

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the referendum campaign was the way in which the abstract words 'sovereignty' and 'control' seemed to capture the imagination of voters, enticing them to leave aside rather more urgent, concrete, practical concerns. Of course such words can be used as a decorous cover for less abstract, but more impolite, sentiments: one might talk loftily of sovereignty and control but be inwardly moved by dislike of people with strange accents and skin colours, with different and suspicious religions or cultural traditions. Moreover, not everyone who voted to leave the EU appealed to these notions or even wanted the result they voted for. It is an oft remarked puzzle of democracy that a majority vote can lead to an outcome to which most are opposed. A vote for the winning option can be motivated by a diverse range of considerations, not necessarily a simple endorsement. Some vote in protest, expressing their loathing of current government policies. Others may vote tactically to express support for what they anticipated would be the losing option. Grant all of this diversity, still it is remarkable that quite so many among the large number of people who made the effort to vote on a day of torrential rain were moved by these abstract ideas. These people were willing to endanger, and in fact many called for, a near revolution of existing institutional arrangements with the inherent economic and political risks that that involves. That an electorate might be so moved by abstract ideals seems quite at odds with that oft-repeated self-conception of the British people as empirically grounded, pragmatic and practical.

Abstract thought and concepts are central to understanding the political, of course. Practical questions of governance must be guided by theoretical and reflective thought. The argument for this is perhaps best formulated by Immanuel Kant in a famous essay, 'On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice'. But as Kant recognized, and those who love to employ the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory commonly miss: theory and reflection can play their proper role only if they are tightly connected to knowledge of the practical problems at hand. In the case of the EU referendum, the abstract concepts invoked were not at all well matched to the realities that would follow from the decision to be made.

What, then, is sovereignty? The idea brings to mind notions of territoriality, membership of a nation, the authority to decide. But I can't recall any positive definition laid out of what sovereignty was on offer, or how it had been compromised. What is it for people who live in the different constituent parts of the UK to enjoy sovereignty? Sovereignty over what? The clearest sense one had of an answer to these questions came negatively through the sense of rejection involved in the vote to leave the EU. The least well-off in social and regional terms echoed the thought that they had no control over their lives, and so no sovereignty, the idea of territory being reintroduced through abstract nostalgia for a better, more socially integrated British past – one which may never have existed.

Why was the EU taken to be the culprit in this complaint of an undefined sense of sovereignty which had somehow been denied us? In part, those on the right in the UK have long used the term 'Europe' to designate with a mix of defiance and disapproval all that which lies to the East of British borders. (Much as in Franco's Spain, 'Europe' was used to mean that uncleanliness North of the Pyrenees.) The fact that these islands have not been invaded in a thousand years and the absence of any experience in the population of a split between resistance and cooperation with an invading enemy that much of the rest of Europe suffered in the Second World War together gave rise to a sense of difference and superiority. Where the rest of the European nations have gone in for various forms of soul searching over the last seventy years, the UK is fed with a vague sense of national pride, superiority and the proper isolation of a British culture. But these feelings of hostility do not arise solely from the right or from nationalism. More recently, the brutal treatment of Greece, where the relief of actual, acute suffering was sacrificed to vague and abstract financial imperatives, intensified the impression that the EU was dogmatically focused on the ideology of free markets, and that it turned its back on any concern with people's control over their own lives. For part of the left, it was a short step to thinking, now from the perspective of the least well-off, that we must exit the EU. The liberal left and the libertarian right alike viewed rulings 'from Brussels' as a denial of our self-governance.

What has been less remarked upon, even on the left, are two central facts. First, the nature of bureaucracy. And of course there are good reasons to resist and reject the kind of management of local practices whose meaning and significance is clear to those nearby, but which are sacrificed to concerns of efficiency and the greater good by remote and authoritarian central control. However, it is equally clear that we are faced with complex and intertwined social orders which rely on the correct operation of various complex social institutions. For our lives to go well, we need to treasure the body of very able, highly trained, officials and civil servants who help these complex social orders to survive. To cite only British examples, consider the large body of public-spirited individuals who work in the NHS, in the BBC, in the corridors of Westminster, in local authorities, in the Inland Revenue and the Foreign Office. We must move beyond a purely negative attitude towards how the complexity of a globally, inter-connected world is sustained by these workers.

Second, it needs to be recognized more widely that for many of the politicians responsible for the initial steps and the later evolution of the European Union the main aims were not any ideology of the free market. Rather these founders had commitments to peace, to solidarity among different peoples, different regions and different social classes. Their commitments were to freedom of movement and to proper controls over markets in order to make them work more rationally as good instruments to help further people's lives, rather than to be ends in themselves. Solidarity and freedom of movement are abstract notions, no less than sovereignty and control. But these have left concrete traces on people's lives. Their claim on us was reflected in the emotional sense of loss so many have felt in the decision to depart from the EU. Solidarity, feeling ourselves part of a larger grouping, and a freedom of movement to explore these other areas are key aspects of the lives of many in this country. Though the current debate,

or rather rage, around immigration would seem to deny it, the benefits from this are most important for the least well-off. Solidarity and freedom of movement is what the left ought to stress a commitment to, and to have a better understanding of how they are central to a conception of the good in living together. It is among the greatest of things that the institutional arrangements such as the EU have provided us with, and it is now of the greatest of urgency that we find other such institutional aids, if the work of the last forty-three years is to be thrown away.