



CONSERVATIVE EUROPEAN FORUM

DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND THE
POLARISATION OF EUROPE

By Rt Hon Dominic Grieve QC

Democratic values and the polarisation of Europe

Principles of liberal democracy have been the cornerstone of governance in what is usually termed “western democracies” since the end of the Second World War. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire, its spread into countries that had been subjected to Communism and the growth in democratic transitions of power without violence, in parts of the “developing world”, produced a wave of optimism that its values would become dominant if not universal. Today, however, this has been replaced with a growing pessimism that liberal democratic values are being eroded, both in the USA and countries of Europe. Russia is once again a military threat. Meanwhile global power is shifting to the Asia-Pacific region, which is increasingly dominated by China, a totalitarian state, which combines private sector wealth generation with aggressive nationalism and the ruthless suppression of freedom of expression and dissent.

It is hard not to conclude that we have been complacent. Liberal democracy can trace its origins to the Enlightenment of the late 17th century and to John Locke’s view, expressed as early as 1677, that “the business of man is to be happy in this world by enjoyment of the things of nature subservient to life, health, ease and pleasure and by the comfortable hopes of another life”. It took 250 years for this to become the central focus of what a good government ought to try to deliver. We can trace its development through the texts of the US Declaration of Independence and the

Declaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen. We can see it in the increasing necessity of European governments to respond to public pressure for reforms, as the suffrage was progressively extended in most states, giving a voice to sections of society that were often previously ignored. We can see it in the change of Christian theology that shifted the emphasis from the world being inevitably a vale of tears to one that promoted much greater social action and laid the foundations of Christian Democracy movements. These did so much to create liberal democratic principles in continental Europe after 1945. This helped to enshrine them in the European Convention on Human Rights and in the social policies that have been its most characteristic outward expression.

But all this can make us too easily forget the alternatives on offer. These have promoted the view that the world is a harsh environment in which human societies succeed through being strong and where necessary ruthless towards those who pose a threat to their progress or survival and of which the first half of the 20th century has numerous examples. Their catastrophic consequences have blinded us to their attractions. They are able to give a sense of empowerment and control to individuals and the comfort that comes from being a participant in collective action often aimed at others outside the group. This phenomenon is readily exploitable and exploited by politicians seeking to gain and retain power.

The emergence of liberal democracy post war coincides with a sustained period of steady economic growth which, despite the disruption of the Oil Crisis of 1974, survived until the Financial Crisis of 2008. Despite the Cold War up to 1990, there was an optimism about the human condition and achieving global progress and stability, which translated well into liberal democratic principles, even if it left much detail still to be debated and contested through politics. Today this optimism is notably absent. Improvements in standards of living have stagnated for many and with it the sense that a democratic Europe and, indeed, its partner, the USA is slipping behind its authoritarian competitors. Efforts to promote and develop civil societies on a more liberal model in Iraq and Afghanistan, through armed intervention in response to the threats coming from them, have failed spectacularly. Even more fundamentally, we are now facing a series of intractable challenges to which our governments have no certain response. Climate change and overpopulation are making parts of the planet uninhabitable. This is leading to mass migration into Europe by desperate people. Some Europeans feel understandably threatened by both the incomers different cultural background and the scale of demographic change. This is making it more challenging to integrate newcomers into a liberal democratic model.

European governments are now recognising and belatedly responding to the evident threat to liberal democracy of the existential challenge of climate change. But many see the policies put forward in mitigation, as just adding to their existing financial burdens through “green” taxes.

Those under thirty who understand the threat are despondent about their future and question the ability of liberal democracies to provide a credible solution.

Technological advances are also challenging. The development of artificial intelligence has raised the possibility of greater interference in the lives of citizens than ever before. This is readily capable of being exploited in authoritarian states to curb freedoms. Liberal democracies wishing to use these tools for the promotion of better public health and the delivery of public services, face backlash from groups convinced their freedoms are being threatened by the governments of liberal democracies themselves.

