leading to the installation of a Brexiter government under Boris Johnson and, at long last, Britain's departure from the EU. This final phase of the Brexit crisis demonstrates the critical importance of this populist moment in securing majority rule but also the weaknesses of populism as a political form. Like all contemporary populist parties, the Brexit Party was a creature of the void, unable to grasp the historical task of

Box 4.1 Main Events of the Brexit Crisis

2016	
19 February	David Cameron's renegotiation of UK–EU relationship completed
15 April	EU referendum campaign officially begins
23 June	EU referendum
24 June	Cameron resigns. Jeremy Corbyn accepts the referendum outcome, calling for Article 50 to be invoked
13 July	Theresa May appointed prime minister
24 September	Jeremy Corbyn defeats Labour Party leadership challenge
2017	
24 January	Supreme Court rules Article 50 notification requires Act of Parliament
16 March	European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017 becomes law, authorizing government to invoke Article 50
29 March	UK government formally notifies EU of intention to leave as prescribed by Article 50
8 June	General election. All major parties promise to respect referendum result. Conservatives lose Commons majority
19 June	Formal EU–UK withdrawal negotiations begin
2018	
15 April	People's Vote campaign formally launched
6 July	Chequers proposals finalized by Cabinet
8–9 July	David Davis and Boris Johnson resign from government
25 November	EU endorses Withdrawal Agreement
2019	
15 January	House of Commons votes down Withdrawal Agreement
25 February	Corbyn backs a second referendum
22 March	EU agrees to extend Article 50 deadline for leaving EU to 12 April
29 March	Original Article 50 deadline passes

Box 4.1 (*cont.*)

10 April	EU agrees to further extension of Article 50 deadline to 31 October
23 May	European Parliament elections: Brexit Party wins highest vote share
24 July	Boris Johnson appointed prime minister
28 August	Johnson advises the Queen to prorogue Parliament from 6 September to 14 October
3–6 September	Parliament votes for European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) Act, requiring government to seek Article 50 extension if no agreed Withdrawal Agreement with EU before 31 October
24 September	Supreme Court rules Johnson's advice to the Queen to prorogue Parliament was unlawful
17 October	UK government and EU agree new Withdrawal Agreement including Northern Ireland Protocol
22 October	House of Commons backs Withdrawal Agreement but rejects implementation timetable
28 October	EU agrees to extend Article 50 deadline to 31 January 2020. House of Commons votes for early general election
12 December	General election: landslide victory for Conservatives
20 December	Withdrawal Agreement voted through House of Commons
2020	
31 January	United Kingdom leaves the EU
31 March	Negotiations on a trade agreement open
24 December	EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement finalized

reconstructing 'the people' through processes of political representation. Johnson's version of populism implicitly acknowledged the bankruptcy of Thatcherism, winning the 2019 general election through distinctly post-Thatcherite promises of re-industrialization and higher public spending.

However, as subsequent events showed, this was insufficient to rebuild the Tories' political authority or fill the

void of representative politics. Thatcher's ghost continued to haunt the Tories, with deluded Eurosceptics complaining that Brexit had not produced the 'Singapore-on-Thames' they had sought. More important, the COVID emergency that immediately followed Brexit, and the government's subsequent intervention in the Ukraine conflict, showed that, despite leaving the EU, the United Kingdom retained many of the pathologies of member-statehood.

Brexit means Brexit: the weakness of Tory Euroscepticism

The political class was entirely unprepared for the vote to leave the EU. That is unsurprising with respect to Remainers, who neither expected nor accepted their defeat. Crucially, however, it is also true of the Tory Eurosceptics who had championed withdrawal for decades. They proved incapable of seizing control of the post-referendum government or the Brexit process. Devoid of real vision, their clapped-out Thatcherism substituted for any serious understanding of the political problems posed by member-statehood.

The Eurosceptics' inability to lead was exposed immediately after the vote, following the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron, who had led the Remain campaign. His heir apparent was Boris Johnson, who had led Vote Leave to victory. But within days he had been stabbed in the back by his own campaign manager, fellow Vote Leaver Michael Gove, forcing Johnson out of the race. Gove's own leadership bid imploded, leaving quiet Remainer Theresa May to defeat the other contenders.

May clearly had little idea how to implement Brexit. Her vacuous slogan, 'Brexit means Brexit' simultaneously recognized that the referendum result was politically binding and exposed the fact that she had no idea what Brexit meant. May and her fellow Remainer ministers treated the entire process as a damage-limitation exercise. Their

approach was that of functionaries of an EU member-state, triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on 29 March 2017, and dutifully following its processes. This allowed Brussels to insist on negotiating a withdrawal agreement before any discussion of the future UK–EU relationship. Moreover, the two-year limit to the Article 50 process, combined with May's unwillingness to countenance leaving without a deal, gave the EU tremendous negotiating leverage. A bad deal was almost inevitable.

However, the negotiation process revealed that the Eurosceptics had no alternative to May's disastrous approach. Their own lack of clarity over what Brexit should involve had been exposed during the referendum campaign itself. They broadly favoured leaving the EU's Single Market and Customs Union and striking a free-trade deal with the EU, but they could not articulate a convincing vision for Brexit – still less for a post-Brexit Britain. This lack of clear planning contributed to the post-referendum political vacuum, which Remainers filled with denunciations of the vote. Moreover, although May appointed leading Eurosceptics to key Brexit-related posts – Johnson as Foreign Secretary, David Davis as Brexit Secretary, and Liam Fox as International Trade Secretary – they failed to generate a compelling alternative to her strategy.

Thatcherism: the problem, not the solution

The Tory Eurosceptics' evident disorientation stemmed from their Thatcherite worldview, which was fundamentally inadequate to the political task at hand, in two main ways. First, as chapter 1 discussed, Tory Eurosceptics misunderstand the EU as a foreign superstate, rather than an expression of domestic political decay. This led to a breezy, unrealistic belief that quitting the EU would be simple and would be sufficient to revive British sovereignty and democracy. They wholly underestimated the investment of the United Kingdom's own state machinery in the EU's intergovernmental networks, and the accompanying

cosmopolitan commitments of the country's cultural, professional and educational elites. This posed an immediate problem insofar as the state bureaucracy greeted the task of implementing Brexit with at best cool indifference and at worst outright hostility. Their flawed outlook also blinded the Eurosceptics to the EU's interest in making Brexit as difficult as possible. Most importantly, it meant that they had little to say about the British political class's turn away from its own people and towards the elites of Europe, or how that had created the basis for the anti-establishment reaction that had generated the referendum and, indeed, their own victory.

Reflecting this limited understanding, the Eurosceptics' second problem was that Thatcherism could not provide a post-Brexit vision that would reconnect them with citizens and rebuild the state's political sovereignty. As chapter 2 discussed, the Eurosceptics were rebels within Britain's political elite and capitalist class. They emerged in the early 1990s as some Thatcherites railed against Brussels bureaucracy and came to believe that the British economy would be better served by leaving the EU. As chapter 3 noted, for them, Brexit meant more deregulation and globalization. But these were emphatically not the reasons why most people had voted to leave the EU.

While Leave voters favoured national sovereignty and democracy, they were unmoved by issues of free trade or business deregulation. Working-class voters in particular had voted against a system that had entailed de-industrialization and abandonment to low-wage, low-skilled, insecure employment in towns with ageing infrastructure and overstretched public services. This stagnation was a direct result of Thatcherite policies and could not be addressed by tinkering with Britain's foreign trade relations. What was needed was bold industrial policy, massive investment, skills training and new infrastructure to boost productivity, enhance growth and create higher-quality jobs. As Thatcherites, the Eurosceptics had nothing to offer beyond a few deregulated 'free ports'. They had

played a critical role in creating the political void; they were not obviously part of the solution.

One effect of this Tory blindness to the underlying motives of many Leave voters is that they underestimated the appeal of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party. In the spring of 2017, as withdrawal negotiations with the EU approached, Theresa May opportunistically called a snap general election, hoping to exploit Remainer disarray and convert favourable poll ratings into a stronger parliamentary majority. But, with Corbyn newly re-elected as Labour leader, he was temporarily able to insist on respecting the referendum result, thereby neutralizing the Brexit issue. Many voters were sympathetic to Corbyn as an anti-establishment outsider apparently offering an alternative to Thatcherism, including the re-nationalization of public services, a £250bn 'national transformation fund', higher taxes on the rich and greater welfare spending. Consequently, Labour increased its share of the vote and parliamentary seats, reducing May to a minority government dependent on the support of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party. As we shall see, this further weakened May's hand in the withdrawal talks.

Another effect of the Eurosceptics' narrow obsession with trade was serious political naivety about these talks. They believed that because Britain ran a large trade deficit with Europe, it was in the EU's interests swiftly to agree a favourable deal. In January 2017, Brexit Secretary David Davis (2017) told Parliament that Britain would secure 'a comprehensive free-trade agreement and a comprehensive customs agreement that will deliver the exact same benefits as we have, but also enable . . . [the UK to] form trade deals with the rest of the world'. A few months later, Trade Secretary Liam Fox even claimed that, given the two sides' pre-existing regulatory alignment, a UK–EU free-trade agreement 'should be one of the easiest in history', unless 'politics gets in the way of economics' (McClean 2017; Daddow 2018). But, of course, politics was always going to get in the way – at home and abroad.

Brexit was a serious political threat to the EU. Its leaders had an obvious interest in making leaving as difficult and costly as possible in order to discourage others from following suit. Moreover, as noted in chapter 1, the EU is a neoliberal economic constitution for Europe: it cannot be amended, only accepted or rejected entirely. The EU had to defend the 'integrity of the Single Market': it could not allow a departing member-state to retain the benefits of market access while escaping from the regulations governing that market. Following the referendum, both French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel made clear that Britain had to be seen to pay a price for leaving (Chassany 2016). The EU Council's decision to insist on finalizing a withdrawal agreement before discussing the future relationship was clearly designed to neutralize the advantage created by Britain's trade deficit during the withdrawal talks.

The EU's hand was further strengthened by the British government's political weakness. Despite May's mantra that 'no deal is better than a bad deal', in practice she was clearly unwilling to walk away without an agreement. Moreover, parliamentary Remainers were seeking to make Brexit as difficult as possible, with Labour's Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer insisting on holding the government to Davis's absurd promise to secure the 'exact same benefits' as remaining in the EU (Labour Party 2018). This would make most forms of Brexit impossible and certainly ruled out 'no deal'. With a largely supine British government and parliament, the EU could confidently drive a hard bargain, knowing that neither the government nor the opposition that might replace it would be willing to walk away from the negotiating table.

The final weakness of the Eurosceptics' obsession with trade at the expense of politics was that they remained vulnerable to Remainer reaction. By narrowing the claimed benefits of leaving the EU to questions of trade, they reduced Brexit to a technical question of economics. As the referendum had shown, on this terrain Remainers had

the advantage, being able to mobilize endless prophesies of doom from professional economists. This was the same profession that had neglected to predict the 2008 global financial crisis, or even seriously to reflect on its failure since. And, as chapter 3 showed, many of their Brexit predictions had already been disproven by post-referendum events. Nonetheless, the 'experts' and their media allies sustained Project Fear, predicting economic apocalypse in the case of a no-deal Brexit – everything from shortages of medicines and drinking water to outbreaks of 'super-gonorrhoea'. This strengthened Remainer elites by keeping their base mobilized and fearful while grinding down Leave support – and it further emboldened the EU.

Northern Ireland: the flaw in the crown

The most important political issue that the EU was able to exploit in the Brexit talks was the weakness of the British state's sovereignty in Northern Ireland. Brexit entailed customs and regulatory checks on trade between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. At the same time, Britain's government of the province was constitutionally dependent on the cooperation of the Irish Republic, an EU member-state with a strongly Europhile political elite. These circumstances allowed the EU to exploit the Irish border problem in order to stymie Brexit, and to throw British politics into chaos. Again, the Tory Eurosceptics neither understood this issue, nor did they have an adequate response.

The problem that Brexit created in Ireland was that customs and regulatory checks would be required for goods crossing the Irish border, at least on the EU side, to ensure that Single Market regulations were observed. This created a trilemma for the British government, in which it sought to achieve three things when only two were possible simultaneously: (1) to leave the Single Market and Customs Union; (2) without creating a trade border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;

and (3) without creating a trade border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The second condition was thought to be necessary to the stability of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) that underwrote Northern Ireland's constitutional order. This was not because the GFA prohibited border controls; in fact, the Agreement said almost nothing about the border – which was, in any case, already policed for tax smuggling and illegal migration. Rather, the problem was that the GFA is a political deal between the United Kingdom and the Republic that provides the basis for the power-sharing regime through which Northern Ireland has been governed since the late 1990s (Bassett 2020: 82). Any significant changes governing relations between the two parts of Ireland had to be consensual – Britain could not act unilaterally. However, the Irish government, led by Leo Varadkar, was hostile to Brexit and declined to cooperate. Along with British Remainers and many northern Nationalists, Varadkar claimed that a trade border would undermine the hard-won peace in the North (D. Smith 2018). This was despite the fact that Sinn Fein repudiated the idea of any return to violence, and veteran Irish Republicans rubbished the scaremongering (Carswell 2017). The Europhile Irish establishment apparently believed that the EU could stop Brexit from happening and was keen to help Brussels achieve this (Bassett 2020: 94–5). Consequently, when the British government proposed technological solutions to avoid a 'hard' customs border, Dublin and Brussels rejected them as unworkable (Gudgin and Bassett 2018).

In the face of this intransigence, and with the Article 50 clock ticking, May's negotiators accepted the EU's 'backstop' proposals: if a solution to the border issue could not be mutually agreed, then the whole United Kingdom would remain within the EU Single Market and Customs Union until an agreement was reached. The only alternative was to keep Northern Ireland alone in the EU economic zone, but this would have entailed border checks between Britain and Northern Ireland, which was unacceptable to May's DUP

backers. The backstop avoided both an internal border within the United Kingdom and a hard border in Ireland, but at the cost of accepting EU rules over which the United Kingdom would no longer have any say. Moreover, exiting this arrangement would depend on Brussels' agreement to new border arrangements – potentially trapping the UK forever. The backstop made a mockery of 'taking back control'.

The Eurosceptics' deep inadequacy was fully revealed by their reaction to these proposals. When May presented her proposed withdrawal agreement to the Cabinet at Chequers in July 2018, the Brexit Secretary David Davis resigned, followed a day later by Boris Johnson. But, despite rejecting the Chequers proposals – and the actual Withdrawal Agreement that eventually emerged from them, which differed but retained the backstop – the Eurosceptics had literally no alternative to offer. Davis, Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg, chair of the backbench 'European Research Group' (ERG) of Eurosceptic Tory MPs, all publicly denounced Chequers, insisting that Parliament would not accept a deal based on it, but they never published any rival plan. Resolutely ignoring the EU's refusal to compromise, they only repeated their technical proposals for the border and waffled vaguely about a 'Canada-style free-trade agreement' with the EU or simply leaving without a deal and relying on World Trade Organization rules. This exposed the Eurosceptics to widespread mockery and allowed Theresa May and her supporters to claim, in true Thatcherite style, that there was no alternative to her deal – not least because Parliament would certainly reject a no-deal Brexit.

The underlying problem here was not a lack of technical detail but rather the Eurosceptics' political inability as Conservative Unionists to recognize the limits of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland. We will return to this highly significant constitutional vulnerability in more detail in chapter 6. But at the heart of the problem is the fact that, since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the

United Kingdom's government of Northern Ireland has depended on collaboration with the Irish government. Taking a harder line with Dublin and Brussels in the withdrawal negotiations risked having to assert Britain's sovereignty over the province by acting unilaterally on the border question, and placing the onus on Ireland to avoid a hard border. However, London could not do this precisely because it risked a breakdown of relations with Dublin, which would jeopardize the only method that Whitehall has for maintaining the union with Northern Ireland. The Eurosceptics certainly could not say how Britain should govern Northern Ireland were such a breakdown to occur.

Ironically, then, far from expressing its triumph, Brexit revealed the political vacuousness of Thatcherite Euroscepticism. Its proponents had no answers to the problems posed by the decay of British sovereignty and democracy because they did not recognize them, or their own role in creating them. As free-marketeers, they breezily asserted that no deal would be no problem because they believed a buccaneering Britain could only prosper once freed from the dead hand of Brussels bureaucracy. But, as chapter 2 showed, the Thatcherite belief that there is no alternative to the market was one of the key causes of the political void that EU member-statehood had emerged to manage. No-deal advocacy might be red meat for some hard-line Brexiters, but it was not connected to a compelling vision of post-Brexit Britain capable of mobilizing the wider population behind a course of confrontation with the EU. Just as they had no grasp of how Britain actually governed Northern Ireland, the Eurosceptics had nothing to offer the millions of people who had suffered under neoliberalism and who felt abandoned by the political class. Fundamentally, the Eurosceptics' outlook was part of the problem that caused working-class citizens to vote for Brexit.

Impasse: Remain's contradictions revealed

In January 2019, May's EU Withdrawal Agreement was presented to Parliament and defeated by 230 votes – the largest government defeat in British parliamentary history. The Tory Eurosceptics had rebelled against May's deal with its hated Irish 'backstop', and the Remainer opposition had also opposed it. This initiated a period of total political paralysis where, for five long months, the people's elected representatives were simply incapable of agreeing a way forward. In a series of so-called 'meaningful votes', Parliament considered and rejected every option put to it: May's deal, no deal, remaining in the Customs Union, revoking Article 50, a second referendum, and various other alternatives. With Parliament paralysed and the Article 50 deadline for actually leaving the EU looming at the end of March, the government was forced to request an extension, first to May and later to October. The Eurosceptics' weakness had given ultra-Remainers the perfect opportunity to present a second referendum as the only way out of this chaos and paralysis. Ultimately, however, their attempts to stop Brexit failed. This section explains why, dealing first with authoritarian liberals and then the Corbynite socialists.

Authoritarian liberalism's limits exposed

Authoritarian liberals are those committed to upholding the interests of the market and private property at the expense of democracy (Wilkinson 2021). The mainstay of Parliament's Remainer faction, they were spread across Britain's political parties: Remainer Tories like Anna Soubry and Dominic Grieve; the Liberal Democrats and Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP); and most of the Labour Party. They never accepted the referendum result but worked constantly to de-legitimize it, not least by linking it with racism and fascism (see chapter 3). Ultimately,

however, this contempt for the people was to be their undoing.

Authoritarian liberals' arguments for ignoring or rerunning the referendum ultimately rested on an elitist claim that 'our sovereign parliament' could ignore the expressed will of the majority of citizens (Worley 2016). They perhaps drew vaguely on the eighteenth-century conservative MP Edmund Burke, who had famously claimed that parliamentarians could vote however they wanted, even against the wishes of their electors; the latter could then oust their MP at the next election, if they so wished. Applied to Brexit, this doctrine implied that it would be legitimate for the Remainer MPs to ignore the referendum result. Moreover, because 75 per cent of MPs had campaigned to Remain (Press Association 2016), they had the numbers necessary to do so.

There were two glaring problems with this position. First, Remainer MPs were invoking Parliament's sovereignty only to negate it. Rather than truly reasserting Parliament's supremacy, they in fact sought to maintain a situation in which Parliament had actually surrendered its authority to ministers and bureaucrats operating through EU institutions. Second, and more significantly, the elitist perspective vastly exaggerates the degree to which Parliament can exercise authority autonomously from the will of those who elect it. As Richard Tuck (2019) pointed out, the only reason to think that Parliament has the authority to pass laws that should be binding on all citizens is that it represents those citizens. If MPs instead legislate based on their own personal preferences, or those of a minority – and especially if they do so in defiance of their own explicit political promises – they sacrifice this claim to represent the people and hence undermine their own political authority (Ramsay 2019b).

The difficulty for Remainer MPs was that they had not only enacted the referendum, but they also promised repeatedly to respect the result. The EU Referendum Act 2015 was passed overwhelmingly, by 544 to 53 on its

second reading and 316 to 53 on its third. It achieved near-total cross-party support, with only the SNP opposed. And politicians on all sides made it clear that, while the referendum would not be *legally* binding, *politically* it would be (Loughlin 2018). As the (pro-Remain) government leaflet sent to all households had pledged: 'This is your decision. The Government will implement what you decide' (HM Government 2016). Furthermore, 85 per cent of MPs elected in 2017 had pledged to respect the referendum result in their manifestos (Ramsay 2019b). The electoral mandate given by the people was therefore crystal clear.

