

## EU referendum: have we lost the ability to run our own country?

Vast numbers of our civil servants have grown up in a world where they have never had to think for themselves

David Cameron talks with Angela Merkel Photo: PA

By Christopher Booker

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When David Cameron returns this week from Brussels, will he triumphantly proclaim, Chamberlain-like, “I have in my hand a piece of paper”, only to reveal that there is nothing written on it? One of the many questions not addressed by any of the competing “Leave” groups in this dismal pre-referendum campaign is whether, if Britain were to vote to leave the EU, we would be capable any longer of running our own country.

Few people beyond those nerds who study such things have any real idea just how far we have now become enmeshed in that vast, amorphous system of government centred in Brussels. The officials of whole ministries, like the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, have come to operate almost entirely within the framework of policies and laws decided at EU level.

*"If we were suddenly to find ourselves an independent country again, would civil servants know where to begin in working out such policies for themselves?"*

It is now 20 years since the only occasion when a British minister, Angela Browning, resigned because she could no longer tolerate being told by her officials, whenever she proposed a sensible policy on some issue, “Oh no, minister, we can’t do that because it would be against European policy.” Vast numbers of our civil servants have grown up in a world where they have

never had to think for themselves what might actually be the best policy for Britain, because such decisions have all been outsourced to a higher supranational level.

If we were suddenly to find ourselves an independent country again, would they know where to begin in working out such policies for themselves? For a start, we would still have to keep huge quantities of EU law on the statute book, following the example of India after its independence

in 1947, which only got round to the mammoth task of replacing the British-made law they had inherited in 1955.

Apart from anything else, we would also have to recruit an army of experts to take our place at those scores of global “top tables”, above the EU, where so much policy and regulation is now decided, but where for years we have been represented only by the EU.

Not only have none of the “Leave” campaigns yet agreed on a properly worked-out plan for how we could plausibly extricate ourselves from the EU; they haven’t shown any understanding of how we could learn once again to govern ourselves once we had left.

*"Just saying 'we want to leave' is not going to persuade the British people that this would not be a 'leap in the dark'"*

It would require a titanic effort, immense practical ingenuity and political will, of which at present there is no sign whatever.

Just saying “we want to leave” is not going to persuade the British people that this would not be that “leap in the dark” which for the equally dismal “Remain” campaigners still looks at the moment like their winning card.

Even if Mr Cameron comes back this time brandishing a piece of paper with nothing written on it, he could still carry the day, because we have actually lost the ability or will to run our own country.

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