

LETTER TO AMERICA: A WARNING FROM EUROPE

Churchill is said to have once quipped ‘Democracy is the worst form of government, except all of the others,’ Three months after the ‘triumph of democracy’ in the UK and approaching the November US Presidential election, it makes one curious about what those other options may be.

In about 380BCE, an Athenian called Plato published a book called ‘*The Republic*’ in which he describes why forces within each system of social organisation create pressures which make it likely to turn into another one.

In an oligarchy or plutocracy, the principle determining power is wealth and it accrues to the few. The principle it lacks is equality. As the gap between rich and poor increases to unbearable levels, the poor rebel. Out of the ensuing chaos, democracy emerges, in which the principle determining power is freedom and it accrues to the many. The principle it lacks is cohesion. The many coalesce into interest groups, the interest groups form factions, and the larger collective disintegrates. Out of this chaos emerges a charismatic strong man, a man of the people, who creates unity. The strong man creates stability in which the principle determining power is order and it accrues to him alone. His system becomes a tyranny. The principle it lacks is freedom.

Each system is unstable because it seeks to exclude an opposing principle upon which it in fact depends for its legitimacy.

To avoid these cycles, Plato recommended aristocracy, the rule of philosopher kings who are uninterested in power, but exercise wisdom on behalf of the collective, balancing the rights and duties of the whole with those of groups and individuals. It was his ideal, and ideal it has remained, for it has never been tried.

In the West a different way of creating stability has evolved over many centuries, culminating in nation states run as parliamentary democracies with a division of powers between the legislature and the executive. The mechanism used to avoid the failings of the other systems is the power of institutions. These institutions hold the different principles of order, force, freedom and wealth in balance, and so allow sustained cohesion and the peaceful transition of power. In countries without any such institutions, or where they are weak and other social forces are strong, the Platonic cycles continue.

Western institutions allow different interest groups with different ideological persuasions (most commonly represented by political parties) to alternate in exercising power, and they also constrain the amount of power any can exercise at any time. We call the system ‘democracy’, but in fact it is in itself *heterocratic* rather than *monocratic*, i.e. offering diverse sources of limited power rather than a single source of absolute power. Plato might console himself that it also provides opportunities for wisdom-loving philosophers to emerge from time to time in critical roles.

We call these individuals ‘statesmen’ rather than mere politicians. Politicians represent interest groups. Statesmen have a broader view of the interests of the collective as a whole, which they usually understand to be their nation.

The heterocratic Western system has a democratic foundation: a system of universal suffrage in which those who exercise executive power are elected as representatives of the people. In no country are the civil service or judiciary elected by the people. That is generally regarded as a safeguard. The most democratic country on the planet in Plato's sense is probably Switzerland, where most major executive decisions are decided by referendums. Switzerland remains unique, but occasionally other countries also hold referendums.

The UK has recently done so, and as a result will be ending its membership of the EU. The result, in which 52% of the 30 million or so who took part voted to leave and 48% to stay, has been announced in various quarters with the usual cliché: 'the people of Britain have spoken'. They have done nothing of the kind. They have made a noise. It is quite cacophonous.

The cacophony is made up of a wide range of voices which are saying quite different things.

On one side, some were saying that leaving would be an economic disaster, so they wanted to stay; others said that the EU needed reform but the best way to achieve that would be to stay in it; others said that they were more European than British and that the right to move around freely within the continent was fundamental to their future.

On the other side, some were saying that though there would be a short-term economic cost to leaving, Britain would benefit in the long run by abandoning the Eurocentrism of the Continent and joining the global community of individual nations; others said that the EU institutions were beyond reform and that Britain should take back control; others said that the EU was an inward-looking relic of the 1950's which merely shuffled around market-distorting subsidies in an opaque and corrupt process in Brussels and that the driver of free trade was the WTO; and the loudest voice of all said that the free movement of labour was out of control and that Britain was being flooded with immigrants who were swamping its creaking welfare, health and education systems.