Consequently, authoritarian liberals were constantly caught between their instincts to impose their own minoritarian preferences, and the political reality that they would, at some point, have to justify whatever they did to the voters. The risk was not simply that some MPs in Leave-voting constituencies might lose their own seats. A bigger problem was that if MPs openly defied their electoral mandate, they would expose Parliament's claim to be acting on a democratic basis as a sham. No matter how they had voted in the referendum, citizens would plainly see that Parliament had no intention of respecting popular votes if they conflicted with MPs' own preferences. They would have no reason to trust politicians or participate in any election ever again. Parliament's authority would be permanently shattered.

Enough MPs recognized enough of this to prevent the authoritarian liberal cause from succeeding. Ultimately, too many Remain MPs vacillated for Brexit to be prevented. They were openly tempted to renege on their earlier promises but unwilling to take responsibility for the consequences. To get their own way, they instead had to claim that they were still representing the people – revealing the limits of their political autonomy from the citizenry. They had to claim either that the referendum was illegitimate because of electoral fraud or subversion (see chapter 3), or that the majority had changed its mind, such that a second referendum was required.

The authoritarian liberals' vacillation was displayed immediately after the referendum in the phoney war over the triggering of Article 50. Ultra-Remainers clearly hoped that Parliament would refuse to respect the referendum outcome, and consequently claimed that only Parliament, and not the government, could invoke Article 50. Fronted by the businesswoman Gina Miller, this campaign resulted in a Supreme Court judgement favouring Parliament. However, when the government complied by presenting a bill that would authorize it to trigger Article 50, MPs quailed at defying the majority's will and voted overwhelmingly in favour. This early episode characterized the whole crisis: Remainer MPs loudly insisted on their right to determine if, when and how Britain should leave the EU but were ultimately unwilling to seize control and take full responsibility for making these decisions, instead leaving it to the prime minister.

The People's Vote campaign seemed to have real potential though. Rerunning referendums to get the 'right' result was an established tactic of EU elites, as noted in chapter 3. Despite its populist framing, the People's Vote was transparently the work of Westminster insiders (notably the Blairite fixers Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell), and many of its supporters made no secret of their desire to overturn the 2016 referendum (Mance 2020). Nonetheless, to do so they were forced to resort to the popular will, rather than merely their own judgement. They therefore argued that the people should have the final say on any withdrawal agreement, now that the facts of what Brexit would actually involve were clear. When Parliament refused to endorse Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement in January 2019 and became deadlocked, the People's Vote campaign also argued that a second referendum was essential to break the impasse. It mobilized large demonstrations in London and, in April 2019, a legislative amendment to enact a second referendum fell just 12 votes short. The authoritarian liberals came tantalizingly close – but ultimately failed.

This was because enough MPs could see, however reluctantly, that rerunning the referendum would be deeply unpopular. The People's Vote campaign's 'facts' about what Brexit would involve were actually artefacts of the authoritarian liberals' own campaigning (Tuck 2018). Their relentless doom-mongering about no deal and their high-profile agitation for a second referendum clearly gave the EU no incentive to compromise; indeed, it only encouraged Brussels to insist on a bad deal in the hope that a weary electorate would reject it and opt to remain. Similarly, the parliamentary deadlock was the result of Remainer MPs' own refusal to vote for anything except Brexit-in-name-only. A second referendum might produce a majority for Remain, enabling the authoritarian liberals to get their own way by acting in the name of the people; but millions of people would be able to see that, in truth, they had only manipulated the situation to allow them to ignore a popular vote they disliked. Even if MPs cared little for the consequences for Parliament's authority, enough feared the wrath of their own constituents to recognize that voting for a second referendum would be electoral suicide (Maguire 2019).

The People's Vote strategy failed because it shared a fundamental tension with the structure of EU member-statehood itself. As chapters 1 and 2 showed, the EU is not a new kind of sovereign state, drawing authority from a new Europe-wide demos. It is comprised of member-states, whose political essence is the *evasion* of the authority of national populations. National elites are elected, but are then enabled to make decisions and rules through remote EU institutions which are not accountable to citizens. Nonetheless, the fact that they are still elected – and on a national basis – implies that the highest political authority within a member-state remains that nation's population. Although national elites systematically try to evade this fact, they are still compelled on occasion to acknowledge it, including through national referendums. The People's Vote shared the same basic structure. It was

anti-democratic because – as Leave voters insisted, and many Remain voters accepted – there had already been a 'people's vote' in 2016. Another referendum in which Remain featured on the ballot would simply fail to respect that earlier vote. There would be no point even to voting because, given Parliament's refusal to enact the 2016 referendum result, citizens could have no faith that their vote would be respected. And yet, by resorting to consulting the people (albeit only after the Leave vote had been suitably ground down by elite intransigence and fear-mongering), the People's Vote campaign exposed the reality that the people were the ultimate source of Parliament's authority. Parliament's legal sovereignty – its capacity to make or repeal any law – was ultimately not independent of the electorate politically.

Corbynite socialism self-destructs

Corbynite socialism also failed the test of Brexit. Jeremy Corbyn, a traditional left-Eurosceptic from the distant Bennite past, had campaigned half-heartedly for Remain. But after the vote, he insisted that Labour must respect the referendum result – a commitment expressed in the party's 2017 manifesto. Nonetheless, for all Corbyn's talk of democratic socialism, in mid-2019 he switched to backing a second referendum and pledged to campaign for Remain. This was not simply because he was outmanoeuvred by his party's Blairite authoritarian liberals. The decision expressed the exhaustion of British socialism and of the Labour Party itself.

Corbyn's fundamental problem was that the Labour Party had been hollowed out through its decades-long capitulation to neoliberalism. Indeed, his own election as leader was an ironic effect of this process. His predecessor, Ed Miliband, had changed the party's rules on leadership elections in order to break the trade unions' residual power, and prop up the party's dwindling mass base, by allowing registered supporters, not just full members, to vote. In the

context of mass disillusionment with the party's Blairite trajectory, this led to the election of a socialist throwback – not what Miliband had intended.

At the same time, however, the party's base, membership and parliamentary echelons had all been fundamentally reshaped by its accommodation to the neoliberal revolt. As chapter 2 argued, the single most important aspect of the voiding of representative democracy was the defeat of the labour movement which had, through the trade unions and Labour clubs, connected the Labour Party to its working-class constituency. Through the late 1980s and 1990s, the party pitched towards middle England and the aspirant middle classes, increasingly taking its working-class base for granted because, as Peter Mandelson reportedly said, they 'had nowhere else to go'. Abandoned by their former representatives and suffering years of economic stagnation, many working-class people also withdrew from Labour. Consequently, by the time of the EU referendum, the bulk of the party's membership was now firmly professional-managerial class and, consequently, pro-Remain (ESRC Party Members Project 2019). As chapter 3 showed, this segment of the population was comfortable with the technocratic politics of EU member-statehood and had little understanding of, or sympathy towards, their fellow citizens who backed Leave.

This posed a basic electoral conundrum. A substantial minority of mostly working-class Labour voters, around 30 per cent, had voted Leave (Lord Ashcroft 2016). Moreover, while the Remain vote was concentrated in middle-class metropoles, the Leave vote was very geographically dispersed. Seventy-two per cent of Labour's most marginal seats had voted Leave, as had 78 per cent of the Tory marginals that Labour needed to win in order to form a government (Johnson 2019). A party of militant Remainers found that its only route to power lay through Leave voters.

For all his vaunted left-wing radicalism, Corbyn's basic answer to this conundrum was to adopt the classic Blairite

strategy of triangulation, trying to appease both sides – but in practice pleasing neither. This is why Corbyn ditched his traditional Euroscepticism during the referendum but campaigned only tepidly for Remain. Likewise, he insisted on respecting the result, yet also allowed his shadow Brexit secretary, Keir Starmer, to set out 'six tests' for any Brexit deal that effectively ruled out anything other than Brexit-in-name-only (Jones 2018). This evasive strategy worked well enough for the 2017 election but disintegrated in 2019. Labour's refusal to back May's Withdrawal Agreement made it clear that the party would not support even a modest break from EU strictures. After months of chaos and crises, including major losses to the ultra-Remain Liberal Democrats in the May 2019 European Parliament elections (discussed further below), Labour resolved at its July party conference not only to pursue a second referendum but also to campaign for Remain. For all the talk of socialism, the Corbynite left had ended up openly disrespecting the political equality of Britain's poorest voters, becoming the militant wing of the Europhiles' authoritarian liberalism. As we predicted at the time, this inevitably resulted in electoral disaster for Labour (Jones 2019a).

Why was Labour so hostile to Brexit that it was willing to commit electoral suicide? That Blairites should do this is unsurprising. The New Labour project arose out of the voiding of Labour's connections to the organized working class, and its leaders had enthusiastically embraced the remote, intergovernmental decision making of EU member-statehood, being rewarded with sinecures in the Commission and elsewhere. It is the Corbynistas' retreat from Brexit that is more significant because it represents the final nail in the coffin of twentieth-century social democracy.

This retreat may appear superficially perplexing. Electoral arithmetic aside, even Corbyn's historically modest programme of nationalization and state intervention would have been at best difficult and at worst illegal

within the EU. Implementing it as a member-state would have embroiled a Corbyn government in relentless legal battles with business interests, which would have gone to the British courts to enforce EU law (Nicol 2018, 2019). Smarter Corbynistas conceded the problem, arguing for 'remain and reform', ignoring the fact that, as chapter 1 showed, the EU is deliberately structured to frustrate any such programme. Some had even acknowledged the EU's intrinsic neoliberalism before the referendum, floating the possibility of a 'left exit', or 'Lexit', from the EU. The influential leftist journalist Owen Jones put the case persuasively in 2015. Jones recalled the reasons why the left had historically opposed European integration and highlighted the EU's disastrous imposition of austerity on southern Europe. He insisted that Thatcherite and UKIP enthusiasm for Brexit should not dissuade the left from mounting its own 'populist campaign' for Lexit, focused on 'building a new Britain . . . of workers' rights, a genuine living wage, public ownership, industrial activism, and tax justice' – a vision that would 'help the left reconnect with working-class communities it lost touch with long ago' (O. Jones 2015). Yet, when the referendum came, Jones and his fellow Corbynites backed Remain; and by 2019, they had entirely isolated themselves from 'working-class communities'.

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the Corbynistas were not serious about socialist transformation. They were defeatists clinging to the threadbare protections of EU member-statehood rather than putting their faith in working-class agency and democracy. Jones later explained that his 2015 article was merely a tactic – pursued by him and other Corbynistas – to protect EU labour and environmental safeguards. Suggesting that a Corbyn-led Labour Party might campaign for Brexit was intended to dissuade David Cameron from negotiating an opt-out from these arrangements during his pre-referendum renegotiation of Britain's membership (O. Jones 2016). Jones was clearly aware of the EU's

constitutional protection of the interests of capital over workers, its negation of democracy, and even the problem of the void between the left and working-class voters. But these considerations were secondary to preserving a few regulatory protections that were, as chapter 1 noted, basic minima that largely followed and were exceeded by British standards. Far from being confident about a bright, socialist future, the Corbynistas had actually internalized the left's historic defeat and could only expect things to get worse. For them, more democracy could only mean more defeats for the left. This point was made explicit by another Corbynista journalist, Paul Mason. He admitted that the EU was irredeemably anti-democratic and neoliberal, with a judiciary that had 'subordinated workers' right[s] to . . . employer[s'] right[s]'; however, given the left's political weakness, Brexit could only empower the Tories, who would 'turn Britain into a neoliberal fantasy island' (Mason 2016).

For all their red flag-waving, the Corbynistas' political horizons were pitifully low. They could tolerate Brexit only if it was a *guaranteed* 'Lexit', directly advancing the Labour Party's political objectives (Cunliffe 2018). But unlike the EU, which was designed to lock in neoliberalism, Brexit would not guarantee any particular policy agenda. It would merely force British political leaders to make decisions for which they would be fully accountable to citizens, with no way to hide behind EU rules. What followed would depend on democratic struggle. Yet, clearly, the Corbynistas had no faith in their ability to win this struggle. They talked of socialism, which is premised on the working-class wielding power. But, in truth, they could only see workers as hapless victims in need of protection – through the anti-democratic EU if necessary. They had inherited from Old Labour the idea that the state should protect workers from the ravages of capitalism but had forgotten that such protections as existed are always the product of active, working-class struggle – rather than being the gift of EU institutions.

For all their revulsion at Blairite neoliberalism, the Corbynistas were very much products of the Blair era (Nicol 2020). Despite sometimes being categorized as 'left populist', they were never entirely comfortable with the notion of 'the people', preferring instead to speak of 'the many' – denoting the many vulnerable groups suffering under neoliberalism, rather than invoking a coherent working class or nation. This reflected the left's abandonment of socialism in favour of a Third Way commitment to intersectionalism, which understands individuals as bearers of intersecting identities that are products of discrimination and privilege (Winlow and Hall 2022). Society is thereby defined by mutual vulnerability, with racism, sexism and phobias pervasive among ordinary people (Ramsay 2022). For the intersectionalist left, the working-class is not, as Marxists argued, the subject of a universalist politics with the capacity to eliminate social division of all kinds. It is just one victim group among many in need of recognition and protection (Barnett and Belkhir 2001). The contemporary left is comfortable with the working class only insofar as it maintains a plaintive, victimized status, passively accepting the ministrations of progressive elites (Cobley 2018). Whenever workers independently assert their own political subjectivity, the left recoils in horror, unable to see anything but a threat to inter-group relations – resulting inevitably in charges of intolerance or even fascism (Guilluy 2019: 96).

This explains why the left struggled with Brexit as an assertion of national sovereignty. Such an assertion foregrounds the interests of an entity larger than the diverse identities that concern intersectionalists. As chapter 3 showed, claims on behalf of the people could only be understood by the left as racism. Where the working class made demands as citizens on the state – that they wanted controlled immigration and better economic prospects – the intersectionalists could see only 'welfare chauvinism', implying that citizens have no greater claim to the state's resources than anyone else (e.g., Donoghue

and Kuisma 2022). This encapsulated the contemporary left's actual repudiation of the old labour movement for which they were ostensibly nostalgic. As chapter 2 notes, the post-war national welfare state was created by Labour. The contemporary left's hostility to the nation, and especially to immigration control, is an ironic echo of the old Marxist revolutionaries who once tried to break the workers' loyalty to Labour and the British state by arguing for open borders and proletarian solidarity against capital (Freeman 1986). However, by 2016, the political and business elite had long since repudiated not only racist prejudice (Heartfield 2017) but also the nation itself, preferring cosmopolitan rule through the EU and access to its reserves of cheap migrant labour. The Corbynistas' defence of 'free movement' stemmed not from the old revolutionary desire to overthrow the state or capitalism but rather from their intersectionalist conviction that the state should protect marginalized migrants from victimization by racially 'privileged' citizens. This rendered leftists unable to reconcile with the bulk of Leave voters.

Despite their superficial differences, the authoritarian liberals and the Corbynite left converged during the long Brexit crisis around an anti-democratic politics of fear. A rough division of labour emerged, with the former stirring fear of economic catastrophe and the latter fear of fascism. The left's one-eyed anti-fascism degenerated into articulating and promoting the professional-managerial class's fear of the British people and the idea that the masses should have a decisive say in political life. When Corbyn abandoned Labour's formal respect for the referendum result, the left effectively announced that it had ceased to value the political equality of citizens and had become the militant rearguard of authoritarian liberalism. The voters' verdict, in the general election of 2019, was devastating.

Getting Brexit done: the limits of populism

The Brexit impasse was only broken by the intervention of the populist Brexit Party, which won the May 2019 European Parliament elections. This forced a dramatic reordering of the Conservative government, which took a marked populist turn under Boris Johnson. Populism is, as chapter 2 noted, a symptom of the voiding of democratic representation, which fuels grievances against an unrepresentative elite. This populist moment was undoubtedly decisive in securing the principle of majority rule and ensuring that Brexit finally happened. Yet it also illustrated why populism does not provide meaningful answers to our political problems: it is a creature of the void, not a solution to it.

The Brexit Party breaks the impasse

That the May 2019 European elections happened at all in Britain was itself symptomatic of the failure of political representation. The government had triggered Article 50 on 29 March 2017, so Britain ought to have left the EU by the end of March 2019. This failure to implement the referendum result was not lost on Leave voters, who turned out en masse for the newly formed Brexit Party under former UKIP and Leave.EU leader Nigel Farage. Unlike the hidebound parliamentary parties, Farage reached across traditional ideological divides, selecting candidates ranging from Thatcherites to former revolutionary communists like Claire Fox. Setting aside questions of policy, even on Farage's favourite topic of immigration, the Brexit Party campaigned exclusively on the central question of the day: democracy and the need to respect the 2016 referendum, even if that meant no deal with the EU. It won the largest share of the vote (30.5 per cent) and the most seats, pushing the Tories into fifth place.

To save its own skin, the Conservative Party was compelled to prove its commitment to Brexit. Tory MPs quickly replaced Theresa May with Boris Johnson, who recalled Vote Leave mastermind Dominic Cummings to government and appointed a pro-Brexit Cabinet. This decisively clarified the division in Parliament: a government now unequivocally committed to Brexit faced an opposition united against it. This set the scene for a final parliamentary showdown that would see Johnson's Conservatives seize the populist mantle.

Johnson's goal was to scare Brussels into negotiating a withdrawal agreement that Tory Brexiters could support. When the EU refused to budge, Johnson advised the queen to prorogue (suspend) Parliament for five weeks in September and early October. This was highly provocative because, if no alternative agreement was reached, the default outcome would be a no-deal exit from the EU on 31 October. This deliberately put immense pressure on Parliament, and on Brussels and Dublin. And it was plainly intended to set the stage for an electoral confrontation between 'the people' and Parliament.

In response, the authoritarian liberals yet again engaged in loud histrionics and anti-democratic manoeuvrings but failed to seize control of events and impose their will. The shadow attorney-general denounced Johnson as a 'tin-pot dictator' while Corbynistas – by now the shock troops of the cause of Blairism and the *Financial Times* – tried to convince themselves that they were still doing radical politics by calling the prime minister a fascist and organizing protests to 'stop the coup' (Ramsay 2019c). Before the prorogation could take effect, Remain MPs rushed through the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) Act 2019, which required the prime minister to request an extension to the Article 50 talks unless Parliament approved a withdrawal agreement or a no-deal exit. Johnson had no choice but to comply, but he also expelled the 21 Tory MPs who had supported this legislation, turning the Conservatives into an entirely pro-Brexit party. Simultaneously, Gina Miller

and the SNP MP Joanna Cherry sued the government in the courts. The Supreme Court declared the prorogation unlawful in a controversial judgement that contradicted Article IX of the 1689 Bill of Rights, a bedrock constitutional provision that prohibits judicial interference in parliamentary proceedings (Loughlin 2019).

The prorogation crisis marked the nadir of Parliament's disastrous inability to deal with Brexit and its failure to understand its own constitutional role. Remain MPs triumphantly invoked the Supreme Court's ruling without any recognition that it had entirely discounted MPs' own authority (Ramsay 2019a). The Supreme Court had ruled the prorogation illegal because it frustrated Parliament's ability to supervise the executive, compromising democracy and thereby parliamentary sovereignty. But this was plainly untrue. Parliament had met before the prorogation took effect. It passed its Withdrawal Act, and could have legislated to mandate the prime minister to shorten the prorogation to a single day, or held a vote of no confidence in the government, or enacted a general election. Parliament chose not to do any of these things. The Supreme Court judgement usurped Parliament's authority by intervening instead. Parliament was not thwarted by a 'fascist' prime minister but by its own evasion of political responsibility.

With their Withdrawal Act, Remainer MPs had temporarily stopped Brexit but, yet again, they had not imposed their own solution, instead passing responsibility back to the prime minister. Parliament was blocking the government from implementing its manifesto promise to enact Brexit. However, when challenged by Johnson to call a general election to resolve the impasse, MPs repeatedly refused. The 2011 Fixed-Term Parliament Act had set five-year terms for Parliament. To call early elections required either two-thirds of MPs to agree or for Parliament to pass a motion of no confidence in the government, with no successor government being assembled within 14 days. Nothing symbolized more clearly the contradictions and irresponsibility of the authoritarian liberal position. They

did not dare to revoke Article 50 or enact a second referendum themselves. Nor did they dare face the people's judgement in an election. Instead, they sought to use their numerical advantage in Parliament (representing a minority position in the country) to force an unwilling prime minister to do their bidding. That this involved prolonging a government that many had declared 'dictatorial' and 'fascist' only advertised their dishonesty.

