The last two months have been among the most interesting of my life. Like most people in Britain, I have been horrified by the transfer of powers, or so-called “competences”, from our parliament to the EU. Since I joined the UK Independence Party (Ukip), in January 2007, some members have encouraged me to try for the leadership. When Lord Pearson resigned, I threw my hat into the ring. I was a 50/1 outsider. In the election, the previous leader, Nigel Farage, secured three times as many votes as me and beat me into second place.

I am about to make a confession that I would not have believed possible: I greatly enjoyed the hubbub and tension of competitive politics. I also learned a great deal about my country and its misgovernment. In particular, the experience brought home how important the insights of the Virginia School of Political Economy are to modern political activity.

Its leaders—James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock—did their main work in the 1960s and ‘70s, but its relevance to understanding the EU's emasculation of our parliamentary institutions is greater than ever. Buchanan's and Tullock's central point was that the tools of economic analysis can be applied to topics such as politics, bureaucracy, law, etc., as well as to economists' more familiar concerns such as the determination of prices and quantities of goods. When they were writing, an implicit assumption of most public debate was that the government existed to serve the public interest. Therefore, the purpose of political action was Benthamite, to achieve the greatest good of the greatest number.

Their most devastating proposition was that the Benthamite assumption was invalid. Politicians are human beings, not the expressions of “the general will”. They are greedy, imperfect and have their own self-interested material aspirations. So in practice, many government decisions are taken with a view to the greatest good of oneself and one's chums.

The balance between the high-minded public interest and low-grade private interests varies over time and between nations. The expenses scandal in 2009 showed that in Britain the balance had moved dangerously in the wrong direction and confirmed the validity of Peter Oborne's analysis in his minor classic, The Triumph of the Political Class (2007): “The civil service, the political parties, the judiciary, the intelligence services and the media have all been captured or compromised.” But Oborne was curiously silent on the greatest of these scandals in our era, the capture and compromise of virtually the entire British political system by the EU bureaucracy. Today, most of our legislation, under the alien labels of “directives” and “regulations”, emerges from the European Council of Ministers by a mysterious process that only a handful of people in this country understand.

In Sixties Britain, millions of people flocked to the cinema to view The Longest Day and Sink the Bismarck. How can that same nation now submit to foreign control of its farming, fisheries, energy resources, financial regulation and external trade, as well to the undermining of legal protections (such as habeas corpus and trial by jury)?

The answer is that the British political class has been bribed. Too many of its members have taken decisions for the greater good of themselves and their chums. The corruption at work is largely insidious and opaque, with two processes being particularly important. First, lazy and rather dim politicians have ceded powers to foreign bureaucrats for the sake of a soft life. The truth is that nowadays very few government ministers write their speeches and organise their diaries. They are told what they can and cannot do by civil servants.

Not surprisingly, over time the national bureaucracies have become contemptuous of the people’s elected representatives. Civil servants see the organisation of an international, pan-European bureaucracy as the means of transferring power to themselves. Bureaucrats have the great advantage over the politicians that they are much cleverer and do not have to seek re-election.

Second, the civil servants invent structures that encourage politicians to approve further integration. For example, the European Parliament now offers subsidies (ostensibly to pay for “research” and such like) to MEPs who form “pan-European groupings” and “pan-European parties”. So subsidies to promote European integration are now being offered to MEPs of separatist parties—including Ukip—that are supposed to oppose it. If the Virginia School is right, these MEPs might even accept the money that is being dangled in front of them.