

The EU Threat to Democracy and Liberty

Philip Vander Elst
The Bruges Group

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Group 

THE BRUGES GROUP

The Bruges Group is an independent all-party think tank. Set up in February 1989, its aim was to promote the idea of a less centralised European structure than that emerging in Brussels. Its inspiration was Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech in September 1988, in which she remarked that "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level...". The Bruges Group has had a major effect on public opinion and forged links with Members of Parliament as well as with similarly minded groups in other countries. The Bruges Group spearheads the intellectual battle against the notion of "ever-closer Union" in Europe. Through its ground-breaking publications and wide-ranging discussions it will continue its fight against further integration and, above all, against British involvement in a single European state.

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Contact us

For more information about the Bruges Group please contact:

Robert Oulds, Director

The Bruges Group, 214 Linen Hall, 162-168 Regent Street, London W1B 5TB

Tel: +44 (0)20 7287 4414

Email: info@brugesgroup.com



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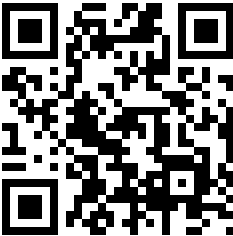
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Bretwalda Books

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About the Author

Philip Vander Elst is a British freelance writer and lecturer whose many publications include *Power Against People: a Christian critique of the State* (IEA, 2008) and *Vindicated by history: Statism's 19th century critics* (Cobden Centre, 2012). This article is an expanded and amended version of one that first appeared in the March 2014 issue of the American libertarian magazine, *Future of Freedom*.

The EU threat to democracy and liberty

“The basic question is whether Britain should remain an independent country or become a province in a United States of ‘Europe.’ No criticism is levelled at those who genuinely advocate the latter course; at least it is an honest recognition of the total implication of belonging to the Common Market. But every form of criticism should be made of those who avoid the issue, who wilfully conceal it with honeyed words, or who simply don’t bother to study the reality.”

These accurate and prophetic words were written as long ago as 1974, by Neil Marten MP, one of the first and greatest Tory opponents of British involvement in the European project, in his pamphlet, *The Common Market: No Middle Way*, published in London by the Common Market Safeguards Campaign. In the ensuing four decades, the British political and media establishment has, with rare exceptions, continued to “avoid the issue” and “wilfully conceal it with honeyed words.”

The anti-democratic and illiberal origins of the European project

To understand the anti-democratic origins and illiberal character of the European project, one needs to appreciate the traumatic psychological impact of the First and Second World Wars on the thinking of a significant section of the European elite. Horrified by the scale of the destruction they witnessed between 1914 and 1945, and by the rise of Fascism and Nazism in the interwar period, the pioneers of European integration drew two erroneous lessons from these events. The first was that ‘nationalism’ was an inherently evil force, which could not be contained and defeated unless the nations of Europe could be induced to sacrifice their national sovereignty in the interests of peace. The second was that democracy could not be relied upon to build a better future, since millions of Germans and Italians had voted for Hitler and Mussolini, and millions of other Europeans had supported authoritarian nationalist movements in other parts of Europe, including Spain, Hungary, Romania, and even France. For these reasons, they concluded, the creation of a new European State was not only a necessary objective of civilized statesmanship; it was also a goal which, in its initial stages, would have to be approached by stealth, so as not to upset the national sensitivities of the unenlightened majority.

To quote just one of these pioneers of European integration, Peter (later Lord) Thorneycroft, a British Conservative politician who became Chancellor of the Exchequer in the late 1950s and Conservative Party Chairman in 1975:

“...it is as well to state this bluntly at the outset – no government dependent upon a democratic vote could possibly agree in advance to the sacrifices any adequate plan [for European Union] must involve. The people must be led slowly and unconsciously into the abandonment of their traditional economic defences...” (Quote from his pamphlet, *Design for Europe*, May/June 1947).

The long and tortuous process by which this goal of European unification by stealth has been pursued, including a lengthy analysis of its historical and intellectual origins, and its chief protagonists, is described in compelling and scholarly detail by Christopher Booker and Richard North, in their widely acclaimed book, *The Great Deception*, (Continuum, 2005). They show how the supra-nationalist project of the European Union's founding fathers has advanced by a gradual and indirect process of economic integration. The most important initial stage was the 1957 Treaty of Rome, establishing a protectionist European customs union (the European Economic Community, or EEC) consisting of West Germany, France, Italy, Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. Today, 56 years and 5 European treaties later, the European Union has ballooned into a supranational Leviathan comprising 28 countries and 24 official languages. (See: *europa.eu*, the official EU website).