The prorogation crisis nonetheless had the effect in Dublin and Brussels for which Johnson had hoped. The Irish prime minister suddenly agreed to replace the 'backstop' with a Northern Ireland Protocol that would solve the border trilemma in a different way. Northern Ireland would remain within the EU's Single Market and the UK Customs Union, while the United Kingdom as a whole left the EU. With Dublin on board, Brussels agreed to this arrangement, which effectively ceded to the EU control over Northern Ireland's economy, while creating a trade border within the 'United' Kingdom. This was a dramatic recognition of the practical limits of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland. But it did allow Johnson to present a revised withdrawal agreement to Parliament. The Commons approved the deal in principle but rejected the timetable for implementation. Johnson was forced to agree a new exit date with the EU, 31 January 2020. In the meantime, he again demanded a general election – and this time the Labour leadership agreed.

This was Remain MPs' final opportunity to block Brexit, and so it is worth asking why they (yet again) failed to do so. The polls looked very bad for Labour, and 40 Labour MPs voted against an election, knowing that they were unlikely to survive their constituents' wrath. Moreover, at this moment, the People's Vote believed that they were closer than ever to a Commons majority for a second referendum (UK in a Changing Europe 2021). Parliament's authoritarian liberals were openly plotting to bring down Johnson through a no-confidence motion, then install a Remainer government under a 'caretaker' prime minister

that would cancel Brexit. Yet again, however, they vacillated. Why?

Partly, they were discouraged by Leave voters' stubborn determination; partly, they were hobbled by the tribalism, ideological delusions and opportunism that are all that remain of Britain's exhausted political traditions. The Corbynistas would not support a Tory as caretaker prime minister, while the authoritarian liberals – both inside and outside of the Labour Party – could not support the 'communist' Corbyn. Buoyed by Remainer votes in the European elections, the Liberal Democrats had convinced themselves that their policy of revoking Article 50 without a second referendum would attract votes from both the Tories and Labour (Liberal Democrats 2019: 5–7). As for the SNP, they needed the election out of the way before a criminal trial of their former leader, Alex Salmond, started in early 2020 (Hughes and Payne 2019).

The December 2019 general election returned an overwhelming, 80-seat majority for the Tories, finally clearing the way for the EU referendum result to be implemented. The election's most important feature was the crumbling of Labour's 'red wall' in northern England, its traditional industrial (now post-industrial) heartland. This was a dramatic working-class revolt against Labour, accelerating the long-term drift away from the party that had begun under Blair (Cunliffe 2019). Constituencies that had returned Labour MPs since their creation flipped to the Conservatives who had been responsible for destroying their industries, communities and collective institutions. These voters held no real affection for the Tories, but the Conservatives at least promised to respect their political equality; Labour, the party that claimed to represent them, openly held them in contempt. Labour had been too colonized by the professional-managerial class and its Third Way ideology to seize the democratic mantle of Brexit. Tumbling to its worst electoral defeat since 1932, it now paid the price.

The United Kingdom finally left the EU on 31 January 2020 and, after a one-year transitional period when EU

rules still applied, UK–EU relations were reset on the basis of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), negotiated after Brexit and approved by Parliament in December 2020. Despite Remainers' conviction that Brexit would automatically erode environmental protection and workers' rights, Britain accepted 'non-regression' clauses that forbade such erosion. However, the TCA also reflected the minimal character of Brexit as an exercise in 'taking control'. British sovereignty was restored in some areas, yet some of the anti-democratic features of EU member-statehood were retained. Free and unconditional movement of capital was guaranteed. Significant restrictions on state aid remained, albeit less restrictive than EU law, with subsidies permitted where necessary to support 'tasks in the public interest' (Title XI, Art. 3.3(1)), or avoid 'social hardship' from job losses or service disruptions (Title XI, Art. 3.4(4)). A Partnership Council was created to oversee the implementation and development of rules governing future relations. Unlike the EU, this Council's decisions require mutual consent, and disputes can only be referred to standard international arbitration, not the ECJ, with remedies limited to retaliatory sanctions, rather than legal enforcement via the British courts, as under EU law. Similarly, private entities cannot sue the UK government for alleged breaches. This substantially limits the Agreement's ability to constrain British policy.

Nevertheless, the Partnership Council clearly mimics the structures of member-statehood by continuing to locate decision making in closed-door intergovernmental forums, not Parliament where it belongs. Any British government committed to radical economic transformation would soon run up against the TCA's limits. Embroiled in arbitration suits, it would either have to back down, suffer EU sanctions or renounce the agreement. The Conservatives were happy with this relatively minimal Brexit, of course, because they have little intention of pursuing a radical agenda.

The force and limits of populism

The Brexit crisis was resolved only through the populist interventions of the Brexit Party and Boris Johnson. Yet these events simultaneously demonstrated that populism is less a solution to the problems of democratic representation than a symptom of its advanced decay.

Populism clearly played a central role in both generating and resolving the Brexit crisis. As noted in chapter 2, UKIP's electoral challenge to the Conservatives drove David Cameron to promise an EU referendum in his 2015 manifesto. In 2016, while Farage's populist campaigning may have alienated some moderate Leave-leaning voters, it also mobilized many others. And in 2019, the Brexit Party was decisive, compelling the Conservatives to 'Get Brexit done'. Even more than UKIP, the Brexit Party's intervention was distinctly populist. It shelved policy questions and, unlike the Remainer tribalists, abandoned the left–right division, the better to claim the authority of the people against undemocratic elites.

These events clearly demonstrate the political force and potential of appeals to democracy and popular sovereignty. The Brexit Party succeeded because it made the connection between national sovereignty and the most basic democratic principle: that the majority's decision must be respected; that no vote should count more than any other; and that democracy is therefore based on political equality. This principle appealed strongly to voters, and the party's success terrorized a delinquent Parliament into following the instruction given to it in 2016.

The Brexit Party's intervention also clarified the popular basis of sovereignty in Britain. For all the Remainers' loud proclamations about parliamentary sovereignty, the truth is that Parliament was at best uncomfortable and at worst hostile towards its sovereignty. For decades after the European Communities Act 1972, a large majority of MPs had happily relinquished their legislative supremacy to the EU institutions. After 2016, they remained very reluctant

to take it back. To succeed, Brexiters were therefore forced to rely on the ultimate authority of the people, as expressed in the referendum. Contrary to the charge of British exceptionalism often made against Brexit, Eurosceptics found themselves implicitly embracing a Continental doctrine derived from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the French Revolution. Brexit affirmed that, in this crucial respect, the modern British state, like others in Europe, ultimately depends on the people for its authority (Tuck 2019).

However, if Brexit demonstrated the political potential of appeals to the authority of the people, it also revealed the critical limitations of populism. At every stage, its influence was felt not through the direct control of governmental power but rather through its impact on the political elite. This had the perverse effect of salvaging that political class, at least temporarily. The Brexit Party's intervention prevented Parliament from entirely trashing its own authority by nullifying the 2016 referendum, which it had called for and promised to respect. The extra-parliamentary populists thereby saved Parliament's (albeit threadbare) legitimacy from Parliament itself. Likewise, while the Brexit Party electrified the Conservatives, at no point was it able to provide any political alternative to them. In 2019, the Tories easily appropriated elements of the Brexit Party's general election manifesto, and won a large majority. Sidelined, the Brexit Party was relaunched as Reform UK in January 2020, a right-wing populist party which remains electorally trivial. Consequently, although Brexit was secured and Britain did leave the EU, this populist eruption left us with the Conservative Party – perhaps the oldest political elite in the world – as the main vehicle for solving the problem of the political void. And, as discussed below, the Tories are far from suited for the kind of politics that this task requires.

This outcome is not simply a result of Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system. Certainly, this creates a formidable barrier for challenger parties. But even on the Continent, where proportional representation is

commonplace, populist insurrections typically end up re-empowering establishment elites and technocratic forms of governance (Bickerton 2020). Podemos has propped up Spain's decrepit Socialist Party as a minor coalition partner since 2020, losing its radical elan and much of its popular support for scant political gain (Mariette 2022). In Italy, the Five Star Movement was elected to government in 2018 but, after a rocky coalition with the populist Lega, it ended up collaborating with two establishment parties. This coalition collapsed in 2021, resulting in the installation of a technocratic regime under former EU central banker Mario Draghi (Fazi 2022). Even in the United States, Donald Trump's election changed remarkably little, resulting in disillusioned blue-collar voters flipping back to the neoliberal Democrats. As Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti (2021) have argued, although populism is often counterposed to technocracy, neoliberal technocrats are increasingly becoming 'techno-populists', combining appeals to 'the people' with claims to be efficient managers who can 'get things done'. Emmanuel Macron emblematizes this, rallying the French people against the traditional parties of left and right in order to advance neoliberal reform.

The Brexit Party's real weakness was not Britain's electoral system but rather the intrinsic thinness of the populist worldview. Populism's division of society into the good, ordinary people, on the one hand, and a self-serving, unrepresentative elite, on the other, seems at first sight to explain the politics of Brexit. But the populist outlook is a misleading half-truth that is able to describe the problem of the void but has no solution to it.

The true part of populism is that we really are ruled by a self-serving, unrepresentative elite. This became transparently obvious following the EU referendum, as most of the political class, supported by civil servants, the judiciary, public service broadcasters, the professions and academia openly collaborated to ensure that the referendum result was not enacted. It was not simply that Remain was the

project of a social and political elite, though it was. The political content of their project was also nakedly elitist. The basic democratic principle of political equality was openly called into question as Leave voters were denounced as so ignorant and/or bigoted that their vote was unworthy of respect.

Nevertheless, the false part of the populist outlook is that framing political conflict as 'the people versus the elite' can provide a practical politics for the future. It is particularly ironic that British populists should rely on this approach to pursue the cause of sovereignty and Brexit because it defies a key insight of England's greatest political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Back in the seventeenth century, Hobbes observed that without political representation there are only many people, a multitude, but there can be no singular people, no 'the people'. It is only through effective representation that millions of diverse individuals can imagine themselves to constitute a singular 'people' or a sovereign nation. That political representation, Hobbes argued, did not have to be democratic. Hobbes championed the royalist cause in England's civil war and bluntly asserted that 'The King is the People'. Yet it transpired that the Stuart monarchs failed to represent the people while Parliament succeeded. After the 1688 'Glorious Revolution', Britain developed institutions and traditions that were able to represent the nation back to itself. What Hobbes teaches us is that the very fact that a 'people versus elite' framing appears to characterize British politics today reflects the decay of the representative institutions through which we once imagined ourselves to be *a people*. As chapter 2 discussed, these institutions have lost much of their vitality and authority through the voiding of representative democracy and the rise of member-statehood. And, as this chapter has shown, the most important of these institutions – Britain's political parties – are empty shells.

The years of elite resistance to Brexit reveal that the true source of this weakness in national sovereignty lies at home – not in the EU institutions, which are merely expressions

of the domestic void. Populism is only a symptom of that void; it cannot fill it. Merely proclaiming the sovereignty of the people or campaigning against wicked elites is not enough. We need a richer vision of what unites us, what our common citizenship means, and how we should institutionalize it. We need new thinking and policy platforms capable of energizing and mobilizing people to take an active part in democratic self-rule, rather than remaining the passive and resentful victims of an uncaring elite. This asks too much of populists. Their worldview predisposes them to posture endlessly as anti-establishment outsiders – even when actually elected to government – rather than taking on the harder task of reconstituting the state's political authority through effective representation.

Moreover, any attempt to build that authority would necessarily entail exposing divisions within 'the people', contrary to the populist worldview. As the Brexit Party and Reform UK found, for the purposes of a general election, putting flesh on populist bones involves creating policy platforms that always appeal to some constituencies more than others. This is precisely because society is not divided into a homogeneous 'people' against an elite but consists of diverse, contradictory interests. As Michael Lind (2020: 83) observes, 'Populist demagogues cannot . . . be truly representative. No single charismatic individual or party can substitute for institutionalized representation of a pluralistic society in all its variety in all three spheres of politics, the economy, and the culture'.

The challenge for those who seek to invigorate national sovereignty is to be able to represent particular interests (and coalitions of such interests) in a way that can nonetheless credibly articulate the existence of a people or nation as a coherent political entity, notwithstanding its many fractures. This may seem paradoxical. But this challenge has been met before, by the old ruling classes: first in the collaboration between capitalists and aristocracy in imperialist nationalism; and later through capitalists' collaboration with trade union leaders in the post-war

social-democratic nation. In each period, a leading social class credibly presented its particular interests not merely as sectional, selfish preferences but as the interests of the nation as a whole; and they made sufficient concessions to other groups to make this claim plausible. These collaborations ultimately failed – as chapter 2 explains with respect to the post-war nation. The subsequent political failure of member-statehood (and globalism more generally) presents the same challenge once more. Either we answer it – and the next two chapters argue that we will have to find different answers to those of the past – or we will continue to endure the deepening authoritarianism and social fragmentation of the void.

The uninspiring record of the Conservatives' own populist turn only reinforces our doubts about populism as a way out of the technocratic politics of member-statehood. Although Remainers often denounced Boris Johnson as a populist, the Tories are perhaps better characterized as techno-populists, using rhetorical appeals to 'the people' in order to restore technocratic governance. Their 2019 election slogan, 'Get Brexit done', symbolized this, implying that Brexit was not part of a sustained, ongoing campaign for popular sovereignty – for taking control – but rather a now-tedious issue to move beyond (Cunliffe and Jones 2019). By de-politicizing Brexit, the slogan betrayed a lack of any coherent (let alone inspiring) vision from its leading advocates, more than three years after the referendum. The mastermind of this project, Dominic Cummings, was arguably the techno-populist par excellence (Bickerton 2020). He recognized the rot at the heart of British politics but, after urging the people to 'take back control', his approach to government involved highly technocratic solutions: replacing stuffy civil servants with specialized 'weirdos'; reorienting government around 'big data'; and co-opting private sector elites to run things more efficiently.

The substantive political content of this project – if it even deserves such a label – was transparently weak. On the one hand, Johnson's 2019 manifesto confirmed the bankruptcy

of Thatcherism as a political force, and the deluded nature of Thatcherites and Remainers alike. The 'red wall' was only captured because Johnson ran on a post-Thatcherite programme (L. Jones 2020). Lifting Corbyn's widely popular economic policies, the Conservatives promised massive spending increases on the NHS, education and training, and infrastructure as part of a 'levelling-up' agenda directed at areas devastated by neoliberalism. In a further rebuttal to leftist Remainers who insisted that Brexit could *only ever* lead to 'Singapore-on-Thames', the Tory manifesto was merely aspirational on tax cuts, very cautious on deregulation and promised moderate improvements to workers' rights. Far from being 'far right' or 'ethno-nationalist', moreover, Johnson appointed Britain's most ethnically diverse Cabinet, supported by the largest ever number of gay and working-class backbenchers. His government increased taxes to their highest level for decades, spent hundreds of billions of pounds paying businesses to close and workers to stay idle, while doing nothing to diverge from EU regulations. Hapless Thatcherite Eurosceptics were left complaining that this was not the Brexit they had wanted (Shrimsley 2022). Eventually, they brought down the scandal-plagued Johnson, with a field of Thatcherites itching to replace him.

This only demonstrated the Conservative Party's unsuitability as a vehicle for popular-democratic renewal. Merely retaining the 'red wall' constituencies requires an interventionist approach to industry, regional development and infrastructure for which the Thatcherite, free-trading Tory Party was ill prepared and not particularly enthusiastic about. Even under Johnson, a £3.2bn Towns Fund and a £4.8bn Levelling Up Fund were being frittered away on small-scale projects unlikely to drive economic growth (National Audit Office 2022). The Towns Fund was wasted on superficial regeneration projects reminiscent of the Blair era, and misdirected to Tory marginals, rather than the most deprived areas (Grylls and Webber 2020). For all the talk of 'levelling up', it took two years for the

Johnson government even to flesh out the term into broad principles. The February 2022 White Paper, partly plagiarized from Wikipedia, exposed an embarrassing lack of vision and a misunderstanding of basic economic history – hardly surprising given the Thatcherites' reluctance to acknowledge their own role in de-industrializing Britain (see Gudgin 2022). The White Paper's most prominent proposal was to devolve more powers – but not additional resources – to local authorities. The government thereby sought to evade responsibility for addressing the regional inequalities created by previous Thatcherite governments, passing the buck to toothless local mayors, who can be blamed for future failures.

Whatever Johnson's personal failings, the weaknesses of his government ultimately lay in the unstable, contradictory character of the coalition of working-class voters led by Thatcherite Eurosceptics that brought Brexit about. 'Getting Brexit done' in the circumstances of 2019 required a talented opportunist, a Tory toff who could play the populist and rally this coalition. But there was no Johnsonism to succeed Thatcherism. Opportunism and techno-populism could not deliver the vision and policies required to fill the void, or even sustain Johnson's own authority for long.

Post-member-statehood: from COVID to Ukraine

That neither Brexit nor the 2019 election had solved the political sclerosis of the state, nor cured Parliament of its delinquency in representing the people, was starkly confirmed by subsequent events. The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the British government's enthusiastic support for a proxy war with Russia in Ukraine demonstrated the political elite's deep attachment to non-democratic, technocratic and intergovernmental forms of rule, and its dependence on the politics of fear and

emergency. This approach yielded short-term popularity boosts for the government, but it did nothing to generate the meaningful, long-term political authority that can only stem from seeking to represent the people. On the contrary, the implosion of Boris Johnson's government and the Tories' turn to reheated Thatcherism demonstrated and accelerated the decay of the Conservatives' authority, and the frittering away of what little ambition and innovation had emerged in response to Brexit.

Ruling the Covoid

Britain had barely left the EU before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. As we pointed out in March 2020, Britain's response was heavily conditioned by the attributes of member-statehood, being anti-democratic, technocratic and failing to satisfy public needs (Cunliffe et al. 2020; McCormack and Jones 2020).

The pandemic found the British state woefully hollowed out in terms of both concrete capacities and democratic authority. Ostensibly, British governments had been preparing for a pandemic since the late 1990s. They had even identified the risk of a global pandemic as a top-tier national security threat. But their 'plans' had systematically failed to make new investments, relying instead on public services that had been outsourced and weakened through years of austerity. The government's strategy stated that it would be 'a waste of public health resources' to try to 'halt the spread of a pandemic', instead accepting that '210,000–315,000 additional deaths' would occur over 15 weeks. By 12 March 2021, COVID-19 testing had to be secretly abandoned because government laboratories could only handle five tests per week. There were critical shortages of key equipment, like masks and ventilators, because NHS supply chains had been outsourced, with even the pandemic stockpile having been privatized to a French company. Nearly half of the stockpile had expired on its understocked warehouse shelves. Meanwhile, to

create bed space, the NHS – already severely stretched merely by annual winter-flu epidemics – was forced to discharge vulnerable patients, including into care homes where the disease ravaged the elderly (Jones and Hameiri 2022).

This lack of material preparation precipitated mounting panic and political crisis, which exposed the limitations of, and deep confusion around, the authority of technocracy and expertise. Remainers, in particular, attacked the government's laissez-faire approach, claiming that Johnson was again (as with Brexit) ignoring scientific advice, risking millions of lives or even wilfully enabling a 'genocide'. The opposite was actually true. The government's plans had been developed by technocrats, leaning heavily on scientific expertise, and it was following the counsel of the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE) in not locking down, as leaked minutes subsequently revealed (Grey and MacAskill 2020; Simpson 2020). However, since these plans had never been publicly debated or democratically ratified, and scientific advice was being relayed in secret, citizens had no reason to feel confident in them. Had the approach been debated earlier, outcomes might have been different. Possibly citizens would have accepted laissez-faire as unavoidable or as preferable to the alternatives. Perhaps they would have insisted on meaningful investments to keep people safe. But absent democratic authorization, the public confronted a state that seemed woefully underprepared and yet unwilling to take additional steps to protect them.

