

Funding the Future

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This is one of a series of posts that will ask what the most pertinent question raised by a prominent influencer of [political economy](#) might have been, and what the relevance of that question might be today. There is a list of all posts in the series at the end of each entry. The [origin of this series is noted here](#).

After the first two posts in this series, the topics have been chosen by me, and this is one of those. This series has been produced using what I describe as directed AI searches to establish positions with which I agree, followed by final editing before publication.

Nancy MacLean is appearing because Jacqueline and I were, during a coffee whilst on our weekend away, discussing people whose books have influenced me. This is the second of three posts that follow on from that discussion.

*[Nancy MacLean](#)'s *Democracy in Chains* is one of the most powerful books of our time. It is not a conspiracy theory but a history of how the American right turned [James Buchanan's](#) public choice theory into a political strategy for entrenching the power of the wealthy minority. Where [Keynes](#) sought to save capitalism from itself, Buchanan and his patrons sought to save capitalism from democracy.*

MacLean uncovered a network stretching from the University of Chicago to Virginia, and from the Koch brothers' money to state legislatures across America, dedicated to making democratic government incapable of serving the majority. Fiscal rules, voter suppression, privatisation, constitutional "restraints" on spending and taxation: all these were designed to ensure that elected governments could never again redistribute wealth or regulate capital.

Hence the Nancy MacLean Question: *if democracy must be chained to protect wealth, what is left of freedom?*

The origins of a counter-revolution

MacLean traced the project to the 1950s American South. Desegregation threatened the white elite's control of state power. Economists like Buchanan provided the intellectual armour for resistance. They framed government not as the expression of the people's will, but as a dangerous engine of redistribution.

Public choice theory recasts every act of democratic decision-making as self-interest, whether that be voters demanding benefits, politicians buying votes, or bureaucrats expanding budgets. The proposed solution was to tie democracy down with constitutional chains.

It was, as MacLean wrote, a stealth revolution that replaced bullets and batons with fiscal rules and balanced-budget amendments.

The capture of economics

In MacLean's account, economics was not merely an accomplice in this process, but the weapon.

By presenting anti-democratic constraints as rational and scientific, Buchanan's disciples cloaked ideology in mathematics. They built think-tanks, endowed chairs, and trained generations of scholars who would carry the message into policy.

The language of freedom was inverted. Economic liberty came to mean the right of the wealthy to be untouched by democratic demand. Limited government came to mean limited democracy.

MacLean's achievement was to show that neoliberal economics was not a spontaneous evolution but a conscious political construction — a project of class defence.

The architecture of constraint

What MacLean revealed was not merely a theory but an institutional strategy involving:

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Balanced-budget laws that make social spending unconstitutional.

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Super-majority requirements for tax rises that let a wealthy minority veto redistribution.

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Independent central banks that remove monetary power from elected control.

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Private school vouchers and charter programmes designed to dismantle public education.

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Privatisation that converts public goods into rent-seeking assets.

Each of these mechanisms looks technocratic, but together they amount to a constitutional coup: a re-engineering of democracy to guarantee that the majority can never govern in its own interest.

The moral inversion of freedom

MacLean's most devastating insight is moral. The neoliberal right speaks endlessly of freedom, but it is a freedom defined by exclusion: the liberty of property against the claims of people.

In this world, taxation is tyranny, regulation is oppression, and equality is theft.

Freedom becomes the privilege of the rich to live unaccountably. For everyone else, it becomes the freedom to endure precarity and blame oneself.

This inversion turns the democratic promise of liberty, of self-government through collective action, into its opposite: government chained to capital.

The stealth of respectability

MacLean emphasised that this was not an open assault on democracy but a quiet corrosion of it. The actors were think-tanks, philanthropists, and academic programmes, not soldiers. They spoke the language of reform, efficiency, and choice.

That subtlety is what makes the project so dangerous. It convinces the public that austerity is prudent, that fiscal rules are responsible, and that "sound finance" is common sense. In truth, each of these manacles limits a government's capacity to serve citizens and expands the power of wealth.

The coup succeeded precisely because it hid behind respectability.

The global reach

Though MacLean wrote about America, her diagnosis describes the world.

In Britain, fiscal rules and privatisation have hollowed out public life.

In the European Union, treaties constitutionalised austerity.

In the Global South, debt conditionality enforces neoliberal discipline imposed by the IMF and World Bank.

Everywhere, the same logic applies: constrain democracy in the name of stability, and call it reform.

The moral stakes

MacLean's work reminds us that democracy is not self-sustaining. It can be legally and economically disarmed. When elected governments cannot act for the majority, citizens lose faith. Cynicism becomes the ruling ideology.

She forces us to confront the question Buchanan posed and she inverted: should democracy serve markets, or should markets serve democracy?

Our present crisis — from inequality to climate paralysis — shows what happens when we choose the former.

What answering MacLean requires

To answer the MacLean Question, we must break the chains she exposed. That means:

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Reclaiming constitutional democracy. Fiscal rules that forbid public investment must be repealed.

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Exposing capture. Name and dismantle the networks that use philanthropy and academia to entrench plutocracy.

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Restoring political economy. Bring questions of power, class, and ownership back into the centre of economics.

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Re-defining freedom. True liberty lies in collective self-government — the freedom to build a just society together.

Inference

The MacLean Question is not abstract. It is the central political question of our time: who governs? Is it the people, or wealth?

MacLean revealed that the right's long project was to make democracy safe for capitalism by making capitalism safe from democracy.

The result is a world where governments are elected but impotent, citizens are free but powerless, and oligarchy rules behind the mask of markets.

Answering her question demands more than policy; it demands moral clarity.

If democracy must be chained to protect wealth, then freedom itself has already been stolen, and our task is to take it back.

Previous posts in this series

- * **[The economic questions](#)**
 - * **[Economic questions: The Henry Ford Question](#)**
 - * **[Economic questions: The Mark Carney Question](#)**
 - * **[Economics questions: The Keynes question](#)**
 - * **[Economics questions: The Karl Marx question](#)**
 - * **[Economics questions: the Milton Friedman question](#)**
 - * **[Economic questions: The Hayek question](#)**
 - * **[Economic questions: The James Buchanan question](#)**
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