The cost so far in terms of loss of sovereignty

Whether they like it or not, Britons and other European nationals already live in an emergent European State with a common flag, passport, citizenship, anthem, supreme court, executive, parliament, bureaucracy, central bank, and currency (the euro), used by 19 of the member countries, excluding Britain. The foundations have been laid for a future European Army and police force, and the European Union now has its own official diplomatic corps. As a result of all these changes and the development of common European policies in nearly every conceivable field, Britain, for example, has lost control of her agriculture, her fishing grounds, her external trade, decisions about Value Added Tax, aspects of employment law, immigration, and internal trading standards – including weights and measures. Most recently, under the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, which extended ‘Qualified Majority Voting’ [abolishing national vetoes] into 63 new policy areas, the EU has been given new powers over external border controls and internal security, as well as a role in standardizing civil and criminal laws and procedures. It has, in addition, been allowed to appoint its own EU foreign minister, who will conduct the Union’s common foreign and security policy.

In 1992, the then German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, declared:

“The European Union Treaty [referring to the 1991 Maastricht Treaty]... within a few years will lead to the creation of what the founding fathers of modern Europe dreamed of after the war, the United States of Europe.”
(Quoted in *Treaty of Maastricht*, Civitas, London, November 2005).

Readers can judge for themselves how close the rolling bandwagon of European supranationalism has come to reaching this final destination.

A loss of democratic control previously enjoyed by national electorates over the laws and regulations governing their daily lives, has been an inevitable consequence of the centralizing supranationalist process of European unification.

For instance, despite being one of the biggest EU member states, Britain's decision-making power within EU institutions like the Council of the European Union (representing national governments) and the European Parliament, is extremely limited. British representatives only control around 8% of the total votes. As the European Union expands to include more countries, this loss of democratic accountability through the dilution of national representation at European level, only increases, a problem troubling other European nationals as well as many British observers.

To quote the words of Germany's former President Herzog, written in January 2007:

"It is true that we are experiencing an ever greater, inappropriate centralization of powers away from the Member States and towards the EU. The German Ministry of Justice has compared the legal acts adopted by the Federal Republic of Germany between 1998 and 2004 with those adopted by the European Union in the same period. Results: 84% come from Brussels, with only 16% coming originally from Berlin..." (Article on the 2004 EU Constitution, jointly written with Luder Gerken, *Welt Am Sonntag*, 14 January 2007).

Whilst popular disenchantment with the process of European integration has increased markedly in recent years, most of all in Britain, the latter's subordination of national institutions to supranational ones has evoked less opposition than might otherwise have been expected, due to its largely hidden nature. As Mark Leonard, of the Centre for European Reform, explained in 2005:

"Europe's power is easy to miss. Like an 'invisible hand' it operates through the shell of traditional political structures. The British House of Commons, British law courts and British civil servants are still here, but they have become agents of the European Union, implementing European law. This is no accident. By creating common standards that are implemented through national institutions, Europe can take over countries without necessarily becoming a target for hostility." (Booker & North, *Op. cit.*, p. 1).

Resistance to the growing power of the European Union is not only undermined by its partially hidden character, but also by a deep-seated conviction, particularly strong in Germany, that the cause of peace is worth almost any sacrifice of national sovereignty, however initially unwelcome. The visitor centre in the European Parliament building in Brussels, for instance, prominently displays the following quote by Philip Kerr (later, Lord Lothian), a former British civil servant and one of the leading advocates of both European unification and world government during the 1930s (see Booker & North, *Op. cit.*, pp. 24 – 26):

“National sovereignty is the root cause of the most crying evils of our time and of the steady march of humanity back to tragic disaster and barbarism... The only final remedy for this supreme and catastrophic evil of our time is a federal union of the peoples.”

The myth about national sovereignty being the cause of war

There is, however, no basis either in history or logic for the belief that national sovereignty is “the root cause” of war and “barbarism”. Religious and ideological divisions, and the dynastic ambitions and family quarrels of emperors and kings, caused plenty of wars in Europe (and elsewhere) long before the advent of the modern nation state. If any one factor can be singled out as the primary cause of war and barbarism down the ages, it has not been national sovereignty, but tyrannical government and the lust for power of rulers and elites, as all the great classical liberals – notably Herbert Spencer, recognized. This has been even truer in the 20th century, the age of totalitarian socialism in all its variants – Communist, Nazi and Fascist. Anyone who doubts this, should not only read R. J. Rummel’s seminal studies, *Death by Government and Power Kills* (Transaction Publishers, 1996 & 1997), but also *The Coming of the Third Reich*, (Penguin Books, 2004), by Richard Evans, Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. Evans’ book is particularly relevant because it shows that Imperial Germany’s authoritarian, anti-Semitic, and aggressively militaristic political culture was the biggest single cause of the First World War as well as the soil in which the seeds of Nazism were planted long before Hitler came to power in 1933.