Britain's collapse into lockdown was therefore an expression of deep state failure, resulting from years of political and bureaucratic delinquency during the neoliberal era of member-statehood. Understandably, the public wanted protection; but the unprepared establishment had nothing to offer them except shutting down society in order to 'protect the NHS' from the very people it had been established to protect. Even here, the post-Brexit government was taking its cues from its European counterparts. Its scientific

advisors initially believed that the harsh lockdowns being implemented in China would be unacceptable in the democratic West. However, when northern Italy locked down, this emboldened the British government to follow suit (Whipple 2020). That most of Europe quickly adopted policies inspired by the world's foremost authoritarian state reveals the profoundly anti-democratic character of member-statehood. Ironically, however, Corbynistas who had just months earlier railed against Johnson's 'fascist coup' now declared themselves 'relieved to be placed under house arrest . . . by a right-wing Tory government' (O. Jones 2020).

Lockdown entailed the total suspension of democratic politics in favour of technocracy – despite the fact that failed technocratic government had led us to this point. While 'essential' workers continued to brave the virus, Parliament declared itself inessential by passing the authoritarian Coronavirus Act without debate, then dissolving itself. By contrast, Parliament had sat throughout the Second World War, even as bombs fell on the Palace of Westminster. Now, after years of railing against executive power grabs, Britain's delinquent legislators empowered the executive to 'rule by decree' (Ewing 2020). In the name of 'following The Science', citizens suffered virtual house arrest, prolonged restrictions on the rights of assembly and protest, and mounting corporate censorship on the few online platforms left open to them. For all their hand wringing about constitutional violations, Britain's authoritarian liberals had sacrificed basic civil and political liberties without question. For the next two years, only leaderless protestors and a handful of right-wing libertarian MPs would demur.

Nonetheless, the attempt to substitute 'The Science' for democracy as the legitimizing basis of government only generated authoritarianism without authority. Science is an evolving, contested process, not a single source of indisputable truth. Scientists often disagreed over modelling, the extent of infection and herd immunity, appropriate

policy responses, and so on (e.g., Cookson 2020; Spencer and Calver 2022). Attempting to substitute science for politics only politicized science itself, with 'dissidents' – like the scientists behind the Great Barrington Declaration who called for 'focused protection' rather than lockdown – facing abuse and censorship. Moreover, scientists were not (and could not be) formally in charge. As the cliché has it, 'advisors advise, but ministers decide'. But, as one SAGE member admits, this 'lets the advisors off the hook by minimizing their responsibility for the actions . . . taken on the basis of their advice' but also 'lets ministers off the hook' by allowing them to 'hid[e] behind the scientists' (Woolhouse 2022: 225–6). With neither the government nor the scientists unambiguously in control, neither could be held accountable. The result was flailing, inconsistent and frequently irrational policy making that undermined the authority of the state and experts alike. Public confidence and compliance steadily ebbed away.

'The Science' being insufficient, the pandemic also saw extensive resort to the use of fear as a means of public control. As early as spring 2020, scientists knew that COVID-19 mostly affected the elderly and infirm. The proportion of infected people who died was just 0.27 per cent, and just 0.05 per cent among under-70s (Ioannidis 2021). In Britain, 84 per cent of deaths occurred among the over-70s, with a median age of 82 (Office for National Statistics 2020, 2022). Yet whereas Tory Brexiteers had railed against Project Fear, now they deliberately promoted public anxiety out of all proportion to risk in order to secure compliance with COVID-19 restrictions. Even children, who were especially unlikely to get sick or spread the virus, were targeted, with warnings that failing to follow the rules could 'kill granny' (Dodsworth 2021). The result was an increasingly authoritarian, intolerant, conformist and irrational climate where anyone questioning lockdown was denounced. This made it difficult for elites to change course, even as the disease entered its endemic phase in late 2021.

Far from generating political authority, however, fearful emergency rule only widened the void between citizens and their ostensible representatives. Like most governments, the Johnson administration got a short-term popularity boost from the initial lockdown and from the vaccine roll-out, the only effective part of Britain's response – developed far more swiftly outside of EU strictures. Yet, by May 2020, Johnson's approval ratings had already turned negative and there was soon talk of ousting him (YouGov 2022). With lockdown entailing a deep recession, bankrupting small businesses, Conservative policy makers were also forced into Corbyn-style spending sprees totalling more than £300bn – but net benefits were limited to a narrow sliver of big pharma, outsourcing companies and management consultancies (Jones and Hameiri 2022). The final straw was the prime minister's own unwillingness to obey the restrictions he had imposed on everyone else. Traditional Tory voters were deeply alienated, eventually fuelling a backbench revolt. But growing discontent with Johnson did not entail popular enthusiasm for the Labour Party. Labour's neglect of working-class interests was pronounced as it demanded ever-tougher restrictions while incomes, health and education all suffered and inequality soared (Blundell et al. 2020; Briggs et al. 2021; Clare, Lynch and Smith 2021). Even when the government threatened to sack tens of thousands of vaccine-hesitant health and social care workers, only a handful of Labour backbenchers demurred. Nor did the pandemic help rebuild basic state capacities. As a bureaucracy unused to independent policy making and delivery after years of member-statehood simply could not cope, the government was forced to turn to equally inept (yet exorbitantly costly) private firms and consultancies to manage its response (Jones and Hameiri 2022).

By mid-2022, the British people were already beginning to experience the long-term consequences of the neoliberal political class's failure to represent even the most basic conception of the national interest by preparing adequately

for what it had known was coming for over two decades. More people were dying from the public health impacts of lockdown than from COVID-19 itself (Herby, Jonung and Hanke 2022; Knapton 2022). Inflation, sparked by a combination of corporate greed and the supply-side shocks of lockdowns, was plunging millions of households into poverty (Tooze 2022). And the impact would only be compounded by the British elite's enthusiastic embrace of a proxy war with Russia.

Ukraine: retreat from Doncaster

On 17 June 2022, Boris Johnson skipped a 'levelling up' summit with 'red wall' MPs in Doncaster in order to fly to Kyiv for a photo opportunity with Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Nothing could better symbolize the retreat from the hard slog of domestic political representation in favour of international grandstanding and intergovernmental policy making that characterized Britain's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The February 2022 invasion provided an ideal platform for British elites to reconcile with their European and Atlanticist counterparts after the ructions of Brexit. Ever since the EU referendum, Tory politicians had tried to reassure foreign governments and investors that Brexit would not change the foreign policy status quo, that it would only liberate 'Global Britain' to play an even greater international role. Russia's violent and blatant violation of Ukrainian sovereignty gave the Tories the opportunity to prove this, and, moreover, to do so in the name of sovereignty – something that their Leaver base would warmly support. The British government raced to provide economic and military aid to Ukraine, supplying over £2.8bn in the first six months, second only to the United States. Britain was swiftly embroiled in a proxy war with a nuclear-armed state and major energy producer. The resultant spikes in energy and food prices threatened to impoverish millions at home and abroad. Countermeasures

on energy alone are projected to cost the British state around £100bn.

Yet again, this perilous situation arose in the absence of serious democratic debate or contestation (McCormack 2022). Making rapid decisions in NATO's intergovernmental councils, British elites did not even pause to ask whether proxy war with Russia was in Britain's national interest. On the contrary, the hysterical intolerance whipped up during COVID-19 was redirected onto Ukraine, making meaningful discussion virtually impossible. Again, political discourse proceeded on a simplistic, fearmongering premise: that Putin was a new Hitler, bent on recreating the Soviet Empire in Europe, notwithstanding Russia's quickly revealed inability to subdue even Ukraine.

Western observers had been pointing out for many years that NATO (and, to a lesser extent, EU) expansionism was pressurizing Russia and that incorporating Ukraine, in particular, was plainly unacceptable to Moscow (Mearsheimer 2014; Sakwa 2017). NATO expansion had already generated tensions culminating in the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Nevertheless, since 2014, NATO had sought and achieved 'interoperability' between Ukrainian and NATO forces, making Ukraine 'a de facto if not an official member' of the alliance (Streeck 2022). Ukrainian sovereignty was clearly violated by Russia's brutish invasion. But the invasion followed many years of NATO encouraging Ukraine's pro-western elites to integrate with Russia's enemies. This not only fanned Russian anxieties but also exacerbated Ukraine's internal divisions, signifying a reckless approach to national sovereignty among Ukrainian rulers (Jones 2022).

However, just as lockdown sceptics had been denounced as dangerous lunatics, now anyone questioning NATO's narrative was branded a Kremlin stooge. When a handful of Labour MPs signed an anti-war statement, they were threatened with expulsion and forced to repent. Parliament has never debated whether the war is in the interests of the

British people. It did not even question the extension of Britain's nuclear deterrent to cover Sweden and Finland before they joined NATO (McCormack 2022). Similarly, in order to bounce other NATO members into following suit, the legislation ratifying their accession was rushed through Parliament by suspending normal procedures.

The war has allowed British elites to retreat again to their comfort zone of intergovernmental policy making while neglecting the interests of those they should be representing. Epoch-defining decisions are being made not in our delinquent parliament but in closed-door NATO summits. Boris Johnson has gleefully postured as Winston Churchill while his successor, Liz Truss, posed as Margaret Thatcher. Sympathetic as most Britons are to the plight of Ukrainians, their own needs have been forgotten. Far from being 'levelled up', Britain is becoming more unequal, with wages stagnant and millions facing penury. The Ukrainian flags flying atop public buildings indicate a political elite that is more comfortable serving the presumed interests of the Ukrainian people than their own citizens.

As with COVID-19, this latest bout of emergency rule has only further eroded elites' political authority. Not even the war could save Johnson, who was forced to resign in July 2022. This was a remarkable implosion of authority for someone who, just two years previously, had led the Conservatives to an 80-seat majority. But the tussle to replace him also revealed the dearth of political representation in Britain, and the degradation of the conservative political tradition in particular. While Johnson's personal misconduct drove much dissatisfaction with his leadership, the more substantive critique from MPs was that he had abandoned 'traditional' Conservative economic policy in favour of a high-tax state. His would-be successors primarily competed over who was most similar to Margaret Thatcher, promising to slash taxes and shrink the state.

This only exposed how little Conservatives understand the country they claim to lead. Support for a low-tax, low-spending state stands at just 6 per cent, and large majorities

oppose deregulation (Curtice et al. 2020; Curtice, Abrams and Jessop 2021). Even amid a severe cost-of-living crisis, 60 per cent of voters (and 63 per cent of 2019 Tory voters) want tax levels to stay the same or increase to fund better public services, with only 22 per cent (27 per cent) favouring cuts (Savage 2022). Despite what Thatcherite MPs may think, most people did not vote Brexit to get more Thatcherism. They voted to end elitist, intergovernmental rule and for a state that is responsive to their needs. Clearly, they are still not getting that. This is thanks to a deluded Conservative Party that sees Thatcherism as the solution to our ills, rather than the cause of them, and a Labour Party that is again modelling itself on what Thatcher called her greatest achievement: New Labour. Incapable of self-renewal, Britain's exhausted parties seem only able to offer a 1990s tribute act.

Conclusion

Britain's political problems have clearly not been solved by Brexit. Leaving the EU was a necessary but not sufficient condition for resolving the democratic decay entailed by member-statehood. The process of leaving only exposed the political exhaustion that had led Britain into the EU, and it did little to counteract it. The great traditions through which Britons had historically made sense of politics and participated in a shared national life were so decayed that they were incapable of rising to the challenge of reclaiming national sovereignty.

The inescapable conclusion is that a referendum was never going to be enough to solve the problem of EU member-statehood, or the political void at its heart, because the result had to be implemented by political parties that were themselves products of that void. Britain left the EU, but it did not recover its nation-statehood; it was, at best, a post-member-state. The British Parliament took back its legal supremacy but did not strengthen its political

authority. The sovereignty of the British people over their own affairs remained a formality. At the heart of this incapacity is the demise of the mainstream political traditions through which the British people once represented themselves as a nation. For the British people, Brexit has proved that there is no way *back* to control of the state. The question that remains is what we can do to take control in the future.

5
Constituting the Nation

The EU is the most anti-democratic political system in the western world. It deprives hundreds of millions of people of meaningful democratic representation in what was once the global bastion of democracy. Since the EU is designed to be impervious to democratic control and meaningful reform, mass democracy can only be secured by leaving it. This is the task that now confronts democrats in Europe. However, as earlier chapters have shown, secession from the EU is necessary but insufficient to build democracy. Learning from Brexit, this chapter identifies both what is politically crucial in the process of leaving the EU and what must follow to consolidate and expand democratic gains. It sets out general principles that chapter 6 applies to the specific case of Britain.

Filling the void – rebuilding political representation – is the main task of democratic politics today, and representation requires sovereignty. To be meaningful, sovereignty must necessarily assume a national form. The exercise of public will and collective power requires that the scope and limit of that power be clearly established and demarcated, both in terms of citizenship and territory. Our task today is therefore to build democratic nations. This does not mean

'going back' to the nation-state but forward to a new kind of nation. We cannot go back because, as chapters 2 and 4 made clear for Britain, the old ways are dead. The nation-states and political traditions of the past were voided by the neoliberal revolt and the rise of member-statehood. New nations can only emerge out of the contradictions and wreckage of member-statehood.

This is a challenge – but also an opportunity. It means that nations cannot be rebuilt around exhausted traditions or homogeneous cultural or ethnic identities. Their only possible basis is a shared commitment to collective self-government. Building new nations therefore means revitalizing the processes through which we imagine and represent ourselves as a people – the institutions of representative democracy. Precisely because the EU is not a sovereign entity, these institutions, albeit greatly degraded, still exist at the national level as the bases for this struggle.

Many will quail at the idea of building sovereign, democratic nations. But all around us we see the costs of failing to do so. EU member-statehood is not stable; it is decaying everywhere, leaving authoritarian neoliberals unable to formulate national policy and confronting restive and angry populations across the Continent. The populists who flourish in this void are also failing because they refuse to grasp the necessity of leading their people out of the EU. There is no good reason to fear new political nations. The old nationalisms that generated conflict, war and imperialism were created by ruling classes seeking to contain and channel democratic pressures. Today's ruling elites, by contrast, try to avoid democratic pressure by repudiating the nation. Building sovereign nations in the twenty-first century can therefore entail both democratic revival and a true internationalism among peoples that respect one another's sovereignty. Constituting new nations will enable a new era of European cooperation, anchored firmly in the solid ground of national sovereignty and democratic legitimacy, rather than foundering on the rock of the Eurozone or drifting with the shifting tides of populism.

Filling the void

We have argued throughout this book that European member-states are primarily the product of the void between rulers and ruled, as civil society has lost its bridgeheads in the state, and states have lost their moorings in society. Democratizing the state therefore requires filling the void – reshaping and expanding existing structures and institutions of political mediation as well as creating new bonds.

The problem of the void is sometimes cast in sociological terms, measured by declining trade union density and religious observation. Bluntly put, aside from a few redoubts of white-collar, middle-class unionism, trade unions have few members, and the churches are empty (Jäger 2022). This leads some to urge the revitalization of associational life at the level of local communities and culture. For us, however, the void is primarily a problem of politics, requiring a specifically political solution. Filling the void requires the revitalization of institutions – and the creation of new ones – that will ensure majority rule and allow state power and public authority to express the popular will.

Although this process remains in its infancy in Britain, the experience of Brexit nonetheless provides important lessons about what it involves – and what more still needs to be done. Brexit was a result of the internal contradictions of member-statehood. European integration insulated elites from democratic accountability, but it also deprived them of democratic legitimacy, generating a growing crisis of representation and the emergence of populist challengers. UKIP's electoral threat to the Conservatives compelled the latter to call a referendum on EU membership.

The first task facing European democrats, then, is to intensify the contradictions of member-statehood by connecting voters' material concerns and political frustrations to their countries' EU membership. In the 2016

referendum, the slogan 'Take back control' artfully (and correctly) linked Britain's EU membership to this wider sense of political disaffection, as UKIP had done previously. As the heightened turnout revealed, voters rightly understood that vastly more was at stake in 2016 compared to general elections in which meaningful political and ideological choice had vanished. Elite outrage at these efforts to connect national sovereignty to people's everyday grievances only demonstrates their potency.

Moreover, it is in moving to address popular grievances through the prism of sovereignty that new political possibilities arise. After years of political stagnation, the Brexit process electrified the country and transformed the situation of Britain's sclerotic political parties. Crumbling partisan loyalties were replaced by intense associations with Leave and Remain, putting the question of democracy at the forefront of political life and creating the opportunity for significant political change. The 2017 general election, with all parties notionally committed to Brexit, offered voters a stronger ideological choice than any since 1983. Brexit also left the Conservatives deeply divided and rudderless. It was a golden opportunity for a sovereigntist left – but none existed to seize it. Instead, the Tories eventually responded to the successive ballot-box rebellions of 'left behind' regions to assemble a new electoral coalition and reshape Britain's political geography. The political shock of reclaiming sovereignty is always likely to shatter a decrepit member-state; the prize will fall to whoever can reassemble the pieces.

Withdrawing from the EU, then, is not simply about seceding from international institutions; it is also about breaking up and re-forming the internal arrangements of member-statehood – including the economic arrangements. Despite Remainer fears and Eurosceptic fantasies of turbocharged neoliberalism after Brexit, the 2019 election was won on promises of 'levelling up': industrial policy, investment and infrastructure for long-neglected areas. This platform emerged directly from the contradictions

of member-statehood. The people most disadvantaged by European integration will be likeliest to vote against it and to support parties offering a real break from the status quo. Against the desire and expectations of conservative Eurosceptics, this logic drove the Conservative Party to promise not to conserve but rather to transform the existing order. Even if the Tories are currently failing to deliver, the 'levelling up' agenda will likely shape British political competition for years to come (Wolf 2022). Notwithstanding the distractions of COVID-19 and the Ukraine war, Brexit has refocused electoral competition, and the political attention of the state and political elite, away from southeast England and empowered working-class voters in 'left-behind' constituencies. If the Tories cannot (as it seems) grasp the historical necessity of abandoning Thatcherism for good, they will pay the electoral price.

Given the nature of member-statehood, it seems almost inevitable that these dramatic realignments will have to be made creatively and in real time. The charge often levelled at Brexiters was that they were offering at best hazy visions of the future against the known risks of the status quo. However, given the degraded nature of Europe's representative politics, it is unsurprising that fully formed blueprints of the future are rare. It is only when citizens assert their collective sovereignty that political elites will be forced to re-engage with them and really listen to popular grievances or develop fresh ideas and platforms. Breaking away from the EU should therefore be seen as the starting point for democratic renewal, not the end goal.

Indeed, sovereigntists need not offer a detailed plan for the future as long as they are clear about the stakes of sovereignty itself, as the British Eurosceptics were not. Sovereignty is a relationship of political authority between governors and the governed (Loughlin and Tierney 2018). Restoring sovereignty is about rebuilding this relationship. Removing external fetters on state action is essential to ensure that governments can enact the public's will; this,

in turn, creates space for meaningful political deliberation and choice. As sovereignty is established, political competition can take place over whatever a particular society wants. What that involves will necessarily vary and, as a collective and creative process, its content cannot be known in advance. Indeed, this very indeterminacy is what makes democratic sovereignty so powerful: freed of the anti-democratic shackles of member-statehood, the people can collectively shape their own destiny as they see fit.

This indeterminacy is also what terrifies authoritarian liberals and many leftists, who worry that the people will not support their preferred policies, leaving them clinging fearfully to the EU. But, as Brexit showed, the majority of citizens clearly want more democracy – and they had more faith in themselves and each other than their so-called leaders. They were willing to take serious risks in backing Brexit, facing down all manner of absurd predictions of disaster as well as years of abuse – all in the absence of any detailed blueprint for the future.

The national form of sovereignty

That sovereignty is central to democracy should come as no surprise in light of both modern political theory and modern history (Bickerton, Cunliffe and Gourevitch 2006). Historically, sovereignty was the political solvent used to dissolve imperial and religious forms of rule, from the medieval papacy and the Holy Roman Empire to the multinational dynastic empires of the Habsburgs and Ottomans to Europe's colonial empires. More specifically, in the modern era, sovereignty has typically involved an assertion of the collective will of a national unit over supranational forms of rule. It is therefore unsurprising that, today, 'the revolt against [globalist] neoliberalism should first and foremost take the form of demands for a repoliticization of national decision-making processes' (Mitchell and Fazi 2017: 3). Taming sovereignty in Europe

has entailed the de-democratization of its member-states. Restoring sovereignty will necessarily involve a fresh assertion of national democracy.

