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EU "citizenship": what does it mean?



Last November it was revealed that the European Union was considering allowing British people to retain "associate citizenship" of the EU after Brexit. Since then the idea has gained traction, with the EU Parliament due to debate the proposal in the spring.

A petition set up by Europhiles in Britain, urging the EU to adopt the proposal, has gained more than 50,000 signatures. Both before and after the referendum "Remainers" readily declared themselves "European citizens," and many of them are cheering this proposal.

But what associate citizenship would actually mean is far from clear. Until it is put before the EU Parliament—which is hardly known for its clarifying, robust debate—all that is clear is that such an arrangement would give British people the right to work and travel freely within EU member-states—and it seems that the "citizen" would have to pay for the privilege.

That such an arrangement can even be called citizenship shows how degraded the notion has become. Being a citizen now simply means having the right to live and work in a country. The idea of citizenship that emerged in

the ancient world, and was refined in the eighteenth century—the age of democratic revolutions—has been reduced to the status of a visa arrangement. This is particularly true of EU "citizenship," an appellation that we all had conferred on us by the Lisbon Treaty.

"Associate citizenship" of the EU seems to be no different from a typical work-and-travel visa, which governments around the world already offer. In fact the arrangement being discussed is actually more restrictive and less liberal than many established agreements between states, which at least allow citizens the right to live and work in the territories in question and in many cases confer either full or limited voting rights.

EU citizenship has always been hollow, offering people formal rights without any real ability to shape the institutions that govern them. Now it's being offered to spurned British Remainers purely to soothe their post-Brexit wounds, and to allow them to continue proclaiming their "European citizenship."

But citizenship is bound up with democracy—something that is in short supply in an EU virtually controlled by lobbying groups, whose parliament cannot even initiate legislation and whose executive body, the Commission, is unelected.

Now—probably spurred on by Brexit—the European Union is boosting its funds for the promotion of the idea of "European citizenship." Having had its budget cut in 2013 at the behest of Britain, the EU's "Europe for Citizens" scheme will now increase its budget by tens of millions of euros. Officials at the EU Parliament, which approved the increase, say that, "considering the current political climate,

in which an increasing number of citizens question the foundations of the EU, decisive action is indispensable.”

But surely the EU recognises that, despite its best efforts and wishes, the majority of Europeans still primarily identify as citizens of their own national states. Even leaving aside British people’s vote to leave the EU entirely, European people’s reluctance to be linked with the EU has become increasingly clear in recent years.

Many Irish people have not taken kindly to having their fiscal and economic policy determined by German finance ministers and Brussels bureaucrats. Such decisions, they rightly believe, are the prerogative of nationally elected officials within a democratic state. At the same time, people in northern European states, such as Germany and Finland, resent what they see as having to foot the bill for the EU’s bail-outs and financial rearrangements.

During the EU debt crisis many commentators compared the situation to that in the United States. In the same way that Germany ends up “subsidising” southern Europeans, they said, more prosperous states in the United States provide fiscal transfers to poorer ones. But the United States is different from the EU. Yes, fiscal transfers may on occasion cause quibbles in Congress; but the broader sense of being one country, with a shared sense of citizenship, ultimately tempers any real anger over subsidies to poorer regions.

The EU, by contrast, has no collective sense of nationhood and therefore no meaningful sense of citizenship. Instead it is a collection of nationalities that has been cobbled together with varying degrees of enthusiasm; and so it must mechanically try to foster some sort of European identity to transcend nationality.

Of course, nation-building—or post-nation building in the case of the EU—is not new. States have long engaged in the construction of national identity.

Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen*

(1976) describes the process behind the cultivation of French national identity and citizenship during the Third Republic (1870–1940). Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities* (1983), extended the concept in the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, following a series of failed insurrections, Polish nationalists living variously under German, Austrian and Russian rule engaged in what they called “organic nationalism” to foster a cultural sense of Polish national identity.



But the EU’s attempt at nation-building through the “Europe for Citizens” scheme is something rather different, and it has only exposed the vacuous nature of so-called European citizenship. At the top of its list of ideas on how to foster European identity are “eligible” historical dates for collective commemoration. Yet many of the “eligible” commemorations actually mark quite dark periods in European history, including the Spanish Civil War and the Yugoslav wars.

These commemorations are served up only as lessons, warning citizens of how bad everything was before Brussels took over. This is hardly likely to generate a sense of shared spirit.

