

## Robert Skidelsky: No Choice and No Exit for the UK

The outcome of the simple binary choice given to UK voters in the June 2016 Brexit referendum has proved almost impossible to implement. The main obstacle is not the complications of negotiating new treaties, but rather the judgment by those in charge of Britain's political life that the costs of an emphatic withdrawal are too great **writes Robert Skidelsky**



Robert Skidelsky,  
Professor Emeritus of  
Political Economy at  
Warwick University

The United Kingdom's protracted attempt to leave the European Union has upended the two illusions by which the world has lived since the end of the Cold War: national sovereignty and economic integration, the twin endpoints of history, according to Francis Fukuyama's celebrated 1989 essay.

Juridically, the world consists of 191 sovereign states, which freely enter into treaties, agreements, and associations to order their relations with one another. The UK is one of them. Its failure to

make a meaningful exit from the EU would be the first time in modern history that a major sovereign state was forced to remain in a voluntary union because, while legally free to leave, doing so would be too costly.

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*Britain has been painfully discovering the limits of its own sovereignty*

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Coercion must be understood as a continuum of pressure, ranging from the use of force at one end to mild economic and cultural sanctions at the other, with a country's sovereignty measured by its vulnerability to the various forms of compulsion to which it can be subjected.

On this criterion, very few of the world's 191 states are truly sovereign, in the sense that only military force can compel them to change their policies and systems of government: certainly the United States, China, and Russia, and possibly Japan and India. Britain has been painfully discovering the limits of its own sovereignty.

The outcome of the simple binary choice given to UK voters in the June 2016 Brexit referendum has proved almost impossible to implement. The main obstacle is not the complications of negotiating new treaties, but rather the judgment by those in charge of Britain's political life that the costs of an emphatic withdrawal are too great.

All of Prime Minister Theresa May's efforts for the past 30-odd months have been devoted to respecting the popular vote to leave in name but not in fact. This strategy is enabled by the fact that it has never been completely clear what Britain was leaving. The EU and its overlapping subordinate economic regimes resemble a jellyfish more than a political and economic union.

For Britain's political class, the test of national sovereignty is not the ability to leave the EU. It is the ability to leave with as little disruption as possible to business as usual, that is, the UK's economic integration with EU countries. But then what about those who voted for an emphatic disruption of Britain's ties with the EU?

This brings me to the second illusion: the blind belief in the supreme virtue of economic integration across borders, with its corollary that national frontiers are obstacles to the more perfect integration of markets. From this point of view, the nation-state's only function is to ensure that national policy is market conforming, a view which regards countries simply as branches of government.

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*A conflict between economic integration and democratic politics has arisen*

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But as Harvard economist Dani Rodrik has powerfully pointed out, this view of nation-states as mere vehicles for global integration ignores the fact that modern governments are in general

accountable to their own people for their decisions. It may be that economic integration benefits everyone in the long run; but in the short run, it is highly disruptive economically and culturally. That is why a conflict between economic integration and democratic politics has arisen.

The architects of the EU have seen its member nation-states mainly as juridical instruments for establishing the four freedoms of the single market: free movement of goods, capital, services, and labor. But governments in the EU are accountable to their voters. They cannot ignore the costs of economic integration in the cavalier way their nineteenth-century predecessors, possessed of small electorates and large empires, were able to do.

All thoughtful Europeanists have long been aware of the problem of the EU's democratic deficit, but very little has been done about it. Unlike economies, politics have not migrated significantly beyond national borders. Quite logically, therefore, convinced Europeanists like the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis have called for a United States of Europe. Only a genuine parliament holding an elected president to account can render the single market democratically legitimate.

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### *A United States of Europe is beyond practical politics*

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But a United States of Europe is beyond practical politics. One cannot make a democracy legitimate just by writing a new constitution. Voters have to internalize a sense of possession over their politics, and this sentiment of ownership and obligation grows organically, not prescriptively.

So, despite all the extra information we now have about the costs and complications of leaving, the debate over Brexit has not really advanced from the summer of 2016. The British journalist Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, a Leaver, wrote in the Daily Telegraph on June 13, 2016 of the UK's "elemental choice: whether to restore the full self-government of this nation, or to continue living under a higher supranational regime, ruled by European Council that we do not elect in any meaningful sense."

Rodrik agreed that "the EU rules needed to underpin a single European market have extended significantly beyond [the reach of] what can be supported by democratic legitimacy," but remained optimistic that a single European polity might evolve to underpin the single market.

The question is whether the UK can any longer choose meaningful self-rule. It seems to be stuck in a web from which there is no escape. If this predicament is ever felt more widely across the EU voting public, it will spell the end of European liberal democracy. And the return of the Demons – the further rise of illiberal democracy, if not worse – cannot be far off.

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