The EU has neutered national sovereignty through a supranational legal system, the Single Market, the Eurozone, and so on. Crucially, these arrangements are not primarily intended to suppress cultural identity or economic self-sufficiency but rather *political* self-sufficiency. Vestigial national identities, economies and political institutions can all remain. But the capacity of a given people to make binding collective decisions over their economic and social life is systematically curbed.

This de-democratization has, moreover, been accompanied by a new type of anti-national cosmopolitanism. Significant intellectual and political energy has been devoted to de-legitimizing nationhood, national belonging and national citizenship, all of which are routinely derided as parochial, chauvinistic, racist or worse. As chapter 3 showed, these narratives were powerfully deployed in the campaign to prevent Brexit from 2016 onwards. The very fact that this middle-class cosmopolitanism could be mobilized against democracy, with such bitter intensity and on such a massive scale reflected the power of neoliberal ideas fostered for many decades in our cultural and educational institutions. Cosmopolitan ideology, developed around gentrified metropolitan hubs with their multicultural neighbourhoods and global connections, diluted democratic majoritarianism by boosting these haughty, would-be city-states above their ex-urban hinterlands and the smaller cities and towns (Guilluy 2019). That not *all* national identities were disparaged indicates the strategic character of this assault. Cosmopolitan elites in London and Brussels could pander to sub-national identities in Wales and Scotland precisely because they further weakened the power of centralized nation-states (Heartfield 2007).

Likewise, multiculturalism and identity politics are the official ideologies of progressive neoliberalism precisely

because they serve to fragment a potentially powerful national demos into a host of fractious groupings. In Britain, multiculturalism has empowered self-appointed 'community leaders' as official interlocutors between minority ethnic and religious groupings and the state, strengthening their dependence on non-democratic forms of representation (Malik 2005). Combined with the Third Way ideology of intersectionalism, multiculturalism reframes society as a host of mutually vulnerable groups requiring protection from one another by a beneficent state and civil society institutions – staffed, of course, by a professional liberal elite (Cobley 2018). Rather than the state being the vehicle of the democratic power of society, the state becomes a power standing over and policing society, while politics is reduced to the unedifying flaunting of oppression and victimhood as rival groups compete for state favour, resources and patronage.

However, although sovereignty must necessarily assume a national form, this does not entail reviving national traditions or identities undermined by neoliberal cosmopolitanism, as conservatives might suggest. The very experience of member-statehood will often so degrade a nation's political life that traditional elements cannot be saved – and many may not, in any case, be worth saving. Likewise, upholding national sovereignty need not involve a vindication of any existing state, border, identity or policy. As we will argue in chapter 6, for example, national sovereignty in Britain cannot be rebuilt without Ireland's reunification. Our insistence on the nation is simply a logical corollary of the principle of sovereignty. Sovereignty arises out of the political relationship between the rulers and the ruled. It requires establishing a secular political authority – the state – as the highest form of collective decision making. This necessarily involves demarcating a *particular* population and space, over which no *external* authority is recognized. Furthermore, the only possible basis for the state's supremacy – its capacity to make and enforce laws – is its claim to represent the people as a unity.

In modern societies, this claim is justified through systems of democratic representation. This also involves demarcating a limited population: the citizens of a particular state.

The whole purpose of this demarcation is to make sovereign power accountable by limiting its extent. If the state does not have supreme authority over a given territory or people, its government cannot be held accountable for what happens there. As we have seen, the EU allows national political elites to blame EU decisions and rules for their failure to respond to popular grievances. Yet, at the same time, citizens have no way to hold 'the EU' accountable because it is not a state under their democratic control. Conversely, leaders in a fully sovereign state cannot deflect blame onto others and must face the judgement of their citizens. As chapter 1 argued, this is precisely why the EU will never develop into the European superstate that haunts Britain's Eurosceptics.

Democratic sovereignty necessarily entails political limits. It can only be meaningful within a politically demarcated space and citizenry. Historically, we have called such communities 'nations'.

Constituting the nation

Despite the neoliberal assault on the nation, the EU member-state still contains the kernel of nationhood from which democratic politics can grow. This is another key contradiction of the member-state form. EU member-states are designed to de-fang mass democracy at the national level while simultaneously preventing the emergence of a new mass democracy at the continental level. Paradoxically, this requires member-states to retain a significant degree of political autonomy and identity. National parliaments, governments and so on all continue to exist, even though their decision-making powers are substantially curbed. Member-statehood arose from the crisis of the old national traditions, which are now thoroughly exhausted. However,

the institutional remnants of the nation-state, preserved in member-statehood, provide spaces for democrats to wrest control away from the transnational networks governing Europe by constituting nations.

Nation building cannot, therefore, mean 'going back' to the old nation-state. Since the ruling classes and their middle-class allies have gutted these nation-states in pursuit of European integration, there is nothing to return to. As chapters 2 and 4 showed with respect to Britain, all the old traditions through which the British people came to conceive of themselves as a nation have been destroyed or hollowed out. We should not mourn their loss or seek to revive them. After all, the European nation-states that emerged through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the result of elite efforts to contain the threat posed by mass democracy to property and hierarchy. Ruling oligarchies were confronted by increasingly assertive workers' movements, and demands for popular enfranchisement and political participation. Elites responded by suppressing radical demands – like Chartism in England and the democratic revolutions of 1848 on the Continent – and channelling popular passions into imperial expansionism, racial chauvinism and geopolitical rivalry (Hobsbawm 1987; Anderson 2002). Tory Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli pioneered the latter in Britain with his 'one nation' Toryism, which explicitly married the extension of voting rights in 1867 to an imperialist foreign policy and domestic identity (Harcourt 1980). Virulent nationalisms – and fascism – were all efforts to temper the threat to social order arising from industrialization and mass politics (Hobsbawm 1987).

By the same token, European elites abandoned the nation whenever that seemed a more viable strategy for democratic containment. In 1940, French reactionaries cried 'better Hitler than Blum', preferring Nazi occupation to the election of a Socialist-led government under Leon Blum. Across the Continent, elites that had hitherto jealously championed their nationalist claims in pursuit of profit and imperial glory turned to compromise and collab-

oration with German occupation. The mantle of patriotism and national leadership fell to working-class partisans and peasant guerrillas (Heartfield 2012). Populations mobilized for war also extracted a heavy price from their rulers, a post-war settlement that granted them unprecedented political influence and economic concessions. As chapter 2 showed with respect to Britain, when this began threatening the ruling class's social and economic power in the 1970s, elites turned against the nation. Rather than diverting popular passions into interstate conflict, they abandoned mass politics itself, turning to collaborate with each other through European institutions. Having once whipped up nationalism, ruling elites now denigrated it as a plebeian anachronism with no place in a globalized world.

The ruling class's abandonment of the old nation-state and its substitution by the member-state creates two benefits for democrats. First, the nation is now available for the masses to seize themselves. As chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate, elites of all stripes tend to recoil from the nation, rather than aspiring to lead it. Second, it means that there can be no return to the politics of the past. Even if it were possible somehow to revive post-war European nation-states, it would not resolve our problems but only reproduce them: after all, it was their decay that gave rise to member-statehood.

The fledgling new nations of Europe are also rich in potential. Today's European societies contain reservoirs of untouched democratic power vastly greater than that of the old European nation-states. Their populations are not only larger and healthier but also more equal, with women enjoying levels of political and civic emancipation and workforce participation that was denied to them under the old nation-state (Heartfield 2017). Europeans are also more socially liberal, better educated, more technologically sophisticated, and more ethnically and racially diverse, than ever. These citizenries contain tremendous pent-up demand not only for meaningful political choice and representation but also for economic

growth, enhanced living standards, social connectedness and greater opportunity.

It is out of these actually existing societies that new nations must be formed – not as backward-looking communities centred around traditional cultural values, but as political associations aspiring to collective self-government. The EU can meet neither their aspirations for self-rule nor their economic demands, offering anaemic growth at best and continued stagnation at worst. Constituting the nation gives us the opportunity to release democratic energies that have been untapped by Europe's member-states, which have repeatedly shown themselves too sclerotic to mobilize their own peoples.

European populists: adrift without sovereignty

Constituting new nations is a hugely ambitious and demanding prospect, but the experience of European populism serves as a cautionary tale of what happens when anti-systemic challengers fail to grasp this necessary task. Populist insurrections across Europe have all failed because they have not made national sovereignty their lodestar.

Here Britain is the partial exception that proves the rule. As we have shown, populist parties (UKIP and the Brexit Party) were crucial in producing and securing Brexit. Their historical impact reflects the fact that British national-populists consistently placed Britain's position in the EU at the forefront of their politics. This ensured that Brexit was more than just another ballot-box protest. Conversely, populist revolts that have failed to prioritize secession from the EU have achieved little – largely serving to prop up member-statehood by spurring liberal technocrats to rally the centre (Guilluy 2019: 95).

Left populists have consistently quailed at the task of leading their respective nations to political independence. In Britain, Jeremy Corbyn's electoral support increased in

2017 when his offer of higher state spending was coupled with a promise to enact Brexit. But it collapsed in 2019, despite Labour making even more extravagant promises, when Corbyn backed a second referendum. This not only betrayed working-class voters who had supported Leave; the explicit contempt for democratic outcomes also made Labour's electoral pledges hollow. In Spain, Podemos's anti-austerity politics forced it into an anti-EU position in the 2010s, given the context of the Eurozone crisis. However, Podemos's refusal to pursue this position to its natural conclusion – leading Spain out of the EU – has reduced it from an insurgent challenger into a junior coalition partner of Spain's establishment Socialist Party (Errejón 2021) In Greece, Syriza's 2015 surrender to EU austerity, after having led a popular vote against it, transformed the party from a radical challenger to a thuggish enforcer of Brussels' will (Varoufakis 2020).

On the other side of the political spectrum, whenever right-wing populist parties – such as France's National Rally, Italy's Lega or Poland's Law and Justice Party – have flirted with secession from the EU, they have all quickly retreated, quailing before the scale of the task or wilting under the force of powerful pro-EU opposition. In 2017, following her electoral defeat by Emmanuel Macron, National Rally leader Marine Le Pen abandoned any talk of 'Frexit' or of restoring the franc as a national currency. Similarly, the Lega's Matteo Salvini denied that Italy would withdraw from the Eurozone, telling the *Financial Times* that 'Europe is changing for the better by equipping itself with new tools and new rules, and we must accompany it' (M. Johnson 2021). Following Poland's constitutional tribunal ruling in October 2021 that European law could not override Polish national law, the ruling Law and Justice Party nonetheless insisted that there was no chance of a 'Polexit' – despite its support for the decision and resultant friction with Brussels.

In July 2021, Europe's right-wing populists abandoned all talk of secession from the EU, effectively adopting the

position of British Corbynism in 2019: 'Remain and reform' (Gotev 2021). Having retreated from national sovereignty, they have settled into the safer territory of promoting tedious culture wars, jousting across the continent over abortion, gay marriage, Christian values and so on. When Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán endorsed Marine Le Pen for the French presidency in early February 2022, he did so on the basis of their joint opposition to a federal Europe and their shared vision of a Europe of 'free nations' (Rassemblement National 2022). But there is no prospect of a federal Europe, let alone an EU comprised of free nations. It is typically empty populist rhetoric. As Thomas Fazi (2021) has argued, these transcontinental culture wars belie the shared commitment of all their participants to Europe's supranational institutions and the Eurozone.

This dreary record only reinforces our conclusion that populists cannot be relied upon to undertake the hard work of constituting democratic nations. The unusual commitment of British populists to national sovereignty was a consequence of Britain's peculiar economic relationship to Europe and resultant splits within the Conservative Party that populists could exploit electorally. This led to the political opportunity represented by Brexit. Nonetheless, as chapter 4 noted, British populists have been unable to develop that opportunity into a lasting project that can fill the void of political representation.

Fear of the nation

The prospect of renewed European nations will doubtless fill many with dread. Liberals will fear that the rights of individuals and minorities will be trampled amid the formation of new national majorities and solidarities. Free-market conservatives will worry that, given the choice, voters may support new trade barriers and inefficient industrial policies. Socialists will fear that a new nationalism will detract from addressing poverty and economic

and social inequality, or foster racism and fascism. What all these fears really amount to is a fear of mass democratic politics itself. That this fear unites the political spectrum shows how little these old political traditions have to offer citizens, and why they all prefer continued European integration to the challenge of building mass political support. Their politics of fear reflects the fragmented, atomized societies of neoliberal member-states. Lurking behind this fear of the nation is an even deeper dread – an infantile fear of authority itself, the unwillingness to submit to the discipline required for self-government.

The politics of Brexit gives us solid ground to refute these inchoate fears. Take the example of migration. As chapter 3 discussed, contrary to the widespread claims that Brexit was carried on a tidal wave of racial bigotry and xenophobia, British views on immigration have become more positive throughout and since the Brexit process. The bafflement that many commentators expressed when observing that Brexit had consolidated rather than reversed positive attitudes towards immigration demonstrates that it was not hatred and ignorance of foreigners that clouded debate over Brexit. Rather, it was liberals' ignorance and fear of their own fellow citizens. Likewise, significant minority support for Brexit among ethnic-minority voters demonstrated that they have as much interest in the politics of sovereignty and control as any other citizen. Given form and representation, this shared interest in collective self-government can constitute the basis of a new politics of nationhood that will transcend the ethnic divisions and alienated immigrant communities that are intrinsic features of EU member-statehood.

Even if minorities need not fear the nation or democratic majoritarianism, liberals may still object that national egotism will undercut decades of European cooperation and risk renewed conflict and war. However, as noted earlier, the violent nationalism and conflicts of the past were less a product of mass politics than ruling classes' efforts to contain and channel it in ways that preserved their own

power and wealth. Today, there is no reason to think that sovereign nations in Europe will spark war, let alone world war. On the contrary, as the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine grimly demonstrated, peace in Europe requires greater respect for sovereignty – both as a bulwark against expansionism and also to defuse geopolitical rivalry. The tensions between NATO and Russia are the result of too little sovereignty in Europe, not too much. The expansion of the supranational order of NATO and the EU has pressurized and antagonized Russia (Mearsheimer 2014). Moscow's thuggish response has fuelled a vicious circle, prompting weaker states to further integrate into networks of supranational governance at the expense of strengthening ties with their own citizens. The people want peace, but their ruling elites seem intent on plunging them into strife and conflict. Brittle member-states make for a fragile international order.

Liberal fears for international cooperation also underestimate the potential of popular sovereignty to foster internationalism. Popular sovereignty not only makes possible meaningful public participation in political life, it also lays the ground for durable international cooperation between states. As the name suggests, internationalism presupposes nationhood. It is precisely *because* we are internationalists that we argue here for constituting new nations to substitute for the decayed member-states and their supranationalism. *Inter*-nationalism implies that not only should relations between nations be conducted on the basis of equality, reciprocity and mutual respect, but also that these relations should not be suspended above the nation (*supra*-nationalism), beyond the control of each nation's citizens. Sovereignty offers the prospect for meaningful democratic control over foreign policy and gives citizens a more direct stake and interest in the conduct of international affairs. To be sure, diplomacy and international cooperation require the recognition of external limits to national will, as well as learning the advantages of self-restraint as the necessary basis for mutual advantage.

All of this will be stronger, however, if rooted in popular self-government, which would help to ensure that the compromises that are the ordinary stuff of international diplomacy are seen as legitimate.

Marxists may go further than liberals in their objections to the nation. They could justifiably argue that not only does the idea of nationhood posit that labour and capital share common interests, where there are none, but also that sovereign statehood offers no refuge from global capitalism, no matter what industrial policies may be adopted. However, we are not making an argument for socialism here, neither in one country nor in one continent – as many British Marxists did when backing Labour's policy of 'Remain and reform' in 2019. The absence of an organized labour movement, and of any working-class politics worthy of the name, means that there is currently no political means of challenging, let alone transcending, capitalism. The destruction of the workers' movement is the historical origin of the void that dominates contemporary western politics. These simple facts must be the starting point of any self-consciously materialist politics. Self-styled Marxists who fail to recognize this ultimately end up promoting a fantastical and doomed EU-reformism (e.g., Varoufakis 2015). They become, in effect, the left wing of neoliberal globalism.

As Marx and Engels (1848) argued in the *Communist Manifesto*, for the proletariat to 'acquire political supremacy, [it] must rise to become the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation'. We inhabit a world shaped by the working class's failure to constitute itself the nation. The nation as such may not promise an immediate escape from capitalism. Yet, unlike the EU, it *can* be used to mobilize democracy against capital and against authoritarianism. The political gains of bourgeois civilization – liberty, democracy, representative government, sovereignty – were mostly achieved through the nation, not against it. Nationhood was the precondition for the labouring masses to exert any meaningful influence

within their own states, let alone to achieve the political dominance to which Marxists claim to aspire.

Finally, conservatives might object that European nations cannot exist without a common culture and history, rooted in Christianity, perhaps, or shared ethnic origins. As we have seen, however, those sorts of communities, insofar as they ever really existed at the national level, are mostly gone, destroyed by 'conservatives' who converted to neoliberal globalism rather than be ruled by their own working classes and their trade union representatives. The more power the working classes had, the happier conservatives were to abandon the nations they had previously sacralized. They are in no position to champion the nation now. In any case, the historical record clearly shows that nations are political creations, not cultural or ethnic fossils inherited from the past. Nations have been assembled by states from disparate provinces and cities, competing confessional denominations and allegiances, and different ethnic and linguistic groups inherited from pre-modern societies (Weber 1976; Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). National *political* institutions lay the basis for a common history, thereby creating the possibility for the masses to make their own history anew, rising above earlier particularisms. Today, we face a similar task, only this time in surmounting the postmodern particularisms fostered by the member-state: communitarianism, identity politics and intersectionalism. As John Stuart Mill stressed, the most important factor in cohering nations is political will – the collective aspiration to common self-government – not pre-political factors like culture or ethnicity (2010 [1861]: 294). It is this common political will that has to be created through the nation.

Conclusion

We have argued in this chapter that sovereignty and nationhood are both vital to democratic mass politics. This

is why the neoliberal rollback of democracy involved curbing national autonomy, shredding popular sovereignty and scorning nationhood. If mass democracy is to be created, we will need both sovereignty and nationhood. For ordinary citizens, sovereignty is what makes politics matter – knowing that states have the power, right and capacity to act on the collective will. To function effectively, sovereignty requires nations – a territorially delimited political association whose political will is expressed through the sovereign state. The old ruling classes crafted nation-states to contain and channel the growth of popular democracy. Once they ceased to serve this purpose effectively, or had outgrown their usefulness, they were abandoned and substituted with member-states.

This provides an opening for democrats today. With the rulers having abandoned the nation, the ruled can now constitute the nation themselves. The very fact that the nation, with its popular base and collective aspirations, inspired dread among liberals, conservatives, socialists, populists and technocrats alike testifies to its disruptive democratic potential. The fact that the nation requires representation – in the form of the sovereign state – is also what gives nations more coherence and force than 'the people' invoked by populists, who have shown themselves too cowardly to lead their peoples to independence.

Constituting the nation today offers the possibility of sweeping away decadent political parties, technocratic leaders, populist demagogues, ossified state structures and a host of decayed institutions of civil society, from the mass media to the sclerotic trade unions. Against growing geopolitical rivalries, the renewed nations of Europe could forge a new internationalism, transcending real wars and culture wars, as well as the bitter economic conflicts of the Eurozone. This is the challenge and opportunity confronting Europe's democrats today.

6
Taking Control: Towards a Democratic Britain

Leaving the EU was a necessary but insufficient step towards genuine democratic sovereignty in Britain. Brexit was a unique historical achievement: for the first time following a popular referendum, an EU member-state was bent to the majority's will. Yet Brexit has done more to expose the void at the heart of our politics than it has to fill it. Britain after Brexit is a state that has pretended to assert its national sovereignty against outsiders, yet has done nothing to strengthen its decayed political authority at home. It has left the EU, but the political void that EU member-statehood emerged to manage still exists. It is less a revived nation-state than a post-member-state. The task of creating a new nation, a democratic Britain grounded in a shared commitment to self-government, remains. This chapter explains how we might begin to do that, applying the general principles outlined in chapter 5 to the British context.