One of the aims of the policy is to remind citizens of the “ostracism and loss of citizenship” that occurs under totalitarian regimes, from which we can apparently draw “lessons for today.” The lesson, presumably, is that without the EU all that bad stuff could happen again. The EU constantly pushes its idea of citizenship as a negative: stick with us and you’ll be safe.

That the EU and its supporters believe they're the only thing standing between us and a return of fascism became clear in the period leading up to Britain's EU referendum. Euro critics were threatened that we would plunge Europe back into the 1930s. It seems "European citizenship" can only be constituted through dire warnings and negativity.

In fact the nature and history of the EU precludes any kind of positive citizenship. Having been constructed in a piecemeal way, the EU has no heroic founding date. It was not constituted by an active movement of aspiring "citizens" but rather was cobbled together by experts and elites behind closed doors. There are no rousing victories for EU citizens to celebrate, no days that mark the emergence of civic unity. The signing of the Treaty of Rome is never going to inspire a street party. The peoples of Europe were gradually turned into so-called European citizens without consultation; why would we celebrate that?



What's more, being largely the work of faceless bureaucrats, the EU offers no brave or admirable historic figures for people to revere. Jacques Delors is never going to be held up in the same fashion as Pearse or Connolly.

The EU has no rousing founding documents. Its earliest document, the treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (1951), concerns itself with industry. The Maastricht Treaty (1992), which established the European Union as we know it today, begins by saying that the various signatories have resolved "to mark a new stage in the process of European integration undertaken with the establishment of the European Communities."

It's a far cry from the 1916 Proclamation, despite its many unrealised aspirations. And "We hold these truths to be self-evident," as Thomas Jefferson thundered in the opening of the US Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal."

"European citizenship"—that is, citizenship of the EU—is hollow. It affords citizenship in a formal sense, designating people as members of the EU and conferring certain rights. But it is unable to create any meaningful sense of citizenship, where people feel an affinity to the institutions that govern them, and play an active role in shaping them.

EU "citizenship" offers little to believe in or feel moved by. It's an empty concept, dreamt up in the corridors of EU power, alien to most Europeans.

"Euro benefits only Germany," says French presidential candidate



The French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron laid out a plan for a reform of the euro during a visit to Berlin last week, saying that the existing system benefited only Germany. "The status quo is synonymous with the dismantling of the euro," he added.

Macron was minister for the economy in the second Manuel Valls government, 2014–16, but resigned to create his own political movement and to stand as an independent candidate in this year's presidential election.

His views were uncannily echoed by the German vice-chancellor and aspiring chancellor, Sigmar Gabriel, who told the news

magazine *Der Spiegel* that “German-led austerity policy in the euro zone has left Europe more divided than ever, and a break-up of the European Union is no longer inconceivable. Should that happen, our children and grandchildren would curse us, because Germany is the biggest beneficiary of the European community—economically and politically.”

Singapore treaty to set standard for TTIP and CETA?

An advocate-general and senior adviser to the EU Court of Justice, Eleanor Sharpston, is of the opinion that the national parliaments of member-states must be given the chance to participate in decision-making in relation to the concluding of a trade treaty with Singapore. It should follow that trade treaties such as TTIP and CETA must also be discussed by national parliaments.

What we’re seeing now is that the EU Parliament has scarcely any involvement in these treaties, while the lobbyists for trans-national corporations have more and more. Shifting the responsibility to national parliaments would mean conducting the debate closer to home, and so voters would at least be given a chance to have their say.

Treaties of this sort affect far more than trade. For example, the intention is that complaints from overseas investors would be resolved in a separate court of arbitration and not by an ordinary court, which would look at both national laws and international treaties.

As most of our laws come from the EU Commission, they are in effect cooked up in advance with corporate lobbyists. This makes our political institutions little more than a democratic shell.

The EU’s crisis of legitimacy

Referendums are dangerous for the EU. In recent years almost all popular votes on EU matters have ended up with the same answer:

No.

The vote with the most far-reaching consequences was Britain’s referendum on membership of the EU last June, when 52 per cent of voters chose the most radical option: leaving the Union. Only weeks before, in April, 61 per cent of voters in a Dutch referendum rejected an EU-Ukraine association agreement, casting doubts on the bloc’s strategy for stabilising the war-torn country.

These two referendums in 2016 followed one in Denmark at the end of 2015, when closer co-operation with other EU countries in some justice and home affairs issues was dismissed by 53 per cent of voters.

“I’m fundamentally not a big friend of referendums,” the president of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, told the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in June, days before the British vote. “One always breaks out in a sweat when someone dares to ask the opinion of the people.”