This was less an argument than a cry of rage. It came from deep within society. It was made by the underclass who saw the free housing they were waiting for being allocated to East Europeans; from the working class who felt their neighbourhoods were being swamped by the sheer number of immigrants who were depressing wages and taking their jobs away; from the comfortable rural middle classes who felt a threat to their lifestyle; and from the elderly who felt they were losing the country they knew. It was made by people who felt they had no control over what was happening to their world and did not like it.

They identified what they do not like with the EU. In fact much of it is the result of globalisation and the inevitable rise of China. Many of the regulations commonly attributed to the EU in fact come from the WTO and from British authorities who have a habit of making them particularly detailed and onerous. But the overriding issue was immigration.

What the referendum in the UK has brought out is what has been brought out in the campaign for Presidential candidacy in the US. It is the same rage, on the part of the same people, the people who feel bypassed by the political system and are scared by the speed and scale of change in the world. The establishment is the problem. Politicians are despised and seen as pandering to the interests of greedy, self-seeking bankers and 'big business'. For Brussels and its deals over subsidies, read Washington and its lobbies. For East Europeans and Africans read Mexicans and the now indigenous black population of the US. For the re-imposition of UK

border controls on EU citizens, read the proposed ban on Muslims entering the US ‘until we know who they are’. For the proposed wall along the border with Mexico, read the English Channel which many anti-EU campaigners in Britain want to turn into a moat. The US is tearing itself apart in a cold version of the Civil War, with the sides fairly evenly split in terms of numbers. The UK is also divided about 50:50, and passions run high. The lines of division broadly follow the demographics of age, level of education and London versus the rest. Similar divisions can be found across Europe.

What is happening is general across the West. It is a loss of trust in the institutions built up over centuries, in particular the last 250 years. Divisions have been allowed to fester until reason has been swamped by emotion and with that, hitherto marginal voices on the extremes have become more audible, the voices of Plato’s charismatic demagogues. We face a hollowing out of the centre.

We, the authors, are both members of a community which Winston Churchill called ‘the English-speaking peoples’. We share not just a language but an intellectual and ethical legacy – the free thinking of the Enlightenment, social and economic liberalism, individual liberty under the rule of law in a civil society - which together constitute the idea of the West. That legacy is part of the language we speak, for the language embodies a set of values. One of us speaks it in a European dialect with a British accent; the other in an American dialect with a Mid-Western accent. We were both born in provincial towns but were educated internationally. The only privilege we enjoyed at birth was to be born into moderately comfortable lower middle class families which were emotionally stable, non-violent and drug-free. We have risen through the social ranks through education in what seemed a natural meritocratic process to become part of an international community in which it is normal to enjoy both work and play with people from all over the world. Between us, we have worked in every continent except Antarctica. Today, whatever their native tongue, young university-educated people across the world are as much part of the English-speaking peoples as we are.

That community, and with it that legacy, is now under serious challenge.

The challenge is partly from external threats. The system of the West is being challenged by Russia once more. It is not as serious as the threat once posed by the Soviet Union, but Putin’s authoritarian, xenophobic oligarchy has been playing its weaker hand very well. The idea of the West is being challenged most radically by Islamic fundamentalism which totally rejects all its values. Beyond these is the indirect challenge of China which offers another form of authoritarianism buoyed and strengthened by its pragmatic adoption of a version of market economics.

Apparently triumphant in 1989, the western model of democracy – heterocracy – looks decidedly weaker and less attractive now than it did then. On the very borders of Europe, President Erdogan of Turkey, a country which applied long ago for accession to the EU, has declared ‘Democracy, freedom and the rule of law – for us these words have absolutely no value.’ⁱ

The West could overcome these threats, through strong diplomacy in the case of Russia, effective security operations (as opposed to a ‘war on terror’) in the case of radical Islam, and wise partnership and peaceful co-evolution in the case of China. None of these threats is in itself as fearsome as those posed by Nazism or Soviet Communism which were overcome in the C20th.

The challenge that makes the external threats more formidable is internal.