As that chapter argued, constituting democratic nations cannot be a matter of going back to the post-war nation-state. Just as the old nation-state's contradictions led to the emergence of member-statehood, so new nations can only emerge from the contradictions of the member-state. We

therefore identify three specific contradictions in the state revealed by Brexit and propose reforms to address each.

The first contradiction is that Brexit was a project of repudiating supranational governance forced upon a political class that remains committed to that way of ruling because it knows no other. As chapter 4 showed, since Brexit, this class, including its Brexiteers, has doubled down on its globalism. Our first proposal, therefore, is to curtail supranational governance so as to force elites to focus on democratic representation at home. We reject 'Global Britain' in favour of a sovereigntist foreign policy: Brexiting from NATO while maintaining an independent nuclear deterrent; and relinquishing the remnants of Britain's imperial past.

The second contradiction concerns the limits and boundaries of the British nation. Brexit was a project of asserting the national sovereignty of the *United* Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that was carried out by a political class committed to maintaining critical weaknesses in the authority of the Union itself. The most important weakness is the union with Northern Ireland which, as chapter 4 discussed, has played a key role in constraining Brexit and will continue to do so. Brexit has demonstrated conclusively that, if the British people are to enjoy real political authority within Great Britain, the union with Northern Ireland must be ended and Ireland reunified. The second weakness is the devolution of political power to Scottish and Welsh parliaments. This had less direct impact on the Brexit crisis but has institutionalized the political void in these territories by encouraging a parochial, authoritarian separatism. Defeating Scottish separatism, in particular, offers a key test for those who would constitute the British nation anew. It demands a vision of British democracy that can convince Scottish voters not merely to reject secession but to abandon devolution.

Such a vision is only likely if we resolve the third and most important contradiction of Britain after member-statehood: Brexit entailed the reassertion of Parliament's

legal sovereignty but was implemented by a parliament and political class that lacks the authority to exercise that sovereignty. Brexit has demonstrated that the central doctrine of the British constitution – parliamentary sovereignty – retains significant democratic potential. But it is stymied by the oligarchy of bankrupt political parties who abuse it only to rule over the void. Addressing this contradiction requires wide-ranging political reforms and creating a movement capable of realizing these changes.

We therefore propose a set of democratic reforms aimed at breaking up the established oligarchy. This includes changes to Parliament itself, to party financing and to the electoral system. They are designed to impose greater responsibility on elected representatives, force change on the existing parties and encourage and enable new challenger parties to form.

We close by asking what substantive political ideas could mobilize the coalition of citizens needed to bring about these changes and transcend our current political sclerosis. There being no way back, we cannot recreate the failed projects of Britain's now-zombified political traditions. We argue that only a politics of national sovereignty and democratic self-government is capable of inspiring ordinary citizens to engage with the opportunities and burdens that we now face following the failure of the old order. Countering potential scepticism about our proposals, we emphasize their realism and necessity if we are to avoid the continued political, economic and social decay of post-member-statehood.

We do not pretend to provide anything like a full political programme or a manifesto here. Rather, beginning from a sober recognition of the depths of our political decay, we indicate a possible route out of the void. Our proposals are also necessarily tailored to the specific manifestation of this void in the United Kingdom. But similar problems afflict all advanced democracies, and we hope our ideas may help those confronting the task of democratic nation building elsewhere.

Against 'Global Britain'

EU member-statehood is not the only way in which supranational, intergovernmental rule degrades the British people's control over their collective life. There are others, and today they fly under the flag of 'Global Britain', a vision conceived by the Remainer prime minister, Theresa May, and championed by the Conservatives ever since. Its purpose is to signal to overseas oligarchs, property investors, transnational banks and corporations, and Britain's military allies that the British state was not going to abandon them simply because of a popular vote, nor let merely domestic concerns trump their transnational interests and collaboration. 'Global Britain' was an attempt to perpetuate the foreign policy of a member-state even after Britain left the EU. This must be rejected in favour of a truly sovereigntist politics, including democratic control over foreign policy.

The democratic thrust of Brexit cuts against the agenda of 'Global Britain', especially insofar as it seeks to preserve international structures that strengthen the ruling elite's independence from its citizens. Indeed, 'Global Britain' is the exact opposite of what most British people actually want. Consistent with the majority's reasons for supporting Brexit (see chapter 2), they want British politicians to be accountable to them and address their grievances and problems, not preen and strut on the global stage. In a recent poll that asked people what their 'foreign policy priorities' are, only 6 per cent answered 'retaining Britain's military strength', while 40 per cent answered 'building a prosperous British economy'. Likewise, only 13 per cent favoured additional defence spending versus 71 per cent wanting more funding for 'levelling up' left-behind areas (Shapiro and Witney 2021). However, as the Ukraine war demonstrates, British elites will only reluctantly focus on such mundane matters. Given the opportunity, they revert to type, abandoning the hard slog of representing

and responding to domestic interests in favour of globalist posturing and decision making through intergovernmental organizations. To drag elites' attention back to where it ought to be, and thereby strengthen accountability and democratic control, Britain must withdraw from the US-led, globalized versions of member-statehood.

Brexit from NATO

The most prominent of these is NATO. Buffeted by the democratic shock of Brexit, Britain's ruling classes have retreated into NATO councils, returning to the supra-national, intergovernmental forms of consultation and decision making where they feel most comfortable. This addiction to member-statehood is not only a flight from domestic and democratic accountability; it also endangers peace and prosperity in Britain and Europe.

Like the EU, NATO is a treaty-based system that formally preserves the legal sovereignty of member-states while undermining their political sovereignty. NATO was initially created after the Second World War to help preserve western states' independence against the Soviet Union. However, over time, this independence has been undermined by supranational integration. Routine decisions about defence procurement and deployments are now built around NATO-force planning. Member-states' defence policy is effectively subordinated to that of the United States, making independent action inconceivable. Even the target for defence spending as a proportion of GDP is imposed by Washington.

NATO's erosion of national sovereignty intensified with its expansion into Eastern Europe following the Soviet Union's implosion. NATO effectively became the EU's advance guard, encouraging Eastern European leaders to sacrifice their new-found autonomy for entry into the western club. As US Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers (1997) declared, elites' desire to 'enter European economic and security structures, including NATO . . . exerted a

powerful discipline on policy making', serving to 'lock in . . . marketdemocratic [*sic*] practices'. NATO laid the groundwork for the neoliberal rigours of EU membership by requiring aspirant members to undertake reforms like defence industry privatization. As one NATO publication put it, this forced would-be member-states to 'address issues which touch the very fabric of their societies' (NATO Economics Colloquium 1994).

An expansionist NATO has also violently undermined the sovereignty of non-member-states. In 1999, it bombed Serbia and occupied the Serbian province of Kosovo in the name of championing human rights. Kosovo was eventually split off and launched as a new state in 2008 under EU supervision. In 2001, NATO embarked on its doomed, twenty-year occupation of Afghanistan. In 2011, NATO intervened in the Libyan civil war, violating sovereignty in the name of the 'responsibility to protect'. Destroying the Gaddafi regime, NATO left the country in chaos, its citizens prey to warlords, slavers and people traffickers. Foreign policy making in intergovernmental forums has turned NATO into a perpetual war machine.

NATO has steadily built tensions with Moscow while, ironically, laying precedents for Russian leaders to violate other states' sovereignty. Since the late 1990s, Russia has made it transparently clear that it considers NATO expansion towards its borders as an unacceptable, existential threat. As NATO refuses to accommodate Russian security interests, Putin has sought to establish buffer states along its western borders, resorting to war as necessary (Mearsheimer 2014). NATO's dismemberment of Serbia provided Vladimir Putin with the script to justify his intervention in and dismemberment of Georgia in 2008, and of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Russia's recognition of the breakaway enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the so-called 'People's Republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk, all explicitly built on the precedent NATO had established in Kosovo, right down to claims about protecting the human rights of embattled minorities. In

Ukraine, the pro-western elite's neglect of the country's Russian-speaking citizens as it sought to integrate with Moscow's enemies – egged on by NATO – gave Putin the opening and incentive to intervene (Sakwa 2017; Jones 2022). The result is a ruinous proxy war that is destroying the sovereignty of the Ukrainian people.

NATO is clearly an enemy of national sovereignty and Britain should withdraw from it. Many will blanch at this. Remainers will ask why Britain should further 'isolate' itself, compounding the supposed injuries of Brexit. What they are really defending is cosmopolitan intergovernmentalism and its horrific consequences. But many Leavers may also demur. Some have been swept up by NATO's misleading claim to be a defender of national sovereignty. Many may simply feel that NATO membership is essential for national security. But this is also untrue. As its chaotic war effort reveals, Russia is militarily weak. Bogged down in eastern Ukraine, it cannot seriously menace Eastern Europe, let alone Britain. British national security and prosperity are not well served by being dragged into a continental proxy war with Russia, resulting in massive refugee flows, surging energy prices and the diversion of political attention and resources from deep-seated domestic problems. These costs have been imposed on the British people without debate by elites committed to supranational decision making and a liberal globalist agenda.

The only solution is Brexit from NATO and the pursuit of a sovereign, independent foreign policy under democratic control. This is not simply about selfishly prioritizing the interests of the British people, still less a call for isolationism. On the contrary, if the British people are serious about the cause of national sovereignty, we must promote an international order that allows other peoples to enjoy national sovereignty, too. NATO will always be an obstacle to this, as well as weakening popular control over foreign policy. Brexiting from NATO would provide genuine global leadership in place of the tarnished brand of 'Global Britain', signalling an end to the era of

humanitarian imperialism and militarism. A democratic, independent foreign policy can help to show other states, including Ukraine, an independent path to follow, one that prioritizes the good of the nation as a whole, rather than the interests of rival military blocs and their supporters.

An independent nuclear deterrent

An integral part of a newly democratized foreign policy should be to assert full national control over Britain's nuclear weapons as a bulwark for Britain's political independence. Since Britain's nuclear arsenal has been intertwined with the United States', Britain is dependent on US technical and political support and cannot operate its nuclear forces independently (Patrikarakos 2017). No other nuclear-armed state has effectively ceded control over its ultimate weapon to a foreign government. The democratic logic of Brexit entails that all elements of the state, including its coercive apparatus, should be under fully democratic, national control.

While some may favour exercising this control in order to de-nuclearize, there are good arguments to retain a nuclear arsenal. These powerful deterrents guarantee a country's political independence from any foreign power minded to suppress it. They also alleviate the need for a large standing army, the existence of which is a constant temptation for its use – including meddling in the affairs of other sovereign peoples. A truly independent nuclear deterrent can therefore safeguard the independence, sovereignty and democracy of the British people, while also reducing the threat that British military intervention poses to the sovereignty of other nations.

Decolonize the colonies

The logic of sovereign authority also entails that Britain should relinquish overseas territories claimed by other sovereign peoples. These territories are remnants of a vanished

empire or expressions of globalist aspirations that detract from Britain's democratic needs today. Britain should unilaterally relinquish its claims to territories claimed by other states, including Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands. Residents who do not wish to assimilate to Spain or Argentina should be offered full citizenship and help to relocate to Britain. This is consistent with the offer made to Hong Kong in 2020, following China's overturning of the 'one country, two systems' approach. That majorities of these territories' tiny populations may oppose this cannot be decisive here (unlike in Northern Ireland, discussed below). A few thousand colonial settlers cannot override the interests of the majority of Britain's citizens to assert their national sovereignty, and their interest in friendly relations with sovereign, democratic states whose territory Britain has occupied for centuries.

Britain should likewise abandon its claim to the Indian Ocean territory of Diego Garcia, which London already did in all but name when it effectively ceded the island to the United States for a military base in 1971. Britain should offer diplomatic support to Mauritius in staking its own sovereign claim to the Chagos Islands. In keeping with the anti-imperialist logic of Brexit, Britain should also renounce and abandon all its global military bases. These either violate other states' sovereign integrity (e.g., in Cyprus) or comprise the infrastructure supporting globalist adventurism (e.g., those in the Middle East and Africa).

By repudiating both the remnants of empire and globalist humanitarian warmongering, Britain will be able to reach out to the peoples of the world who have been on the receiving end of these efforts to frustrate sovereign independence. A newly democratic Britain will promote reciprocal relations and friendship between all the peoples who seek independence for themselves, and peaceful and prosperous cooperation with others. Spurning globalism in order to re-found international relations on the basis of sovereignty is the kind of world leadership to which Britain should aspire.

Consolidating the Union

To say that Brexit was a reassertion of British national sovereignty inevitably raises the question: what do we mean by Britain? Brexit has exposed significant weaknesses in the Union between the four territories that comprise the United Kingdom, which must be addressed to advance the cause of democratic sovereignty. In particular, in Northern Ireland and Scotland, where separatism has been a significant force for many years, most voters backed Remain, raising questions about their future in the Union. Although devolved governments in both territories reflect features of member-statehood, they do so in different ways and for different reasons, requiring radically different democratic responses. Brexit has demonstrated that the continued union of Britain with Northern Ireland constitutes a potentially fatal weakness in British national sovereignty. However, Brexit also offers an opportunity to realign the borders of the British state with the true boundaries of its sovereignty, and to help the Irish people gain their national sovereignty in the process. Conversely, Scottish separatism is only symptomatic of the political void plaguing Britain as a whole. Closing the void on both sides of the border is best achieved by restoring unitary government for the whole of Great Britain.

End the union with Northern Ireland

Eurosceptics went into the referendum with little thought of the complications that Brexit might create in Northern Ireland. This was unwise because, as chapter 4 showed, Northern Ireland was to become a significant obstacle for Brexit. A majority in the province – 55 per cent – voted to Remain, including 40 per cent of Unionists. This created an opening for Dublin and Brussels to exploit a critical political weakness for the United Kingdom, one that came close to thwarting Brexit, brought down Theresa May's

government and remains a serious challenge even after Britain has left the EU. This weakness is that the British state cannot exercise sovereign authority in Northern Ireland. Ending this union is therefore an urgent priority if Britain's national sovereignty is to be secured, let alone strengthened.

Brexit clearly did not reassert British sovereignty over Northern Ireland. To avoid a 'hard' border in Ireland, the May government tried to conclude Brexit with the 'backstop', which threatened to leave the whole United Kingdom trapped inside the EU Single Market and Customs Union. Johnson, in a hurry to 'Get Brexit done', agreed to the Northern Ireland Protocol, leaving the province within the EU Single Market under rules imposed by foreign powers and overseen by the ECJ. As we saw in chapter 4, British governments agreed to these extraordinary provisions because Dublin refused to countenance technological solutions along the land border. At no point did the British government even threaten simply to assert British sovereignty in Northern Ireland. There was never any attempt to call Dublin's bluff by saying that, in the event that no agreement on border arrangements could be reached, the United Kingdom would simply make its own arrangements on its side of the border and let the Republic establish a hard border if the EU insisted on doing so.

Even today, Britain's inability to assert sovereignty over Northern Ireland could still be a means to neutralize Brexit. The more that the United Kingdom seeks to diverge from EU rules, the more friction will be created between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and the more Northern Irish businesses will look to the Republic and the rest of the Single Market. Conversely, the more London tries to avoid this by continuing to mirror EU regulations, the more Brexit will appear pointless, fuelling demands to rejoin the EU (Western 2022). The Northern Ireland Protocol is not a stable solution. The diversion of trade that has already occurred appears to give the British government a legal basis for limiting the effect of the Protocol,

under the Protocol's own Article 16 (Titus 2022). But, despite sabre rattling, the government has so far preferred dragging its feet over implementing the Protocol to taking more radical measures (Connelly 2022).

The fundamental problem here is that the British state lacks sufficient authority to rule Northern Ireland without the cooperation of the Irish Republic. After 25 years of conflict between Irish Republicans and the British state and its Unionist supporters in Northern Ireland, the British and Irish governments negotiated the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which established the territory's current constitutional order. Approved by referendums in both parts of Ireland, it formally ended the Republic's claim to sovereignty over Northern Ireland. As Unionists have noted, in legal terms, the GFA says little about the border, and sovereignty is formally vested with the UK government. Therefore, *legally* speaking, there was little to stop London imposing new border arrangements. The fact that it did not do so demonstrates the primacy of the GFA's underlying political logic and exposes the weakness of Britain's *political* sovereignty in Northern Ireland.

The GFA is a constitutional arrangement in which London and Dublin collaborate in governing Northern Ireland. It adopts all-Ireland approaches to many policy questions. To act unilaterally would be to put the GFA at risk, something British governments are unwilling to do for a very obvious reason. Since the early 1970s, British policy has been to draw Dublin into the government of Northern Ireland because Britain has *no other way* to stabilize and pacify the province.

The British state's lack of political legitimacy in Northern Ireland is a historic problem. The province was created to allow a minority of Unionists to remain in the United Kingdom, despite the rejection of British rule by most Irish people during the 1919–21 War of Independence. The border was explicitly gerrymandered to ensure a Unionist majority in the North (Fanning 2013: 174). This created a permanent deficit of political legitimacy. For the first

50 years of its existence, the province was ruled by the devolved Stormont regime, which institutionalized sectarian discrimination against Catholics to maintain the loyalty of impoverished Protestant Unionists. Reflecting its lack of universal authority, the Stormont government relied on permanent emergency powers, enshrined in Section 1 of the Northern Ireland Special Powers Act 1922. This authoritarian system eventually crumbled in the late 1960s when young northern activists mounted a peaceful campaign for equal civil rights, which was forcefully supressed. When Protestant mobs began attacking Catholic areas of Belfast, Irish Republicans took up arms to overthrow the Stormont regime. Stormont could not suppress the rebellion, forcing London to impose direct rule in 1972. However, while British governments were never willing to concede to armed Irish Republicans, and violent conflict persisted for a quarter of a century, they nonetheless understood that their authority was severely limited. From very early on, London therefore sought to draw Dublin into the governance of Northern Ireland – first through the ambitious but failed 1974 Sunningdale Agreement, then the more limited 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement and finally the 1998 GFA. As the Northern Irish politician Seamus Mallon famously put it, the GFA was 'Sunningdale for slow learners' – though an additional 20 years of war meant that the degree of intergovernmental collaboration now had to go much further than originally envisaged (Bassett 2020: 90).

Whitehall knows that it has no alternative to collaboration with Dublin in running Northern Ireland. This weakness in the British state's authority explains why the EU could deploy the border question so effectively to keep the United Kingdom on the back foot during the Brexit negotiations. Unionists have bitterly criticized the Protocol for carving up the Union by introducing a trade border in the Irish Sea and leaving the province under ECJ jurisdiction. Indeed, they plausibly argue that the Protocol violates the GFA (Hoey 2022). Yet the Protocol nonetheless stems from the GFA. By constitutionalizing the influence

of another state – one that is unaccountable to voters in Northern Ireland – the GFA ensures that Northern Ireland is, in effect, a member-statelet. Likewise, the Protocol is a deeply undemocratic arrangement that gives control of Northern Ireland's economy to EU governments that are in no way accountable to the territory's voters. However, even if the Protocol disappeared, the all-Ireland forums institutionalized by the GFA would ensure that British and Irish representatives would continue jointly to make policy for Northern Ireland – a model of supranational rule comparable to that of the EU itself.

The complement to this supranational mode of rule is the constitutionalization of sectarian identity politics in Northern Ireland. The GFA permits members of the Northern Ireland Assembly to designate themselves as Unionist or Nationalist. It also avoids government by the representatives of the majority, and it instead mandates permanent 'power sharing' between these sectarian factions, distributing ministerial positions proportionally among the largest parties. Intended to avoid the effects of the gerrymandered Unionist majority in the province, this power-sharing arrangement reproduces the old sectarian politics within the government itself, with politics dominated – and frequently paralysed – by intractable questions of cultural identity (McCann 2018). Northern Ireland exemplifies how supranationalism from above intertwines with identity politics from below. This keeps Northern Irish politics quite separate from British politics. Northern Irish parties do not stand for election elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and British political parties make no real effort to represent the province's voters.