Admittedly people do not always vote only on the question asked in a referendum, and domestic politics can have an influence on their final decision.



Juncker’s lack of confidence in the public’s judgement seems to be reciprocated. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey—the regular EU study of public opinion—conducted last spring and published in July, only 33 per

cent of Europeans said they had trust in the European Union, and only 34 per cent had a positive image. The level of trust was slightly above the low point of 31 per cent reached in 2013–14, just before Juncker became president of the Commission, but down from 40 per cent in the spring of 2015.

“This will be the last-chance Commission,” Juncker warned in 2014. “Either we will succeed in bringing our citizens closer to Europe or we will fail.” Two years later the EU is about to lose a member, and anti-EU movements are gaining ground in several countries.

Dutch and French far-right leaders, Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen, are leading in opinion polls before elections next year, while in Austria the far-right candidate Norbert Hofer narrowly missed the presidency in a rerun election in December. Even in Germany, immune from large far-right movements since the Second World War, 2016 saw the rise of the anti-migrant and anti-EU Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany). Launched in 2013, the party won a symbolic victory in September when it finished second in the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern elections, ahead of Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union in her own region.

In 2016, opposition to policies such as the euro zone’s austerity developed into a broader critique of the EU’s role in other issues, including the refugee crisis and free trade.

Another referendum was organised in Hungary against the EU’s policy of sharing asylum-seekers. Only 44 per cent of voters participated, but 98 per cent of the valid votes rejected the idea that the EU should impose mandatory quotas.

Even the EU’s trade policy, on which the Commission has led the charge for decades, is under growing criticism. France, a founder-member of the Union, called for more national involvement.

The ultimate proof of contention regarding the EU’s role came when the Belgian region of

Wallonia held up the signing of a trade agreement between the EU and Canada. Canada ultimately had to negotiate directly with Wallonia to ensure that its concerns were taken into account.

After the much talked-about democratic deficit of the 1990s and 2000s, the EU seems now to suffer from a legitimacy deficit. “Historically, the EU drew its legitimacy from common benefit,” Jiří Příbáň, director of the Centre of Law and Society at Cardiff University, told EU Observer. “It brought more prosperity, affluence, accountability. The benefits outweighed the costs.” But with time, the EU has become a more political project, and “the question of its legitimacy will hit at every new step.”

Trade for the transnationals or for the people?

A new CETA-type trade agreement between the EU and Japan is very close to conclusion. Every controversial aspect of that treaty with Canada is also present in the treaty with Japan, including an investors’ court in which transnational corporations can prosecute governments if they break agreements.

The impact, however, is potentially much greater, as the Japanese economy is three times the size of Canada’s.

Concluding trade agreements has been the responsibility of the EU Commission ever since the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957. In 2009 the Treaty of Lisbon extended this to include investment treaties.

The process involves negotiation of the terms, approval by the Commission, examination by the Council of Ministers, and even presentation to the EU Parliament. Big business is always to the fore when this process is being shaped and driven forward, while trade unions, environmental organisations and consumer groups have for the most part a purely ceremonial role.

The Commission works as if its mandate is given to it by transnational corporations. Their principal goal is to get rid of the “burdensome regulation” they must comply with.

Nor has the EU Parliament much chance to intervene in the negotiations. Though members may examine the relevant papers, they are forbidden to discuss them in public. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the new generation of trade treaties has been a subject for celebration for the transnationals and a disaster for society. There is nothing here that aims to increase transparency or narrow the gap between rich and poor.



Given the massive public outcry against TTIP and CETA, there have been calls for a “reset” of free-trade policy. Three points have been mentioned: agreement with the Climate Accord and the Millennium Goals, which include getting rid of extreme poverty; a more transparent negotiation process; and making it much clearer where the gains of the trade agreement can be found.

Crucial to any far-reaching trade treaty is democratic control, which needs to be brought much closer to the people. For a start, national parliaments must be able to participate in the framing of such treaties. It is crazy that Brussels alone has the right to decide. National approval is also of great importance, therefore, and for preference this should be by referendum.

“The dearest seat”

The Dutch parliament has voted to support a proposal for a thorough investigation into the

working conditions of airlines involved in a price war.

An inquiry into the work of approximately seven thousand pilots employed in the European Union arrived at shocking conclusions. It exposed, among other things, low wages paid to pilots and crew; pressure on pilots to fly even if they are exhausted or ill; poor safety policies; and the financial burden imposed on pilots to repay the cost of their training out of their low wages.

It is alleged that airlines, including Ryanair and WizzAir, are conducting a price war on the backs of staff and passengers.

