

The Brexit Blog

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A Day to Mourn

So today it will happen. For some, it will be a day of joy and triumph and celebration. Yet, though those celebrations will be occurring, it seems likely that they will be relatively muted and confined to a relatively small number of the most committed leavers, led by a perhaps slightly underwhelming cast of speakers. There will also be some light displays and a new 50 pence coin.

Certainly there is no evidence of a general upsurge of joy, and no mood of national confidence or renewal. The more widespread sense seems to be, at best, one of exhaustion coupled with uncertainty about what has been done and what is to come. For many already realise that today marks only a stage in a very long, painful and uncertain process.

But of course that stage is of fundamental, historic significance because Britain, definitively, leaves the EU with no possibility of revoking that decision. Hence as many, if not more, are mourning as celebrating, and some will even be in despair.

Crucially, there is clear, sustained polling evidence that more people think that it was wrong to vote to leave the EU than think it was right. The current figures, from 26 January 2020, are 47% to 40%. Even more, 56%, think Brexit will be economically damaging compared with just 21% who think it will be beneficial. Two of the four constituent countries of the UK voted against Brexit, and the parliament/assemblies of three of them have rejected the legislation enacting it.

And, yet, today it will happen.

As an Irish Times editorial put it yesterday, “no state in the modern era has committed such a senseless act of self-harm”.

Anyone waking from a four year sleep to read this would find it truly bizarre. This long post is a partial account* of how we got to this moment and where we might be going now.

Brexit has created a deeply divided country

Never before has a modern democratic country deliberately embarked on such a major change of direction whilst so internally divided about its wisdom, and one so widely seen by observers across the world as seriously damaging to its standing and fundamental interests, including to its viability as a United Kingdom.

There is a reason why countries usually require super-majorities to enact major changes, and why countries which are composed of several national components create safeguards, so each can have its say. It is to ensure that such dangerous divisions are not created.

That no such care was taken was, ostensibly, because legally this was only an ‘advisory referendum’. But, politically, that was meaningless, not only but not least because of the leaflet sent by David Cameron’s government to every household, promising to enact the result. Subsequent arguments that the result should be set aside because of its advisory status were always a non-starter.

That leaflet was just one aspect of Cameron’s grotesquely irresponsible complacency that the referendum would be won, and his use of it as a tool to manage to internal divisions of his party. In the process, those internal divisions spread their poison to the entire country which is now infected for years to come. There is no antidote except, perhaps, the passage of time and the arrival in power of a new generation.

There are much deeper causes, too, which future historians will understand better than we can. The ambivalent history of Britain’s forty year EU membership, the social and regional inequalities embedded by the unplanned and imposed deindustrialisation of the 1980s, the breakdown of political trust whose proximate cause was the lies told to justify the Iraq War, a warped and malign public discourse about immigration, the financial deregulation that led to the financial crisis – and no doubt much else.

I think, in particular, the unprocessed cultural psychology of the Second World War was one of the biggest, yet least recognized, causes. In a strange historical irony, in the long run it proved harder to ‘get over’ victory than to face up to defeat and occupation.

Whatever the reasons for the result, it remains the case that, prior to the Referendum, EU membership was a matter of almost no public interest or disquiet. Leaving the EU was not, and is still not, some huge popular crusade or cause.

Brexiteers never expected to win, and would be happier if they had lost

For this reason, just as Cameron assumed he would win the Referendum so, too, Brexiteers expected to lose. That freed them both to tell as many lies as they wanted and to avoid specifying what a victory would mean. There’s no point in being mealy-mouthed about this: just about every claim made by Vote Leave was either simply untrue or, at best, a distortion of the truth. I think that there were some principled advocates of Brexit who were appalled by this but, if so, the plain fact is that without the lies there would have been no victory.

I am also convinced, even more now than at the time of the referendum, that many of the most passionate advocates of Brexit would actually have preferred to have lost. For them, protest, complaint and victimhood were the comfort zone that, in winning, they lost. That has fed through into a situation whereby those who most vociferously support Brexit regard any actual form it takes – including that which Johnson is developing – as not being ‘true Brexit’.

Thus, even as it is forced on the country, they remain unsatisfied and remain in that comfort zone of complaint and victimhood. Indeed the grimmest irony of Brexit is that, ever since the Referendum result, it has left not just so many remainers feeling sad, bitter and angry but so many leavers too.

So despite the endlessly repeated mantra of that Brexit is the ‘will of the people’, there’s never

been a majority for any defined form of Brexit, and only momentarily for Brexit at all. Even as it happens, the [opinion polls show a small majority for remain](#), whilst those who do want to leave the EU are still divided as to what form of doing so is what Brexit really means.

Brexiteers won, but didn't know how to deliver

This is one of the things that makes Brexit so unusual. It entails a huge national shift which its advocates don't know how to deliver unlike, say, the Thatcherite revolution which – whilst one could disagree with it – knew what it was doing and how to go about it.

