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Written by Maureen Younger

IN THE NEWS

Negative freedom

Brexit-related freedom isn't all it's cracked up to be? No shit, Sherlock, says *Maureen Younger*.

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For centuries, first England then later Great Britain continually fought its neighbours to be Europe's top dog; alternating between fighting France, Spain and much later on, a unified Germany.

Little did these countries know that all they had to do was get a few millionaires to blatantly lie to the British public, and we would happily vote ourselves into becoming politically irrelevant. If I wasn't British, I'd find the whole thing highly amusing.

In philosophy there is the concept of negative freedom. It basically means freedom from interference, freedom from restrictions, and it's something that demagogues often focus on. After all, no one likes to be told what to do. Hence there was a constant barrage of slogans from the Leave campaign such as "*Take our country back*" and stop the EU from telling us what to do.

But when a politician starts talking about giving the people more freedom, it's generally a smokescreen for taking away freedoms from us that are much more valuable. Let's not forget one of Hitler's stated aims in the 1920s was to '*free*' Germany from Jewish-Bolshevism and look how that turned out.

Remember those halcyon days when we were told that under privatisation we'd be *free* to choose what energy supplier we want? They forgot to mention that these same suppliers would seemingly be *free* to charge what they like, which is maybe why



when oil prices rise, energy prices increase with an alacrity that is apparently missing when the very same prices take a tumble.

"Thanks to Brexit, we may well soon be 'free' from European interference into what bananas should look like. Much more importantly, the British government will presumably also be free from European interference when it comes to regulating workers' rights..."

According to a report in the *Daily Telegraph*, British energy firms now charge the most in Europe. An article in *The Independent* from 2014 reported that 2.28 million Brits now live in fuel poverty. Presumably this means they are now free to choose whether they eat or heat their home. And in another article by *The Independent* it reported that 15,000 Brits were killed due to fuel poverty between December 2014 and March 2015 alone.

Recently the government wanted to free schools from local authority control and turn them into academies. You know, those institutions of high scholarly attainment which have thus been freed from all kinds of regulations including, it seems, the small technicality of having to employ teachers that actually have teaching qualifications.

But behind this freedom would have been the wholesale transfer of public land and infrastructure, for free, to unaccountable privately operated academy chains. Chains that seem, for the most part, to be owned and operated by Tory politicians and major Tory party donors.

Sadly, the one thing that British children are not free from is the continuous onslaught of exams. Mind you, that does free Britain's youth from the real purpose of a rounded education – to think for yourself.

Now our politicians have been talking for some time about freedom of choice when it comes to the NHS. This is politician speak for privatisation. Don't believe me? A cynic would say it's already happening.

Recently NHS England awarded a contract to run cancer scans for the NHS to a private health firm which just happens to have ex-Tory MP Malcolm Rifkind on its board. This company won the bid despite a rival NHS consortium allegedly offering to carry out the work for £7 million less. Why did NHS England choose Rifkind's firm? No one knows – the bidding process was secret for some reason.

"Society needs regulations. There is no such thing as absolute freedom, because the absolute freedom of one would naturally impinge on that of another."

Thanks to Brexit, we may well soon be 'free' from European interference into what bananas should look like. Much more importantly, the British government will presumably also be free from European interference when it comes to regulating workers' rights such as paid annual holidays, rights to unpaid parental leave and equal treatment rights for part-time, fixed-term and agency workers.

As TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady points out: *"It's the EU that guarantees workers their rights to paid holidays, parental leave, equal treatment for part-timers, and much more. There are no guarantees that any government will keep them if the UK leaves the EU. And without the back-up of EU laws, unscrupulous employers will have free rein to cut many of their workers' hard-won benefits and protections."*

That many on the bottom of the social ladder in the UK feel disgruntled is undeniable, but the reasons behind their dire situation can't simply be laid at the EU's door. Rather the fault lies with successive governments who have continually shafted the working classes.

No affordable housing? Blame Thatcher and her politically-motivated policy of selling council housing en masse and refusing to let councils replenish their stock. The sole raison d'être behind such a move was that homeowners tend to vote Tory while those living in social housing tend to vote Labour. See what she did there? (Though had she known that the Labour party would prove more than adept at destroying itself she needn't have gone to so much trouble.)

It doesn't take a mathematical genius to work out that a growing population plus less affordable housing equals a problem somewhere down the line. But fear not, you can always exacerbate the problem further by allowing foreign crooks to launder their ill-gotten gains by buying property in London to such an extent that it is now too expensive for an actual Londoner to live in the city. Not a Londoner? Fear not once more. Londoners are moving out and may well be pushing up house prices in an area near you sometime soon.

No decent jobs? Well let's think, who shattered Britain's manufacturing base so that the only real options left for the working classes are brain-deadening jobs at minimum wage in some call centre? (I know how zombie-fying these places can be. I worked in one.) And then why not introduce a zero hours contract which allows us to play with the employment figures while neatly getting round the very rights for which workers have been fighting for years.

“What the UK seems to have done is ensured that we’ll be in the same situation as we were before, but most probably with worse conditions and no power to influence the future shape of Europe.”

Society needs regulations. There is no such thing as absolute freedom, because the absolute freedom of one would naturally impinge on that of another, meaning society needs to regulate for the benefit of society as a whole. Remember we were once told, let’s not regulate the banks, they can regulate themselves; and we saw how well that worked out. Let’s not regulate big business; they know what they are doing. It will only hamper investment. Try telling that to all the BHS employees who thought they were investing in a pension for their old age.

Of course as soon as the referendum results were in, we were told that when the Leave campaign said they would invest £350 million a week into the NHS, they didn’t actually mean they would invest £350 million a week into the NHS. Oh yes and stopping all those pesky foreigners coming to Britain? It turns out that if we want access to the single market (which we do) we will still have to accept freedom of movement. And to top it all, even those in the Leave campaign admit they had no actual plan as to how exactly we should go about exiting the EU. What? No wonder David Cameron jumped ship as quickly as he did.

What the UK seems to have done is ensured that we’ll be in the same situation as we were before, but most probably with worse conditions and no power to influence the future shape of Europe. I’m not entirely convinced it’s the UK’s finest hour...

Ironically, the only UK politician who seems to have actually been prepared for this debacle is Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon. Even more ironically, the Conservative Party, the supposedly staunch supporters of the Union, may have finally handed Scotland its get-out clause. If it has, as the scion of two Scots, I’m hoping Scotland proves just as generous with its policy on issuing passports as the Republic of Ireland is. I get the feeling I may be in a very long queue.

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