



EconoMag
Don't Lecture Me About Democracy
and Human Rights!©

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Welcome back to EconoMag on EnglishWaves.

Britain and Continental Europe have a very different perception of the European ideal. The European founding members had all endured World War II, and the European project was a way to secure peace, democracy and human rights. Cooperation was a safeguard against possible abuse of power from individual governments. These countries were later joined by Southern and Eastern Europe, which had endured military or communist dictatorships. For these new countries, securing democracy and human rights was also crucial. Britain, on the other hand, is much less concerned about these issues. They did put in a tremendous effort during World War II, but the Nazis didn't manage to invade them. They suffered less destruction and massive massacres. So peace, democracy and human rights don't seem as fragile for them as for other countries. Also, their democracy and human rights can be traced back hundreds of years. The 13th century saw both the *Magna Carta* and the English Parliament; the *Bill of Rights* and the principles of constitutional monarchy were secured in the 17th century with the *Glorious Revolution*. Some will claim that England invented modern democracy and human rights, and is "the Mother of parliaments".

England also had a strong tradition of rejecting foreign influence in its own domestic affairs. When Henri VIII adopted the English Reformation, it was much more a matter of independence from Rome than pure religious doctrine. He became Supreme Head of the Church of England in order to remarry. It is therefore not surprising that the UK really resents the authority of the European Court and Convention of Human Rights. The most recent disputes have been more symbolic than meaningful. Prison inmates do not have the right to vote in the UK, and that was considered illegal at the Strasbourg court. The Convention made it more difficult but not impossible for Britain to deport a radical Muslim with alleged ties to terrorism. For British politicians, these matters, as well as surveillance and eavesdropping should only be made by the British government or the British Parliament. There is no court to decide that something is unconstitutional, because the UK does not have a written, formal constitution, as opposed to other European countries. Parliamentary sovereignty traditionally meant that the House of Commons was free to vote any law that it wished.

It is interesting to note that these complaints come almost uniquely from the English and English politicians. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland do not worry as much about it. In terms of population and economic weight they are small compared to England, so they are used to having someone else impose their will. The European Convention of Human Rights is also very important in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland suffered decades of troubles

between British loyalists and Irish nationalists. The conflict between the IRA and the British was vicious and traumatic on both sides. It ended in 1998 with the Good Friday agreement that organised power sharing between Irish Catholics and British Protestants. But Europe and the European Convention played a very big role in promoting peace. The UK and Ireland are both part of the EU, so that Northern Ireland is, in a way, partly reunited with the rest of Ireland. The European Convention helped to build support within the nationalist community for the Northern Irish Police, which was previously involved in the sectarian conflict.

Stay tuned to EnglishWaves.