

UK Sovereignty

One argument cited for Brexit is that the UK parliament will once again become absolutely sovereign. No longer will it be subject to laws dictated by unelected overseas officials. The argument is buttressed by the assurance that any bad laws imposed by a UK government can be rescinded following a general election that throws out the scoundrels responsible for those laws.

But there are at least five grounds for considering the cited argument to be either naive or disingenuous:

1. Absolute national sovereignty is an illusion in a networked and globalized world:

- 1.1 The UK is a signatory to numerous treaties negotiated with overseas bodies, and these treaties often make serious inroads into UK national sovereignty.
- 1.2 Numerous international norms, such as principles concerning human rights, apply to the conduct of a UK government whether that government likes it or not.
- 1.3 In a world increasingly dominated by global networks and services, any attempt to isolate the UK from the political benefits of new technology runs the risk of doing more harm than good.

2. The absolute sovereignty desired by many MPs need not be good for UK voters:

- 2.1 Many MPs will want it because it feels like throwing off their chains and being free to do whatever they like, forgetting that absolute power breeds absolute corruption.
- 2.2 The British system of government amounts to a parliamentary dictatorship. True democracy would require much more responsiveness to changing pressures from the public, for example by giving them more than one binary vote every five years.
- 2.3 An absolutely sovereign UK government would be hard to deflect from its chosen course by anything short of a crisis. The public may reasonably prefer a less drastic means of restraint.

3. The checks and balances on a sovereign UK parliament are inadequate:

- 3.1 In contrast to the situation in other democracies, the second chamber in the British system, the House of Lords, is not an effective brake on the first, the House of Commons. The process of nominating Lords has been abused for years, with the result that many Lords are political appointees. This result is cited to block moves to give them more powers of restraint. So outdated limits remain on their powers because the system is seen as not fit for purpose.

3.2 The other constitutional brake on the power of the Commons is the Monarch, who is nominally the locus of absolute sovereignty. Like the Lords, the Monarch is seen as not fit for the purpose of intervening in the details of parliamentary business.

3.3 The UK lacks a written constitution. Disputes that could otherwise be settled clearly are often either fudged, settled by quiet agreements among insiders, or manipulated by the government to suit its own agenda.

4. The electoral system in the UK is less democratic than it might seem:

4.1 Parliamentary constituencies each elect one MP by means of a simple majority. All other candidates are rejected. A historical majority for a major party in a constituency can persist for decades, effectively disenfranchising local minorities. Minority parties with large proportions of the national vote can be permanently excluded from parliament.

4.2 The prescribed frequency of general elections is once every five years. A government elected on its manifesto pledges can use changing circumstances to adopt new priorities, which need never be put to a popular vote.

4.3 Elected MPs are not bound to do what they promise. The public elects MPs on the understanding that once in power they exercise their own judgement rather than follow popular opinion directly. Such representative democracy allows a government to go its own way, if it so chooses, for years in defiance of public opinion.

5. British people deserve something better than a sovereign polity:

5.1 British people in the past were proud to serve King or Queen and country, but those days are long past in a globalized world, since history shows that such pride has often increased belligerence in international relations.

5.2 A sovereign polity would exacerbate English linguistic isolationism. An open society requires an informed appreciation of the cultural heritage transmitted through other languages. An island nation needs to make an extra effort here.

5.3 British people deserve a polity that meshes better with global best practice.

All these are grounds for doubting the wisdom of granting absolute sovereignty to the Westminster parliament. The people of the British Isles are better off with a system that succeeds in rising above the isolation of their geographic location. They cannot afford the risks of an absolutely sovereign parliamentary dictatorship.

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