Cabin personnel are also being crushed by these price-fighters. They sometimes have to sit around airports all day, without knowing whether or not there will be any work for them. For this they receive €30.

As one pilot said, the dearest seat in a Ryanair plane is usually the pilot’s.

Merkel raises military co-operation and corporation tax again

Angela Merkel was in Belgium last week to receive honorary degrees from the Universities of Leuven and Ghent and to meet the Belgian royal family. She said that Europe was facing one of its “biggest challenges for decades” as a consequence of conflicts on its borders, such as Russia’s alleged aggression in Ukraine, but conveniently forgot to mention the role of the EU in fomenting violence in that country—even down to a proposed EU-style Ukrainian flag!



The picture of Pat Cox, former president of the EU Parliament, in the Maidan (Independence Square) in Kiev among ultra-right thugs comes to mind. Cox visited Ukraine at least fifteen times. EU aid, much of it unaccounted for, by their own admission, runs to tens of billions.

That this has further eroded the legitimacy of the EU elite is amply demonstrated by the rejection by the Dutch people of the proposed EU association agreement with Ukraine.

True to her dictum of “Never waste a good crisis,” Merkel also said that Britain’s decision to leave the EU ought to galvanise military co-operation among the twenty-seven remaining member-states. Her appeal comes as the United States is sending tanks and soldiers to Poland and the Baltic states and in the wake of the December EU summit, where military co-operation was high on the agenda, with the Irish government agreeing to accelerate it.

She added that EU states should consider harmonising corporation tax in order to compete with the City of London after it departs. A policy being considered would share corporation tax proportionately between member-states, further reducing Ireland’s meagre tax from transnational corporations.

Merkel told the press in Luxembourg that unless the EU improved security in the passport-free Schengen travel zone, and established control of its external borders, it risked collapse. “Everyone sees the urgency, and everyone knows: If we don’t succeed, each country will install its own border controls. Then freedom of movement will no longer be possible, so to speak, not only the free movement of people but also of goods, financial services, and services.”

Last week the Austrian Chancellor, Christian Kern (Social Democrat), in what would be a clear violation of one of the EU’s fundamental freedoms, followed the Swiss example when he advocated allowing Austrian employers to give priority to local candidates before other EU

citizens. “That means—only if there is no suitable unemployed person in the country can [a job] be given to new arrivals without restriction,” he said. He singled out migrants from eastern Europe in particular, saying, “We have a situation where these eastern European countries are exporting their unemployment to Austria.”

Malian mission impossible

Ten members of the Defence Forces are serving at present with an EU Mission in Mali. According to the Defence Forces’ web site, the mission’s objectives in Mali are to help the Malian authorities to

(1) restore constitutional and democratic order in Mali through the faithful implementation of the Road Map for the Transition adopted on 29 January by the National Assembly; this Road Map includes free and transparent elections in 2013 and a national inclusive dialogue;

(2) restore state authority, law and order throughout the country; and

(3) neutralise organised crime and terrorist threats.



The rationale for Irish participation in this mission should be examined by our elected representatives. The mission in Mali, which is under the auspices of the United Nations, is proving to be a mission impossible.

The task is on the one hand the restoration of state control and on the other hand reconciliation between the warring parties. But this cannot be done at one and the same time, because the UN soldiers are seen as allies of the Malian government. Opponents of the government, such as the Tuareg in Mali’s north, consider the United Nations an enemy.

In recent months countless experts and military personnel have expressed criticism of this double task. On paper the mission's goals of reconciliation and peacekeeping are commendable; in practice the presence of UN soldiers is leading to fresh violence. Observers say that the mission seems more and more like an Afghan scenario: a lengthy presence with no tangible results.

At the same time the mission is costing hundreds of millions a year. This money could be spent on other things, such as humanitarian aid.

EU committee approves CETA

The EU Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety has voted (by 40 to 24) to adopt the proposed amendments to the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between the EU and Canada. These suggested that the committee should recommend to the Trade Committee that it give consent to CETA. It then proceeded to adopt the full opinion. The committee thus voted in favour of the adoption of CETA by the EU Parliament.

The support increases the chance that the agreement will enter into force later this year.

In December, the parliament's Employment Committee rejected the agreement.

The Trade Committee will also hold a vote in January before all 751 members of the EU Parliament cast their ballot on the agreement.

The agreement, which has yet to be ratified by the EU Parliament as well as by national and regional parliaments, would set up special investment tribunals that only heard cases brought by corporations—not by citizens or their governments. It would allow companies to bypass national courts to pursue pay-outs from states and thereby threaten measures taken in the public interest.