So, we should not be surprised at the way Europe is polarising over democratic values. It is difficult to think of any country, outside perhaps of Luxembourg, which is not witnessing the rise of populist and nationalist movements which question liberal democratic orthodoxy and argue that only a more aggressively defensive, tougher and assertive state in protecting its citizens interests will deliver what they need and want to feel secure. At the other extreme, others are suspicious and challenging of established authority. We live in a continent whose history, has until recently been about the creation of nation states on “Westphalian” principles. This has often been achieved through the assertion of the culture of the majority groups. The distaste for supra national authorities, such as the EU or the European Court of Human Rights, interfering in how their countries meet the standards of liberal democracy and the rule of law that underpins the EU as a concept and at supra

national regulation more widely is thus easily explicable. The EU's current stand-off with the Polish government over judicial and media independence illustrates this neatly. It can also be seen in Hungary and its attitudes to the UN Refugee Convention and of course the arguments that underpinned the Leave campaign in the UK and led to Brexit. It is present in varying degrees, in other CEE member states.

So, what is to be done? Those of us who believe that without the framework of liberal democracy, democracy itself becomes fragile and arbitrary need to articulate our case. The rights of oppositions and minorities, the observance of the rule of law, a foundation of rules of social justice and human dignity and reasonable controls over new technologies are not just optional extras to an electoral majority, but essential to good governance and stability. At present with a rising tide of distrust, intolerance and populism, it has become all too easy for national politicians to pass the responsibility for arguing these issues to others. The EU itself, which is seen, despite its elected parliament, as a bureaucracy, is not well placed to do this. Yet national politicians seeking votes often show a marked reluctance to state difficult truths or to engage in debate on complex matters to which no easy answer exists. The development of detailed news management by political parties and the growth of social media has made messaging more important to the point where it can be made to overwhelm and conceal underlying issues. A febrile environment of anxiety is never an easy place to encourage rational debate and politicians are as influenced by this as their public.

We need an alternative narrative as to the benefits of sustaining liberal democracy. We must reestablish it as a crucial tool to build trust between states and facilitate the international co-operation that is required to improve the lives of our citizens as well as those elsewhere and make it capable of rebuilding trust between state and citizen. Despite the greater divisions in public opinion that now exists in Europe on its future, there is little to suggest that, outside the views of small minorities, there are large differences of view of what people hope for in their lives. Locke's definition of the human condition remains valid. What has polarised opinion is the increasing lack of confidence that the established structures of liberal democracy can deliver it.

This also raises issues about showing greater understanding of the anxieties that underlie this trend. The EU, as an institution is perceived to be dismissive of those who question its liberal democratic model. The warning signs have been there for a long time that substantial sections of the public are unhappy with what is being offered them, ranging from the rejection of an EU constitution to the failure of the EU to develop a workable policy to protect its external borders. There is a widespread perception in the United Kingdom that the EU wants Brexit to be seen to fail. The "exceptionalist" views which led to Brexit are not confined to the UK and are to be found today all over Europe, from the Euroscepticism and anger at bureaucracy of the Gilets Jaunes to the rise of AfD. Those who hold populist views and demand change and are obsessed with the belief their freedoms are being eroded, may be mistaken as to the best way

forward but their concerns are not invalid and should not be ignored.

Those of us who believe that a Europe which reflects liberal democratic values will best provide for the wellbeing of all our fellow citizens and be a force for good more widely, therefore have a lot to do. We need to look afresh at those values and how they can be better applied to current problems and show greater understanding of issues of disquiet from the

public. We need to have the courage to speak up for those values and explain how, despite imperfections, they have been central to creating democratic Europe's place as an area of freedom, security and justice and protecting us in increasingly dangerous and multi polar world. This is a task that extends beyond the EU to all countries on our continent that have played and can play a role in building on the valuable inheritance which an earlier generation of believers in liberal democracy have given to us.

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