The referendum campaign in the UK was conducted in a way calculated to create division and polarise. An issue so deep and complex should never have been the subject of a popular vote, particularly when it was totally unclear what 'leave' meant, something which is now being worked out. In the campaign, the complexities were reduced to one issue – immigration. With both sides firmly anchored on their opinions, 'debates' were simply a heated exchange of claims and counter-claims.

The most sinister aspect of the focus on immigration is that it opened the Pandora's Box of prejudice and let out one of the nastiest things inside it – racism. Crude xenophobia has been partly legitimised and is now out on the streets, directed particularly at Poles, which is a new phenomenon.

History suggests that these passions can be contained if there is economic growth and stability. However, that has now been seriously compromised, particularly for the UK. The markets reacted instantly, exactly as the despised experts predicted, but because nobody knows what 'leave' means there will be a long period of uncertainty. One thing about uncertainty is certain – it delays investment and hiring decisions. There is no doubt that the economy will be hit.

The people on lower incomes who voted to leave will feel the effect most, some of them by losing their jobs. Tax revenues will fall just as the pressure on social services increases. People will feel betrayed. It is a recipe for social unrest. Our reading of Plato would suggest that it is an opportunity for demagogues to emerge to tell the people that they are not to blame and it is all the fault of weak, dishonest politicians and a bunch of foreigners. Many of them have had their say and have now left the scene. But there are others, across Europe, who will take up their themes.

Britain now has a new Prime Minister - Theresa May. Though she is under pressure, the most powerful political leader in Europe is Angela Merkel. So it looks as if Britain's and Europe's future will be shaped by women. They will need to be strong enough to re-build the institutions needed to counter the power of the demagogues. To do so they will have to recognise the unheard voices they irresponsibly spoke for.

Donald Trump is a Nigel Farage with money and a serious power base. His message is the same, as is his appeal. Between him and power stands Hilary Clinton, an establishment figure with a chequered record. She could be the third woman to provide the West with the leadership it now desperately needs.

In order to rise to the challenge, these women need to tell the truth. The days of spin are over. People can recognise bullshit and are saying they have had enough of it. They want their fears to be recognised.

They need vision. Not a new one, for it is already there. The vision of the West needs to be re-affirmed. It is embodied in the rationality of the Enlightenment and in heterocracy. The institutions that guard and preserve it need to be reformed and strengthened. Inequality needs to be addressed. Oligarchic barriers to social mobility through access to education need to be removed. The EU must stop talking about dishing out 'more Europe', creating its own army and expanding ever further. It must start opening itself up to free trade and movement of labour with

the world outside it, dismantling its meddling bureaucracy and creating a unified approach to the problem of refugees.

Our leaders need to think and act like statesmen, focussing on common ground rather than internecine squabbles. Britain and the EU now need peace and reconciliation, with movement from both sides. Europe and America need to move together and manage the rapidly emerging global world in partnership with Asia. The greatest challenges we face – climate change, population movement, and the impact of technologies like artificial intelligence – are global ones.

On 10th June 1963, President John F. Kennedy gave a speech at the American University in Washington in which, just nine months after the Cuban missile crisis, he offered to start talks with the Soviet Union about a test ban treaty. He spoke in the interests of the USA, but he bound them together with those of its Cold War opponent.

He sought to establish peace, he said, a peace ‘based not on a sudden revolution in human nature, but on a gradual evolution in human institutions.’ ‘Our problems are manmade,’ Kennedy observed, ‘therefore they can be solved by man. For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.’

Only one of us can vote in America in November, as only one of us could vote in the UK on June 23, but we both feel - and will feel the results. For these are big decisions, and thus should not be taken lightly. Our global problems can only be solved by men and women who tell the truth, move from dogmatic positions to find common ground with others, and try to ensure that the benefits of heterocracy are felt by all. We only hope the lessons will soon be learned.

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ⁱ Wolfgang Münchau, ‘The EU Sells its Soul to Strike a Deal with Turkey’, *Financial Times* 20th March 2016.