Brexit has powerfully demonstrated that the British state lacks sovereign authority in the north of Ireland. For the British people to consolidate our state and revitalize democratic sovereignty, we must redraw its borders to the extent of its real political authority by supporting Irish reunification. The GFA requires the British government to hold a referendum ('border poll') if London believes that a

majority in Northern Ireland would support reunification with Ireland. One effect of the Brexit crisis has been to make this a more realistic prospect. Opinion polls show that, although a majority still favours remaining in the United Kingdom, a significant majority also anticipates that reunification will take place in the not-too-distant future (Lord Ashcroft 2021). Combined with Sinn Fein's electoral success in the Republic, Brexit has transformed the tenor of discussion in Ireland. British democrats must encourage these moves towards Irish unity. It is in our interests to play our part in convincing a majority of voters in Northern Ireland that their future lies in a united Ireland, so that a border poll, when it comes, delivers a decisive vote for reunification and strengthens the sovereignty of both states. A significant movement in Britain along these lines would be a game-changer in Northern Irish politics.

Some Brexiters may blanch at this apparent truncation of British sovereignty. But, to reiterate, there is no real British sovereignty to surrender in Ireland. For more than 20 years, Britain's sovereignty in Northern Ireland has been a legal formality, and its authority there has always been inadequate. This is why Northern Ireland has been governed so differently to the rest of the Union since 1921. The British state has shown itself unable to rule Northern Ireland without using methods that betray its fundamental lack of legitimacy there, beginning with devolution to Protestant supremacists running through counter-insurgency to reliance on Dublin and ultimately permanently entrenching sectarian identity politics. These arrangements have, in turn, been overseen by parties that claim no political representation beyond the island of Ireland. All of this is testament to a politics without a sovereign core. The logic of sovereignty embedded in the Brexit vote compels us to end this damaging political confusion by supporting Irish reunification. British democrats – even those of a conservative stripe – are already moving in this direction. In June 2019, 59 per cent of Conservative Party members were prepared to dissolve the Union with

Northern Ireland if it was necessary to achieve Brexit (Smith 2019). Even traditional supporters of Unionism in Britain can intuit that Northern Ireland is an impediment to British sovereignty – and they prioritize the latter.

Others may worry about abandoning Northern Ireland to the technocratic rule of Brussels and the legal supremacy of the ECJ as part of an Irish Republic. But just as renouncing Northern Ireland will help solidify British sovereignty and cohere a new and democratic British nation, so spurring Irish reunification would radically reconstitute the Irish Republic – perhaps even more dramatically so. Irish reunification will require a complete overhaul of Ireland's constitution. Sinn Fein's ersatz 'nationalism' – which today promotes Irish cultural identity while eschewing real independence in favour of continued EU member-statehood – will be put under immense pressure by the need for a new politics of democratic citizenship in a newly unified nation (Hadaway 2022). These would be challenges for Ireland, however, and not for Britain – as would be the question of Ireland's EU membership. The peoples of Britain and Ireland should cooperate on the basis of sovereign equality and mutual respect. Given the huge gain to British sovereignty that relinquishing Northern Ireland would entail, Britain should offer generous financial support for the process of reunification, and preserve and even deepen existing arrangements like the Common Travel Area and the right that Irish and British citizens enjoy to settle, and even to vote, in each other's country. But the political fate of Ireland should rest in the hands of the people of Ireland, including those many British citizens who will choose to remain living there.

A democratic Britain must be founded upon the political equality of all of its citizens. This requires that all its citizens enjoy the same system of government. Decades of experience has shown that the democratic forms appropriate to Britain simply *cannot* be extended to Northern Ireland. The province is part of a 'United' Kingdom with Great Britain in name only. There could be no more concrete a

demonstration of Britain's reconstitution as a sovereign democracy than for British political parties to support Irish reunification as part of the process of reinvigorating the unity of Britain itself. Recognition that Northern Ireland is simply not part of the British nation will not only strengthen the remaining union of England, Wales and Scotland, it would be a true act of international leadership, indicating the power of a nation that has grasped the meaning of its own sovereignty. It would also mark a decisive break from Britain's imperial past and underscore that a new British nation will be animated by internationalist principles, not backwards-looking atavism.

Ending devolution

If Brexit has proved that Northern Ireland is not part of the British nation but is actually a critical weakness for Britain's national sovereignty, it has done the reverse for Scotland. It has underscored the intimate connection between the sovereignty of the Scottish people and the Union with England and Wales, and the weakness of the case for separation. Scottish separatism is the local expression of the political void, and as such, an artefact of member-statehood. Closing that void can only be achieved through the restoration of unitary government for Great Britain.

Like Northern Ireland, Scotland has devolved government institutions and an influential secessionist movement led by the Scottish National Party (SNP). But in every other constitutional respect the two territories are opposites. Unlike Northern Ireland, Scotland was never a colony of the British Empire. Its union with England in 1707 was essentially voluntary, making Scotland a constituent part of the Britain that established an empire. Unlike in Northern Ireland, where the major parties representing voters in England and Wales have long been electorally insignificant, those parties have always played a key role in the contest to represent the Scottish people. Unlike in

Northern Ireland, the sovereignty of the people of Scotland can be realized as part of the wider British people, but it will be frustrated by Scottish independence. If political equality is to be the core of a democratic Britain, then ending Scottish (and Welsh) devolution is the way to achieve it.

Brexit has undoubtedly fuelled calls for Scottish independence. In 2016, 62 per cent of the Scottish electorate voted to remain, as opposed to 46.6 per cent in England. This allowed the SNP to argue that Scots want different things from the English and that Scotland was being taken out of the EU against its will. This strategically ignored the result of an earlier referendum – namely, the Scottish vote against independence in 2014. The earlier outcome meant that, in 2016, Scotland remained part of the United Kingdom, and was hence bound by the decision of the majority of the population of that union. Despite this, the SNP militantly opposed Brexit and demanded a second independence vote. Following losses in the 2017 general election, the SNP regained its domination of Scottish politics in 2019, securing 48 of the 59 Scottish seats at Westminster. Nonetheless, the public remains divided on independence. After consistent majority opposition until 2020, a small majority for independence appeared in the spring and summer of 2021, only to vanish again later that year (What Scotland Thinks 2021).

The apparent contradiction between widespread support for the SNP, on the one hand, and ambivalence about Scottish independence, on the other, indicates that Scottish separatism is more a reaction to the voiding of representative democracy across Britain than an expression of a genuine yearning for national sovereignty. Scottish 'nationalism' is not grounded on any really fundamental political or economic differences with England or Wales, but is mainly an expression of disaffection with the repeated election of Tory governments in London. Like the industrial heartlands of Wales, and the North and Midlands of England, Scotland suffered significant de-industrialization

under the Thatcher and Major governments. This fostered serious resentment, to which the New Labour government responded by promoting devolution in the cynical hope of capturing a permanent redoubt in the event of a future electoral loss at Westminster.

Nor has Scotland suffered discriminatory treatment from Whitehall relative to other de-industrialized regions – on the contrary. Scotland's per capita GDP is higher than every English region except London, the Southeast and East Anglia, and is much higher than that of Wales (Office for National Statistics 2019). Nonetheless, the Barnett formula – which determines the UK Treasury's grant to the devolved governments – has ensured that public spending per person has for decades remained significantly higher in Scotland than in England, and higher than in much poorer Wales (Cheung 2020). Scotland's share of UK public spending in 2020/2021 was 15 per cent higher than its contribution to tax revenue (Keep 2021). There is therefore little to distinguish Scotland's experience from the other 'left behind' regions of Britain – save that it has received proportionately more public resources in response.

Moreover, the SNP's so-called 'nationalism' is ersatz at best. The SNP does not seek meaningful independence for Scotland. It seeks to remain within the EU, which would, as we have seen in earlier chapters, permanently constrain national policy making. In the 2014 independence referendum campaign, the SNP proposed to retain the British pound to avoid disrupting trade with the rump United Kingdom, Scotland's biggest trading partner – a policy which would have sacrificed control over Scottish monetary policy to London. They even proposed to retain the British monarch as head of state. The SNP's 'nationalist' project is actually premised on creating as little disruption – and consequently as little true independence – as possible. Voters rejected this in 2014, even when it seemed relatively plausible thanks to high oil prices and, more importantly, because a (pre-Brexit) Britain and an independent Scotland

would both be part of the EU Single Market and Customs Union, meaning that no barriers to trade would follow independence.

Brexit makes independence a far more bracing proposition (Tuck 2016), which is one reason why the SNP militantly opposed it. Scotland's economy is much more dependent on external trade than the United Kingdom as a whole, and its trade is much more dependent on the United Kingdom than the United Kingdom's trade is dependent on the EU (Huang, Sampson and Schneider 2021). If the United Kingdom faces a short-run economic hit from Brexit, Scotland would face much more serious economic disruption if it seceded and rejoined the EU. New EU members must also join the euro – an intrinsically unattractive prospect. Until that could be arranged or the requirement waived, Scotland would need its own currency or would have to retain sterling but without any influence over UK monetary policy. All of these options entail serious economic risks and severe constraints on the Scottish government's capacity to borrow (Tetlow and Soter 2021), a particularly acute problem given Scotland's high fiscal deficits (Tetlow and Cheung 2021). Perhaps these challenges could be surmounted if the SNP could rally the population behind this more arduous route to independence. But this seems unlikely, given that Scottish voters rejected even the milder version of independence offered in 2014.

Scottish nationalism is fundamentally weak because it is more a by-product of the decay of the British nation than of a desire for national sovereignty. The current wide extent of support for the SNP is the expression of the void that has opened up between Scottish voters and the Labour Party (Devine 2016). As we saw in chapter 2, the post-war British nation itself emerged as a project of the Labour Party, which was particularly strong in Scotland's industrial cities in the post-war period. But as working-class support for the Labour Party ebbed, so too did the nation and with it the Union. Throughout the 1980s, as Labour failed to defend its supporters' jobs and communities from

the ravages of Thatcherite de-industrialization, Scottish Labour emphasized instead the supposed Englishness of Thatcherism and the purportedly more progressive character of Scotland (Hume and Owen 1988). In the 1990s, New Labour compounded this division by promoting devolution. Yet, as New Labour's inadequacy in responding to Scottish voters' grievances became clear, the SNP were able to capitalize on the new 'Scottishness' and the devolved institutions that Labour had created. This new 'nationalism' arose not from rebellion against a colonial denial of Scottish national sovereignty but rather from the internal decay of the institutions that once maintained British national sovereignty. The SNP has only flourished in the void created by the Scottish electorate's alienation from the Westminster parties. As we have seen, this is in fact a shared national experience across the whole of Britain. Scottish 'nationalism' is the localized expression of the void, not a solution to it.

Like all parties of the void, especially those supporting EU member-statehood, the politics of the SNP are no basis for real national self-determination. The SNP's discomfort with meaningful democratic choice is reflected in its preference for an enfeebled 'independence' encased within the EU. But its discomfort with the Scottish people is also revealed in the authoritarian way in which it rules devolved Scotland. The Scottish Parliament has enacted the most severe restrictions on free speech in the United Kingdom, and has long been enthusiastic for the minutest policing of ordinary people's lives (Waiton 2020). The Scottish government consistently took the most restrictive measures in response to COVID-19 (McCall 2021), though with no greater success in curbing the disease. The SNP's governing assumption is that the Scottish people are a permanent source of danger to each other – as racists, sectarian bigots and, more recently, disease spreaders. This is no basis for national independence or the sovereignty of the Scottish people. It is the basis for a Scottish neoliberalism to rule a Scottish void.

If Scottish 'independence' will only serve to frustrate the sovereignty of the Scottish people, the existing devolution settlement is no better. Indeed, as an expression of the decay of national democracy, devolution replicates key features of EU member-statehood: diluting the nation by fostering identity politics and confusing lines of accountability, enabling evasive elite blame shifting. Particularly under SNP rule, the Scottish government can always blame any political failures on the fact that Westminster is withholding critical state powers from it. Equally, Westminster politicians can disclaim responsibility for outcomes in Scotland because it is run by a devolved government. This evasive dynamic is exemplified by the SNP's post-Brexit campaign for a second independence referendum in the full knowledge that the Tory government is unlikely to grant it. The SNP staves off the prospect of a referendum that it will probably lose while blaming the Tories in London. This cynical charade means that although the Union between England and Scotland is not about to collapse, it remains politically weak. The SNP's separatism is only likely to tend further in the direction of an anti-English identity politics as the party seeks scapegoats for its own ineffectiveness.

To allow citizens truly to hold their political representatives to account, unitary national government must be restored. But this will only help to constitute a new British nation if it is achieved with the support of a majority of Scottish voters. Given that the SNP currently enjoys the lion's share of electoral support, convincing a majority of Scots to abandon devolution is no small challenge for British democrats. Indeed, the way in which the void has been institutionalized in Scotland has done deep damage to the very idea of a British state. Defeating Scottish separatism will require a revived democratic politics capable of persuading Scots that their desire for self-determination and redress for their grievances is much more effectively pursued in unity with the wider British people. This will require a wholly different

approach to the government of all of Britain's regions. It would require a strengthened representative politics that compels Parliament to take seriously its responsibility to all of Britain's people in all its regions on an equal basis and to stop passing the buck to regional governments (R. Johnson 2021).

The same arguments apply in principle to Welsh devolution – although separatism has always been much weaker there – and to any proposed devolution in England. Though Remain commentators love to talk up English nationalism, it has no real political following. It is, like the new Scottishness, a cultural product of the voiding of the old national sovereignty but, unlike Scottish 'nationalism', it has little institutional or party-political representation. There is no democratic reason to encourage it. Successfully making the argument for a unitary Britain and establishing new forms of effective, responsive and accountable local government must be a key part of any agenda for building a democratic nation. If our existing political parties cannot manage it, new ones will have to do it instead. It is to this problem that we now turn.

Popular sovereignty through parliamentary soverignty

Parliament, and the decayed parties that occupy it, lies at the heart of Britain's sclerotic system of political representation that no longer creates the authority needed for effective government. We propose changes to this system that can strengthen citizens' control over the state and thereby revitalize the sovereignty of Parliament.

As we saw in chapter 4, one effect of Brexit has been to clarify the democratic core of the doctrine of the sovereignty of Parliament. The 2016 referendum and its tortured implementation finally disproved any Burkean notion that the sovereignty of Parliament was somehow autonomous from the ultimate authority of the people. Parliament is truly sovereign only insofar as it represents the people. It is legally supreme – empowered

to make or repeal any law it wishes – but its rule will only command real political authority insofar as it is seen to represent those who elect it. Once this political and relational aspect of sovereignty is understood, we can see that the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty is not a licence for the arbitrary rule of an elected elite. It is a radically democratic constitutional principle on which a truly democratic nation can be founded. Unlike in countries with formal codified constitutions, Britain's Parliament is only constrained in its law making by those who elect it.

This concentration of legal power in the hands of our parliamentary representatives is a burdensome doctrine, however. It means that the weight of responsibility for democratic government is ultimately borne by those who elect Parliament. As Britain's entire experience in the EEC and the EU demonstrates, there is no legal constraint to prevent a sovereign parliament from undermining the conditions of democracy itself. The only possible constraints are political: the commitment of our representatives to democracy; and the commitment of the people ourselves – our care for the conditions of our national political association, our political vigilance, and our political energy. In the final analysis, in a democracy we get the government we deserve.

While Brexit clarified the democratic core of the British constitution, it also revealed the extent to which we, the citizens, have allowed our political system to become exhausted. Our actual parliamentarians, and their parties, made a mockery of the powers vested in them and the sovereignty of Parliament. If the state is to be re-founded as a democracy, it will need parties that take parliamentary sovereignty seriously. Our current parliamentary parties are clearly not up to the task. Consequently, we must take steps to force change on the existing parties, and to facilitate the development of new ones, by forcing political elites to take seriously the sovereignty of the British people as it is expressed in our sovereign Parliament.

Our proposals are not exhaustive, nor are they complete in every detail; they are rather intended to illustrate the kinds of radical institutional changes that are required to reverse the decay of the state and constitute a democratic nation. Our proposals are also intended to be practical, in the sense that they could be achieved within the current constitution. Although these proposals would entail significant changes to the operation of our political system, they do not require a revolution or a constituent assembly to write a new constitution. They could all be achieved through ordinary legislation – that is, by realizing the potential of the sovereignty of Parliament. This is not simply a matter of convenience. As we saw with the EU, constitutional arrangements exist to set limits on democratic politics (see chapter 1), when what we desperately need now is to unleash the democratic impulse behind Brexit. Given the degraded state of our current political elite, any attempt to draft a new constitution today would likely achieve the exact opposite.

We have taken inspiration from the People's Charter of 1838. The People's Charter was the work of the world's first democratic mass movement – the Chartists. In the 1830s, the obstacles to democratic control of the British state were the very narrow electoral franchise and the naked corruption of the electoral system. The People's Charter therefore demanded six reforms to make the United Kingdom's political system more democratic: votes for all adult men; secret ballots; ending property qualifications on candidates; salaries for MPs; equalizing the size of constituencies; and annual parliamentary elections. Today, the obstacles facing democracy in Britain are different. All adult citizens (and not only men) can vote; MPs are paid; and rotten boroughs no longer exist. Nonetheless, our vote makes little practical difference because the political system is dominated by a cartel of exhausted political parties whose political operations have denuded the nation of its sovereignty and democratic politics of its power. The six reforms proposed here therefore have the quite specific

aim of opening Parliament up to more political competition, to incentivize and give more opportunities for new political thinking, and to make Parliament and the parties that inhabit it more responsive to the electorate.

Of course, our existing delinquent political parties have reasons to resist such proposals in order to preserve their power and the baleful influence of their failed traditions. Nevertheless, the proposals here are meant to form the basis of a practical political programme that mobilizes the democratic core of the existing constitution to put pressure on its decadent elements. The first three are intended to incentivize more representative political parties. They work as a package because they are interdependent and mutually reinforcing in their effects. The latter three proposals are intended to deepen democracy and enhance political representation by democratizing the state and securing freedom of speech – the key civil liberty, without which there can be no true democratic self-government.

End the corporate financing of political parties

We propose that corporate funding of political parties be outlawed. Individual donations should also be capped at a level that would permit enthusiastic citizens to give serious support to their favoured party while limiting the domination of wealthier individuals. The cap could be based on some portion of the median income – 5 per cent, say, giving a cap of roughly £1,500 per year.

As they have retreated from ordinary voters, the major political parties have become far too dependent on powerful lobby groups and donors. To force political parties to be more responsive to ordinary citizens, they should be (1) required to raise money from individuals rather than from corporate bodies, whether private businesses or trade unions; and (2) prevented from relying on a small number of very wealthy citizens. Corporate bodies will retain freedom of expression and can influence political life in that way and through organized lobbying. Nevertheless,

in order to survive, political parties will be forced to try to inspire a more active relationship with their supporters.

We do not underestimate the impact this would have on political parties. It would change the character of their operations. That is the point. Nor do we doubt that parties would try to find ways to limit this impact. Nevertheless, parties would be compelled to build and sustain large, active memberships that will, in turn, be able to develop meaningful connections with large numbers of citizens who would be willing to support the party materially. To achieve this, parties would be forced to develop ideas capable of inspiring ordinary citizens to engage with politics, and to provide the mediation between political leaders and the electorate that has, in recent decades, evaporated into the political void.

Permit the recall of MPs on political grounds

MPs should be free to depart from their electoral mandates if their judgement dictates. But, equally, voters must have the right to hold them to account immediately for such decisions, if enough of them believe that the MP is failing to represent them as promised at their election. This is an essential requirement of any democracy. Parliament may be legally sovereign, but its political authority is derived exclusively from its electoral mandate, to which elected representatives are ultimately subservient.

Adopt proportional representation for the election of MPs

The political parties that have dominated British politics for centuries have presided over the failure of its old constitution to ensure that the people are adequately represented. They must be challenged by enabling new parties to represent voters in Parliament. However, this is made exceptionally difficult by the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. Hence the need for proportional representation (PR).