Since illiberal political cultures are the real enemies of peace and freedom, rather than national sovereignty, the cause of progress is not advanced by the movement towards supranationalism either at the European or the global level. A Europe of independent self-governing nation states, respecting human rights and engaged in free trade and mutual co-operation on an intergovernmental basis, decentralizes power and offers many opportunities for the free movement of goods, people and ideas. As such, it represents the enduring internationalist vision of the great classical liberals of the 19th century, like Cobden, Bright and Bastiat. The supranationalist alternative of a single European State, by contrast, threatens

both liberty and democracy because it creates a new and wholly unnecessary concentration of power which cannot be subject to effective democratic control within a multinational entity comprising 28 different electorates divided by 24 different languages and cultures. As American experience has shown, even the most carefully constructed federal system, buttressed by an originally homogeneous and libertarian political culture, has failed to prevent the growth and abuse of power by the Federal Government in the USA. How likely is it, then, that the European Union will avoid a much worse fate given the authoritarian and collectivist political traditions, and unfortunate history, of so many of its member countries?

The relevance of this question is underlined by what happened after May and June 2005, when the French and Dutch electorates rejected the newly negotiated 2004 European Constitution in their national referendums. The angry and contemptuous response of EU leaders was to re-present the rejected Constitution, minus some cosmetic changes, as the 2008 Lisbon Treaty, and then ram it through their national parliaments without any further referendums. As Czech President Vaclav Klaus noted with disquiet in his speech to the European Parliament on 5 December 2008:

“I thought...that we live in a democracy, but it is post-democracy, really, which rules the EU.”

Today, in 2015, post-democracy still “rules the EU” because the continuing process of European unification has created centralized supranational institutions offering increased power and more lucrative careers to the ruling political class. Consequently, as long as it remains in its present form, pursuing its founding goal of “an ever closer union of the peoples of Europe” (Treaty of Rome), the EU will continue to act as a powerful and dangerous magnet, pulling into its orbit, and attracting to its cause, thousands of ambitious politicians, academics, civil servants, and journalists, as well as a host of charities and NGOs whose independence has been compromised by their receipt of EU funding (see: Christopher Snowden, *Euro Puppets, The European Commission’s remaking of civil society*, IEA , February 2013).

The liberal internationalist alternative to European unification

If, given these dangers, we want to free ourselves from the supranationalist spider's web of the European Union, and by doing so, contribute to the wider defence of democracy and liberty in Europe, we must rediscover that great old tradition of liberal internationalism mentioned above. We must turn our faces outwards towards what Churchill famously called "the open seas", conscious of the fact that Britain is a major global trading nation and nuclear power, a 'Permanent Member' of the UN Security Council, a key member of NATO, and a significant player in 96 separate international organisations. Furthermore, as Ewen Stewart's recent Bruges Group paper, *Britain's Global Leadership: the positive future for a UK outside the EU*, demonstrates in exhaustive and convincing detail, our economy – including our trade with Europe – is not dependent on our continued membership of the European Union, whose share of world GDP and global trade is in any case steadily shrinking. Not only is the UK "home to the world's global language, the world's most global city and many of the most notable global universities and research institutes," to quote Ewen Stewart's study, but "As the world's 5th largest economy, Britain will not be isolated by leaving the EU. On the contrary, British power would, in some cases, be enhanced. For example, we would swap our 12% EU voting weight at the World Trade Organisation for a 100% British vote."

We must not only be unafraid of a future outside the European Union. We should positively embrace it, because in rejecting the supranationalist goal of a European State, we would be defending the pluralism and diversity which has been the true glory of European civilization. As Wilhelm Ropke, one of Germany's greatest liberal economists put it in the 1950s:

"In antiquity Strabo spoke of the 'many shapes' of Europe; Montesquieu would speak of Europe as a 'nation des nations'; Decentrism is of the

essence of the spirit of Europe. To try to organise Europe centrally...and to weld it into a bloc, would be nothing less than a betrayal of Europe and the European patrimony.” (Wilhelm Ropke, A Humane Economy, Henry Regnery, 1st English edition, USA, 1960).

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Phone: +44(0)20 7287 4414

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