

Death of democracy (Pt. 1): Welcome to the one-party state

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And we're back. Following an all-too predictable election in which Labour managed to magnificently turn an open into an own goal, the final sprint to the starting line has commenced.

We will leave the EU on 31st January 2020, and we will exit the transition phase on or before 31st December regardless of any defined arrangements. Sacrificed on the altar to achieve this are key manufacturing industries in 'secular decline' and a deal in which services, the UK's trade surplus with the EU, is not covered^[1]. Oh, and Northern Ireland also.

The pursuit of finalising the start of Brexit has now created such impetus within the newly elected Government that the Withdrawal Bill is progressing thick and fast. And seemingly regardless of consistency with certain promises or intentions implied by those campaigning for the 'will of the people'.

In the past week alone, parliament has rejected amendments which would have granted EU citizens in the UK leave to remain, continued participation in the ERASMUS+ student exchange programme, negotiation of agreements around protecting worker's rights, and the role of Parliament in agreeing future EU-UK relationships and agreements.

At face value this may seem simply a matter of due process. But something more sinister is emerging here. We are witnessing an erosion of the power to scrutinise and hold to account our own government.

This is not necessarily a new phenomenon. The manipulation of data to bypass effective scrutiny is a tried and tested method adopted by political parties of all persuasions. But in addition, we have seen a continued campaign where the weaponization of disinformation, facilitated by a highly bias media, presents the public with erroneous and hugely subjective data.

Such techniques are political strategy rather than democratic or governmental process. They do however serve to obfuscate from clearly important underlying policy proposals with potential long run effects on the nature of British democracy.

Conservative strategy at the general election fundamentally focused on the reiteration of a plucky if ambiguous banner line – ‘Get Brexit Done’ – whilst discrediting Labour’s proposals through inaccurate claims of the impact of their spending plans.

What was overlooked here was something more clandestine within the Conservative manifesto, the proposal for a Constitution, Democracy & Rights Commission which threatens not only the sovereignty of Parliament but also the role of the Lords and the Supreme Court in holding Government to account.

A government with a significant majority would thus be given relative *carte blanche* to pursue their agenda, regardless of alignment with either national interest or manifesto pledges.

The response here will no doubt be “but people voted for them”. Such a response fails to consider three critical factors. First is the failing of the FPTP system. Brexiteers have had some moral justification since 2016 with the 52:48 referendum result.

This mandate was not replicated in the 2019 election result; indeed, the Conservatives only marginally improved the vote share achieved in 2017, and over 50% voted for pro-remain or second referendum parties. We therefore have a fundamental mismatch between the preferences of the electorate and the Government’s course of action.

Second is the limitations of governmental accountability being situated solely in an electoral process. Promises and pledges are one thing, but *in situ* Governments also have records on which they can and should be judged.

For the Conservatives, this record is damning, representing a decade of lost growth, escalation of in-work poverty, ongoing assaults on public services and huge increases in national debt. When such failure is rewarded with electoral success, the failures of our electoral process are seemingly lain bare.

Finally, and most critically here, is the arising freedom the government holds to reform electoral process and systems cynically in their favour. This is exactly what the current government plan to do in implementing a change to constituency boundaries. Reducing the number of parliamentary seats from 650 to 600 on a basis of registered voter equivalence, research conducted by the Conservatives themselves suggested this would work in their favour, eliminating up to 30 safe Labour seats^[2].

In the absence of reforms to electoral methods, the likely consequence here is securing Conservative majority government on a further reduced proportion. This runs alongside plans for voters to show identification at a polling station, at present meaning a passport or drivers license which many on lower incomes do not possess.

We need to consider this constituency reform in the context of wider changes within the UK. With growing likelihood of a second referendum on Scottish independence this political term, the loss of Scotland will remove from the Commons a large number of opposition seats.

It's my general view that at present, and for the foreseeable future, Labour cannot win an election – or at least form a (coalition) government – without Scotland. If therefore Scotland is lost, we move toward the very real likelihood of becoming a one-party state facilitated by our enduringly undemocratic FPTP system.

And so this is, essentially, how British democracy ends. Dragged to the depths through the deadweight of an ineffective electoral system and a misplaced jingoism. A few years ago, I visited Greece for the first time. On the tourist trail I walked up the Parthenon to the Acropolis, the birthplace of democracy. Standing there, I reflected on what happens to a country which situates its achievements – its identity – in the past rather than the present, and rests on the laurels of former glories. I imagine one hundred years from now, the same question will be posed outside the former 'Mother of Parliaments'.

The death of British democracy seems an appropriate legacy for a demographic so keen to 'take back control'.

^[1] *Johnson to seek fast-track EU trade talks, Financial Times, 5.1.20*

[\[2\] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/aug/28/boundary-review-changes-affect-200-labour-party-seats-robert-hayward-report](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/aug/28/boundary-review-changes-affect-200-labour-party-seats-robert-hayward-report)