A letter sent to the committee urging rejection of the agreement was signed by a unique cross-section of concerned organisations, with a unified view of concern, including such diverse groups as the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers' Association, the International Small Business Alliance, Social Justice Ireland, Comhlámh, the People's Movement, and the Environmental Pillar. In all, more than eighty civil-society organisations in Ireland were represented, from business, agriculture and social and environmental sectors, with hundreds of thousands of members. It obviously had no effect.

A plenary vote is expected in the EU Parliament in early to mid-February, so there is still time to lobby members.

An EU-wide day of action has been organised for Saturday 21 January.

Here in Ireland there will be supporting actions.

Watch our Facebook page for details.



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With friends like these ...

In a single week in Brussels three dishonest men have been in the news. The only question now is whether they will leave the stage or grow even more powerful.



The president of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, turns out to be even more intensely involved in tax-dodging by transnational corporations than recently seemed to be the case. The German member of the Commission, Günther Oettinger, who was caught not long ago making racist and sexist remarks and has been involved in a case of conflict of interest, is now apparently being considered as the new vice-president of the Commission. And to make matters worse, the champion of the big corporations, Guy Verhofstadt, has declared his candidacy for presidency of the EU Parliament.

With friends like these, the EU has no need of enemies.

Previous to this we had Luxleaks, which exposed the fact that Juncker, while still in Luxembourg, was actively involved in the development of systems to facilitate tax evasion by transnationals. On the rather dubious grounds that Luxembourg had at the time few other sources of income, Juncker deliberately opted to develop the principality as a tax haven.

It has now emerged that as Luxembourg's prime minister he lobbied in Brussels when plans were being made to develop a code of conduct to hinder tax evasion. The same man is now trying, as president of the Commission, to

combat tax evasion.

This is completely unbelievable—which is why there are renewed calls for his resignation. These are unlikely to be successful, however, as it would require the heads of government to act, and they have thus far shown no interest in doing so. Some of them probably have too much to hide themselves.



On 12 January group leaders within the EU Parliament decided, with the president of the parliament, Martin Schulz (German Social Democrat), that Günther Oettinger was fit to be promoted. Formerly in charge of the Commission's digital market portfolio, he is now in charge of budgets and human resources—including ethics—and is still tipped to become a vice-president of the Commission. The president of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, proposed Oettinger for the role, despite his racist, sexist and homophobic gaffes, and despite a dispute surrounding his flight on the private jet of a pro-Kremlin lobbyist.

Juncker and Oettinger belong to the European People's Party, the largest group in the EU Parliament.

Co-ordinators from three committees—budget, budgetary control, and legal affairs—held an “exchange of views” with Oettinger on 12 January but did not give him a hard time. Even if the Parliament had raised a warning, Juncker would not have been obliged to change his mind.

Oettinger's hearing was mainly a formality. Under new rules coming into force later in January, members of the EU Parliament would

have had the right to oppose a change of portfolio for a member of the Commission. But Juncker had already appointed Oettinger to his new post before Monday's questions, diminishing the members' role.



To top the lot, we now have the Belgian Liberal Guy Verhofstadt running for presidency of the Parliament, to succeed the outgoing president, Martin Schulz. Verhofstadt likes to present himself as a “super-European,” while he is in reality someone who has done years of moonlighting as a director of transnational corporations. With him as president you can be certain that the EU Parliament would be committed to the neo-liberal European super-state.

Because on this occasion the larger centre-right group, the European People's Party, and the centre-left Socialists and Democrats group, have not been able to reach an agreement, it cannot be ruled out that Verhofstadt will soon be able to come through the middle and win.

If you take all these dishonest men together

you can only conclude that the system in Brussels is rotten to the core, and hopefully is on its last legs.

German court rejects motion against CETA

In another setback for campaigners, the German Constitutional Court last week announced the rejection of an appeal by critics of the EU-Canada trade deal, CETA, who argued that the German government neglected its obligations when signing the agreement in October.

The German party Die Linke and a number of NGOs launched the proceedings in late October, at the same time as the signing of CETA by EU governments.

The plaintiffs claimed that the signing, which implies a provisional application of large parts of the treaty from March, after consent from the EU Parliament, overstepped legal restrictions that the Constitutional Court had set in a ruling in early October.

In its decision on 7 December—only made public this week, after it had been delivered to the plaintiffs—the court ruled that the German government had not violated its obligations.