For having refused to specify in the Referendum what leaving meant – knowing that there was no agreement about that – Brexiteers both then and ever since have shown they have no idea whatsoever about the practicalities of what it entails. Almost everything they say about, for example, international trade, or law, or customs procedures, or business operations, is either based on half-truths or is just flat wrong. It's not just a matter of not knowing arcane technical detail but basic facts about what Brexit involves, as many posts on this blog have discussed with explicit, detailed refutations of the many false claims.

That incompetence is an affront not so much to those who voted to remain, but to those millions who voted to leave and might have had a reasonable expectation that the campaign leaders knew what they were doing. In reality, campaigning and protesting were all they knew how to do. Practical realities eluded them, not least because such [realities contradicted the lies](#) that they campaigned for and protested against.

For that alone Brexiteer politicians deserve to be judged harshly by history. But perhaps even more degenerate are the [shady think tanks](#) and [psychopathic](#) disruptors behind those politicians, such as Dominic Cummings who, we are told, [has now 'done Brexit' \(£\)](#). As if it were a children's game, they have wreaked havoc and then left the rest of us to live with the consequences. Even so, whatever they may say or do, from now on, and in fact since the triggering Article 50, it is [Brexiteers who are responsible for whatever happens](#).

Brexiteers have insulted and humiliated half the country

More than anything else, and unlike any political event in Britain that I can recall, Brexit is an expression of contempt and even hatred directed at about half of the population. Perhaps it was the very surprise and bewilderment of winning that led Brexiteers, rather than savouring victory, to unleash a culture war against those they had defeated. Even in [some of the celebratory comments](#) being made at the moment there seems to be more gloating about remainers' distress than pleasure in leaving the EU *per se*.

The constant, sneering, references to 'the liberal metropolitan elite', 'saboteurs' and 'remoaners' are just the mildest version of this. Politicians, businesspeople, judges, lawyers, civil servants, academics – not to mention EU nationals, who did not even have the right to vote in the Referendum - have all been endlessly attacked, mocked and, at the wilder extremes, subjected to accusations of treachery and to death and rape threats. It's undoubtedly the case that this climate intimidated some MPs into supporting things, especially the triggering of Article 50, which they knew were wrong.

I don't discount the fact that those who voted to leave the EU have also been subjected to many

insults – ‘Brexshitters’, stupid, racist, old, ‘gammon’ and worse – and, personally, I deplore that and have never indulged in it. The difference, though, is this. To the best of my knowledge, leading figures on the remain side have never sought to stigmatise leave voters but, rather, to try to understand their concerns. Whereas leading figures on the leave side have joined in, or at least not discouraged, the vitriol against remainers and never tried to understand *their* concerns.

In the aftermath of a close vote, a divisive campaign and with a colossal national task to undertake a big, inclusive, consensus-building approach to Brexit was so obviously needed. It would have been enormously difficult but neither May nor Johnson even tried. Any competent political leader would have seen the vital need to bridge the huge divides Brexit has created or revealed. Yet even at this late stage, with Brexit assured and a large parliamentary majority, Johnson refuses to make even the tiniest gesture of conciliation.

Brexiteers have refused to seek consensus

Far from any attempt being made to find a consensual solution, as the years have gone by Brexit has been defined in harder and harder ways. The soft Brexit of single market membership, which many Brexiteers had said was what Brexit meant prior to the referendum, and which could have formed the basis of a national consensus, was discounted as not being real Brexit. The hard Brexit of a trade agreement quickly gave way to claims that only ‘no deal’ or ‘clean’ Brexit would do.

As we leave the EU today, there is still no clarity on whether any deal on future terms will be done, or what it will look like, but the direction of travel could well be a complete de-alignment with the EU. Undoubtedly some of the Ultras will push hard for that. However it turns out, it will be very different to what the Leave campaign promised. Always the agenda has been driven by the most fanatical and extreme anti-EU ideologues and their wholly dishonest claim to represent the will of an undivided ‘people’.

Even that might have had a scintilla of legitimacy if a confirmatory referendum had been held. Far from being an outrageous attempt to subvert democracy it would have been a perfectly logical, and entirely democratic, exercise. It would simply have asked voters who had given, as it were, planning permission for Brexit to have the final say on whether, on the basis of what had thus far been agreed, they wanted to proceed beyond today’s point of no return. If they did, the answer would have been yes. If Brexiteers truly believed it to be the will of the people they would have been happy to ask, but they knew it was not so.

So remainers – and, for that matter, ‘soft’ leavers – have for more than three years had their faces ground into the dirt, being told to ‘suck it up’ even as Brexiteers argue about what ‘it’ actually is. It is as if, had remain won, leavers had been told that the vote was a blank cheque to join the Euro, Schengen, and create an EU army. Or as if, rather than a 52-48 remain victory being, as Nigel Farage put it before the result, ‘unfinished business’, it had been treated as a licence to demand of leavers that they publicly recant their former beliefs and swear fealty to the remain cause.