As with any electoral system, PR has its drawbacks. A common objection is that it often produces coalition government, with parties' electoral promises being sacrificed in post-election horse-trading, such that voters do not really know what they are voting for and often end up being betrayed. By contrast, FPTP offers the electorate a clear choice between two different governments-in-waiting. This incentivizes 'broad church' political parties that are in effect pre-election coalitions that present voters with competing programmes that they have already thrashed out internally, such that the electorate knows what it is voting for. However, as the differences between the United Kingdom's political parties on the big questions of political economy and social organization have narrowed to vanishing point, this advantage of FPTP has disappeared. The Labour Party no longer has any particular political relationship to the working class, and there is very little left of what the Conservatives once wanted to conserve. The electorate might know the slight differences between these two neoliberal parties' electoral programmes, but it is a choice that is, at best, uninspiring and at worst, meaningless. Moreover, our first two proposals on funding and recall would limit parties' capacity to evade their mandates by ensuring that party leaders are more dependent on their voters and supporters.

A related objection is that FPTP allows for the largest bloc of voters to produce a majority government with a strong mandate, which makes effective government more likely than with more representative but fissiparous coalitions. Yet, as Britain's recent experience shows, FPTP is actually no guarantee of this. The voiding of representation has so eroded voters' party loyalties that, since 2010, we have seen more years with hung parliaments, coalitions and minority administrations than those with majority governments. Moreover, even governments with large majorities have proven unstable and politically ineffective. A government's capacity to govern depends not simply on parliamentary arithmetic but on political coherence and

authority. The parties dominating – and propped up by – our FPTP system lack both. Hollowed out and divorced from the electorate, they are unable or unwilling to articulate and enact a serious national programme.

Nor is it any real objection to point out that most EU member-states already practice some form of PR, and yet they too suffer from the problems of the political void. PR is no more responsible for the void in Continental states than FPTP is to blame for it in Britain. It is the void that has incentivized unprincipled backroom deals in PR systems, just as it has denuded Britain of any real political choice under FPTP. Of course, where PR is already in place, it cannot make the contribution to reviving national sovereignty that it could in a place like the United Kingdom, where its adoption would seriously shake up the oligarchy of established parties and open up the system to new challengers.

Our argument for electoral system change, then, is not made on the grounds of some abstract principle that PR is always and everywhere the best system, but rather that it is necessary to the specific conditions we face. In the British context, PR is needed to help break up the sclerotic oligarchy of established parties and facilitate the emergence of new parties. Events since 2016 have shown that the established parties are politically bankrupt, with little or no capacity for self-renewal. There is no reason to expect this to change without significant institutional reform. Encouraging and facilitating the emergence of new challenger parties that can seriously contest for power is essential, given the exhaustion of existing political traditions. This might also compel the established parties to become more responsive to voters and more innovative. By the same token, there is no reason why, once the ties of political representation have been rebuilt, we might not return to FPTP or any other voting system. Parliamentary sovereignty – as opposed to a written constitution – favours institutional change in line with the evolving demands of a democratic society. We should use it.

PR will also yield particular political benefits in the present moment. It will empower those regions that have suffered under FPTP – notably the 'red wall' constituencies of England and Wales, as well as Scotland, weakening the appeal of separatism as a vehicle for political protest. PR would allow ethnic-minority citizens, currently concentrated in urban areas, to escape the liberal paternalism of Labour MPs and councillors, who have taken their inner-city voters as much for granted as they did their former 'red wall' seats. Indeed, immigrant and ethnic-minority Britons are key constituents for the vision of the nation we have outlined here. In contrast to the divisive intersectionalism and culture wars that flourish within decaying member-states, a democratic nation offers political inclusion founded on political equality.

Abolish the House of Lords

Law should be made exclusively by the elected representatives of the people, and not retired politicians and bureaucrats, wealthy political donors, bishops or the remnants of the landed aristocracy. This is not simply a moral objection to residual feudal elements of the constitution. The Lords' very existence entrenches technocratic governance while allowing elected representatives to evade their political responsibilities. The main arguments made in favour of the Lords are that its members are technical experts in various policy domains, due to their previous experiences, and that, as an unelected chamber, its members can seriously scrutinize and amend legislation precisely because they do not have to worry about voters' reaction or advancing their own political careers (e.g., Norton 2021). This effectively separates detailed policy and legislative work from the sphere of electoral accountability. It entrenches a division of labour characteristic of the void, which reduces democratic politics to careerism, focus-group mongering and empty grandstanding. Abolishing the Lords is necessary not only to enhance accountability

in law making, but also to force elected representatives to take more seriously their role in shaping and scrutinizing legislation.

Increase the size of the House of Commons

To further support this objective, we should expand the Commons so that there is one MP for every 50,000 electors. In addition to making MPs more accessible to their constituents, this will hugely increase the capacity of the House of Commons to take on the responsibilities of scrutinizing government, making detailed legislation and limiting the power of technocrats, whether in the form of state bureaucrats or independent regulatory agencies. The House of Commons should be moved to new premises to accommodate its increased size. The House should retain its adversarial face-to-face traditions, facilitating our representatives in holding the executive to account on a continuous basis.

Repeal all laws limiting political expression

After the vote itself, the freedom of citizens to express opinions and to challenge the opinions of others is the most important and necessary condition of political equality and democratic self-government. Freedom of speech allows us to express our opinions and grievances, to see how far these are justified and shared, and to debate and develop potential solutions to our problems. These processes are essential to democracy because it is through such expression that the collective will is formed. Freedom of expression is therefore an essential moment of democratic representation. States that regulate or suppress speech are depriving citizens of an equal right to contribute their perspective to political debate, to hear one another and to test each other's ideas. They create a lazy and authoritarian culture in which political elites, rather than listening to, debating with and representing the citizens, instead seek

to repress them, ruling certain ideas out of bounds and making certain grievances impossible to express. This is toxic to democratic life, breeding only resentment and disaffection. Consequently, the only political speech or writing that should be subject to criminal penalties is that which intentionally incites the commission of a criminal offence.

These proposals are hardly a complete list of everything that is needed to democratize Britain. Rather, they focus on constitutional changes that, first, are feasible – in the sense of requiring only ordinary legislation to introduce and, second, could collectively serve to close the void between citizens and government by reinvigorating democratic political representation. They would kick-start a revival of democratic political life that would soon acquire its own momentum. Parties would be forced to become more responsive to voters. A revived parliament would start to rein in the technocratic forms of government that cede too much power to central bankers, judges and quangos. It would address the weakened state of local government and eliminate ancient hangovers in the constitution like the royal prerogative – and eventually the monarchy itself.

Although we are republicans with no sympathy for the aristocratic principle, we have not indulged the grand gesture of calling for the immediate abolition of the monarchy. This is because we are interested in clearly identifying the practical obstacles to democracy in contemporary Britain, rather than engaging in a culture war against its archaic elements. While the symbolism of monarchy is plainly inconsistent with democracy, the monarchy has not been a practical impediment to democracy in Britain for more than a century. Queen Elizabeth II herself was a model ceremonial head of state who took pains not to interfere in Britain's democratic politics. There is significantly less confidence about her successor in this respect. Her death provided a potent symbol of the waning of the old order, and it should be a moment for national reflection and debate about the monarchy. Doubtless, a fully democratic

nation will come to republican conclusions. However, we are reluctant to propose any changes at this point that might require a constitutional convention or something similar. At present, when the population still lacks adequate political representation, this would be to invite elite and technocratic capture of the entire reform process.

Although institutional change can incentivize and facilitate the emergence of new political parties and the transformation of the old, it will not succeed without new political ideas. The electoral system may be an obstacle to bringing the neoliberal void to an end, but it is not the cause of the void. The sclerosis of representation is the result of the failure of Britain's political traditions. In the final part, we turn to consider the world-historic challenge presented by that failure.

The politics of self-determination

The question remains: who shall implement our various proposals? Are they not merely utopian? The basis for a coalition capable of executing these ideas does exist. Many British citizens clearly desire greater democratic control and responsible government – as expressed in the ballot-box revolts of 2016–2019. And yet decades of member-statehood have left them leaderless and unrepresented. A hung parliament might generate a Labour–Liberal pact that would enact PR, but existing parties are hardly likely to quit NATO or ban themselves from receiving corporate funding. And few among the voters who have rebelled against the established parties have moved to establish new vehicles of their own. There is, therefore, an urgent necessity to build a new political movement. To address that problem, we take as our starting point the actual condition of British politics: the reality of its decrepitude and the reasons for its decay into the void. From this analysis, we identify a perspective that could inspire those citizens who are willing to take our political

sclerosis seriously, centred on the realization of collective self-determination through the pursuit of national sovereignty.

The politics of the future cannot draw from the poetry of the past. The great traditions of socialism and conservatism are bankrupt and, with them, the old left/right divide has become meaningless. This is precisely why our proposals do not cleave to traditional left/right positions. They include some elements once supported by the left (e.g., leaving NATO, Irish reunification, abolishing the Lords), some with a more conservative flavour (ending devolution, a nationalized nuclear deterrent), one popular with the liberal centre (PR) and one that was traditionally a property of liberals and the left but has since been abandoned to the right (free expression). This is not simply eclecticism. Today, we inhabit the wreckage of twentieth-century mass politics. Breathing life back into these traditions is impossible; doing so amounts only to tribalism, the beating of an antique drum. Our proposals will not fit neatly into the traditions of the twentieth century precisely because they are a response to the specific challenges arising from the failure of those traditions.

Today, we have a Conservative Party that does not conserve, a Labour Party that does not represent workers, and a Liberal Democrat Party that believes neither in liberty nor democracy. Their demonstrated lack of capacity for self-renewal indicates that we cannot go back to their failed projects. For all the Tories' noisy patriotism, a new nation cannot be constituted through bumptious rhetoric about 'brilliant Britain', still less through treating the market and capital accumulation as the state's *raison d'être*. Thatcherism was their response to the crisis of social democracy, but it only dissolved the nation. Our challenges today are the result of Thatcherism – it is the problem, not the solution. That Liz Truss won the Tory leadership by positioning herself as the new Margaret Thatcher only indicates the scale of the rot. This may simply have been for show, to attract the votes of the tiny,

aged and unrepresentative party membership. Her first act in government was to rush through a £150bn energy support package that one market analyst described as 'the largest welfare programme in the UK's recent history' (FT Reporters 2022). This suggests that, like her predecessors, Truss was driven by forces that she neither understood nor controlled. But if she had been able to proceed, as threatened, to deregulate the economy and weaken workers' rights, this would not have been an effect of Brexit but only of the bankruptcy of the Conservative Party. Johnson at least grasped the need to innovate with his pitch towards the working class (Glasman 2019). That endeavour was stillborn. But his colleagues' drift back towards a failed Thatcherite ideology indicates an even lower degree of political understanding and imagination.

At the same time, member-statehood and its failure has exposed the bankruptcy of the British left in both its state socialist and Blairite forms. There is no way back to the post-war welfare state created by Labour. Member-statehood was the ruling class's answer to the crisis of that state, and it both reflected and entrenched the epochal defeat of organized labour and the political left. Today, invoking the 'spirit of '45' can only be pointlessly nostalgic, for the collective organizations that made that era have been destroyed or irredeemably hollowed out. The failed Corbyn experiment confirmed that the Labour Party cannot be used for socialist ends. Labour is firmly the middle-class party of public sector (and so-called 'third sector') professionals, of those using intersectionalism to advance their own narrow interests. It has reverted to Blairite, Third Way, authoritarian liberalism, an ideology that remains entrenched across the state bureaucracy and the wider establishment. If Truss was cosplaying as Thatcher, Starmer is a pale imitation of Blair, merely projecting an image of technocratic competence while waiting around for the government to implode. As for the unions, although neoliberal economic mismanagement is spurring renewed strike action, membership remains limited to the

public sector. Grandiloquent calls for workers' revolution, or even general strikes, are empty gestures invoking a bygone era. The working class has never been more alienated from the political left (Winlow, Hall and Treadwell 2017; Embery 2020). Workers now engage in politics largely independently from the old left parties (Cunliffe 2019; Guilluy 2019; Kyeyune 2022).

What then can replace these exhausted, zombified forces? Clearly, part of inspiring citizens to re-engage meaningfully in politics – to re-emerge from private life and close the void – must involve efforts to address their material grievances and desires. At the same time, the economic cart cannot be put before the political horse. We have not indulged in a laundry list of proposed economic reforms, still less called for fully automated luxury communism or the like. Such calls can only be utopian where no political movement exists to implement them. Certainly, neoliberal capitalism is failing and an alternative to the market is desperately needed. In the short term, some sectors arguably require nationalization. But a policy of nationalization will not get us very far without a *nation* capable of providing political direction to industry. Indeed, without political leadership, nationalization risks being merely technocratic, with bureaucrats simply substituting for capitalist managers. This was a key failure of the post-war state, and it was repeated in Corbyn's proposals for a green industrial revolution, to be led by well-meaning technocrats, not a politically mobilized nation. If the degree of state ownership is any guide, even the Tories have nationalized certain banks (after 2008) and the railways (during COVID-19), but that has entailed neither collective excitement nor control.

The lesson of these events is that political self-determination must be prioritized for meaningful economic change to follow. After all, we are only talking about 'levelling up' the areas ravaged by neoliberalism because of successive electoral revolts by working-class voters. And this only happened when citizens ignored the advice and

warnings of technocratic economists, voting for more political control even at the alleged expense of economic growth. The project of national sovereignty is a democratic one, in which economic priorities are determined by politics, not vice versa. Britain is one of the wealthiest countries that has ever existed. It ought to be a simple matter of national shame that we have *chosen* not to provide adequate housing or skills training for our young, or abundant, cheap energy for everyone. A democratic movement would have to make meeting such basic needs a top priority. It may then proceed to establish ever-greater democratic control over the economy. But it will only succeed if these are seen not as technical problems to be solved through this or that manifesto promise but as challenges requiring the active engagement of citizens.

Only a politically active population that is already in the business of closing the void can determine the precise forms and relations of private and public enterprise or empower their representatives to take on the powerful private interests benefiting from the status quo. Only such a movement will be able consistently to prioritize widespread national and public needs over local and private objections. Only such a movement will be able to get the houses built, the energy supplied, the real wages increased. And only such a movement will have the political capacity to anticipate national emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the political authority to hold its nerve in the face of them.

Building this movement will require a wholesale change in our understanding of the state itself. Thanks to the voiding of representative democracy, we now see the state purely as a collection of bureaucratic agencies, a practically alien force imposed on our lives by others. Lost is any sense of the state as the political unity of the people constituted through political representation. The state is the institution through which we, as citizens, seek to determine the conditions of our lives together. Without that sense of ourselves as a people, bound together despite

all our diversity and differences, there is no possibility of our taking collective control over our circumstances. As we have made clear, this is not to claim that the state is or can be an organic unity, devoid of class differences or contradictory interests, as conservatives have suggested. It is simply to recognize that we can only live in society if we conceive ourselves as being bound by rules that we make and impose upon ourselves. This is only possible through effective political representation in the state, such that we feel it is genuinely our state, and that we are the people whose will determines its operation. That does not mean homogeneity. It is when we conceive of ourselves as a people, bound by a shared commitment to democratic self-rule, that we come to see contending views and interests as legitimate, and accept majority decisions that may conflict with our own perspective. The Brexit years show how far we are from this vision. Lacking a sense of our unity as a people, we are experiencing the failure of our state.

The democratic movement for national sovereignty must also be internationalist. British democrats must collaborate with those across Europe and beyond who seek to enhance their own peoples' sovereignty. We have suggested some key foreign policy aspects of this. Similar internationalism will be required to enhance the British people's capacity to overcome private, sectional resistance to more democratic control of the economy. The more such a programme is taken up abroad, the stronger its prospects here in Britain. Creating an international movement for national sovereignty is therefore a priority.

If these proposals seem 'unrealistic', consider the alternative. The Brexit crisis has exposed the degree to which the political and cultural elite have repudiated the nation. Although the Leave-voting masses stubbornly and successfully insisted that their votes had to be respected, the dominant parties have shown no capacity to meet the challenge of national sovereignty by representing the nation. Pro-worker conservatism is struggling to find institutional form, with feeble 'one nation' Toryism collapsing

back into Thatcherism. Starmer poses with the Union Jack only because focus groups and pollsters tell him to, and Labour supporters denounce his 'flag-shagging'. Tentative efforts to articulate a 'woke', liberal vision of the nation offer a futile rehashing of the Blairite 1990s (e.g., Welby 2018). The premise of left-liberal thinking is the mutual vulnerability of diverse cultural identities, which the state is required to police. Any claim on the nation from the left wing of neoliberalism will be as vapid as that from the right.

Moreover, these exhausted political traditions are manifestly failing to deal with the challenges presented by the breakdown of neoliberal order. Their response to COVID-19 and Ukraine shows the shadow of the future. State failure is deepening, while reckless elites plunge the world into mounting chaos. In the background, authoritarian liberals – ensconced in the bureaucracies of the public sector, educational institutions, corporate human resource departments, professional associations and trade unions – continue to cultivate the censorious identity politics that de-legitimizes political nationhood and democratic self-government, and fosters instead the intersectionalist police state.

By comparison, our proposals to strengthen national sovereignty are eminently reasonable. Leaving the failed NATO alliance; carving out a new, independent foreign policy; consolidating our own state while making a friend of our closest neighbour in Ireland; changing our political system so as to offer effective representation to all citizens; and mobilizing the citizenry to take collective responsibility: these are moderate, responsible alternatives to the identitarian tribalism, censorship, normalized emergency, stagflation and war offered by our decadent political class. We do not make our proposals because they will be easy to deliver. We make them precisely because they offer a realistic and necessary alternative. They are derived from the actual condition of the state as it exists today. And they offer a path for anyone who does not

want to follow our ruling class down the dark road it is taking towards war, poverty and energy rationing in order to preserve its power.

Creating a democratic movement capable of building national sovereignty is the formidable challenge presented to the political imagination of the twenty-first century. The decay of Britain's political traditions is only the local manifestation of the failure of all the political traditions created in Europe since the French Revolution. This is a world-historic problem that affects every advanced democracy. It demands a return to the first principles of collective self-determination. Exactly why does democracy matter? Why is democracy necessarily representative? What is its connection with individual freedom? How can it be extended beyond the state to embrace our productive lives as well? What are its implications for family life, education, consumption patterns, and so on? These are questions that concern us all, and they can only be addressed through a revived public life engaging the whole nation.

Creating a movement that can answer these questions in practice will require us to cultivate the political spirit needed to bring any truly democratic political programme to life. We do not underestimate the challenge. Strengthening national sovereignty is a question of rebuilding political authority. As we have argued, the political void of member-statehood is characterized by a deficit of real political authority, which gives rise to authoritarianism. The law's authority has not yet completely evaporated, but the relationship between the governors and governed is weak and tenuous, characterized by mutual cynicism, distrust and hostility. To overcome this politically insipid authoritarianism, we will have to turn to the only source of authority that is available to the nation, the one that we have all been avoiding for the past four decades: the democratic authority that arises from collective self-determination. Filling the void requires many more ordinary citizens to take themselves seriously as political actors and to enter public life. It is not going to happen any other way.

In the void of authority, the political spirit that has prospered is the antithesis of trust: the authoritarian spirit of fear. Politicians without authority must promote fear: fear of migrants, fear of fascism, fear of economic collapse. Brexit was immediately followed by a state of emergency based on promoting universal fear of a highly discriminatory disease. This recent fearmongering was the inheritance of decades of fear of crime, fear of terrorism, fear of populist insurgents, fear of secret globalist cabals, fear of new technology, fear of climate change and, of course, fear of other people's alleged fears – fear of homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia and the rest. We fear the effects of others' lifestyles, others' attitudes, others' aspirations and anxieties. Most of these fears boil down to just one: the fear of our fellow citizens. The ideological effect and function of the politics of fear and emergency is to lower our political expectations and to perpetuate neoliberalism. These fears atomize us, precluding the possibility of citizens collaborating to exercise real collective authority over the conditions of our existence. The democratic politics of national sovereignty requires us to subordinate our fears to the task of self-government; to see our fellow citizens not as the problem to be solved but as the potential solution to our problems. It demands a spirit of civil liberty and robust political engagement with each other, rather than the lazy demonization and silencing of those who disagree.

Politicians and activists in many parts of the void exhort us to demand official protection from those they say we should fear. Perhaps the most alarming, difficult and inspiring aspect of replacing the void with a powerful national sovereignty is that it requires us to stop hiding behind our fears. Taking control demands that we stop simply blaming others – and instead embrace our responsibility for our life together as a people.

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Note: All web addresses were correct as of 14 October 2022 unless otherwise indicated.

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Index