What can remainers do now?

Having used their victory in this divisive and derogatory way, the Brexiteers’ demand now is that

remainers 'get behind Brexit' or, at least, accept that since it is unavoidable they should do their best to 'make it work'. But that is impossible, even if there was any clarity as to what it meant and even if Brexiters had shown any whiff of humility. It is like asking someone to 'get behind' a self-harming relative because they are determined to hurt themselves. It can't be done.

This leaves remainers with few options. Those in the easiest position are those who were only ever marginally interested, and only marginally pro-remain. That's probably quite a big group and it shouldn't be forgotten because, just as many leave voters were not rabid Brexiters, so many remain voters were far from being 'remainiacs'. In time, for them as perhaps for others, 'remainer' will simply cease to be an identity.

Others – and I sense this amongst some friends – are simply withdrawing from political engagement, to concentrate on personal or perhaps local issues, and in some cases leaving the country. Some others feel vengeful, and anticipate the coming damage to the jobs and communities that most heavily voted leave with something like pleasure.

Others will follow [the course outlined by Steve Bullock](#), fighting to keep alive in Britain the liberal values of the EU in the face not just of Brexit but of what its architects will now try to do. That may have some [unpredictable effects on British politics](#), according to Stephen Bush. Still others will regroup around a campaign to re-join the EU although, realistically, this makes most sense for younger people since even [on Ian Dunt's reckoning it is a decade away](#), and I think that's optimistic.

As for me ...

As for me, well, although no one reading it can be unaware that I think Brexit is a catastrophe – not least as [I stated it in the very first post](#) – I have always avoided writing anything very personal on this blog. Indeed, some readers may have the impression that my primary concerns about Brexit are to do with trade, business, economics, and international political standing. And, it's true, I do care very much about all of those things. I do not want my compatriots to be poorer and less secure, and everything I know about economics and politics – which, in one form or another, I have spent my entire adult life studying – tells me that Brexit will have this effect, in spades.

But just as I have always thought it nonsense to say that leavers are motivated only by emotion and culture rather than rationality and economics, so too do I think it nonsense to imagine that remainers are not motivated by emotion and culture as well as rationality and politics. There has not been a single night since the Referendum that I have not woken mid-way through with a feeling of despair, nor a morning I have not woken without the dull, heavy ache of doing so to a world gone wrong. It is the only time in my life I have experienced political events as personal trauma, the worse for there being no prospect of their resolution.

I also feel a seething anger about the torrent of lies which have been told by Brexiters and, by being recycled endlessly, have come to be believed. Even as we leave a new one has gained ground, conflating warnings about no-deal Brexit with the actual situation of a Withdrawal Agreement and transition period [to crow that Project Fear has been finally discredited](#). It's a small but telling example of how incontinently the lies are still flowing.

In particular, I feel a constant shame at the disgusting way EU citizens – including my own

friends and colleagues – are being treated. They, like, their UK counterparts in the EU, built their lives on the entirely reasonable expectation that freedom of movement was a permanent right. On that basis, they created plans, families and careers which have now been damaged if not destroyed.

It is no doubt my own psychological peculiarity or professional deformation that my response to all this is to try to provide an analysis of what is happening, using evidence, rationality and argument. And, with Britain now having left the EU I will continue to do so, not least because – I'm pleased to say – there seems to be a (mainly) appreciative audience for this analysis.

As I wrote in more detail [in a post after the election](#), there is a continued case for providing an ongoing analysis since Brexit is still so very far from over in terms of the decisions about what it will mean. Moreover, there may be some value in creating a more or less continuous record of what Brexit has done to our country since 2016, if only because what has happened so far is already [in the process of being re-written](#), often inaccurately and sometimes mendaciously.

There may be worse days to come

That record will show how Britain has made [an historic strategic error](#), leaving it poorer and weaker. It is a strategic error without even being a strategic decision. Unlike the day that Britain joined what became the EU, which was the outcome of years of careful planning and statecraft, today has come about by a series of accidents and mistakes, and an epic failure of political leadership. To undertake it in the absence of any clear national consensus is profoundly dangerous and irresponsible.

At best, depending on what happens now, the effects may continue to be a gradual, [slow-burn process of damage and decline](#) with no great drama, and the full effects emerging over so many years that their cause will be easily denied.

At worst, if Brexit rapidly creates deep economic hardship – for example if there is no future terms deal and no transition period extension - the biggest danger is who, then, will get the blame? Not, I suspect, those who have brought us to this, but all the usual scapegoats, especially immigrants as always, and also those who continue to refuse to 'get behind' Brexit. Social media warriors already regard that as a hanging offence, and at least one mainstream politician [has already proposed](#) trying those with "extreme EU loyalties" for treason.

It's not entirely far-fetched to imagine that the [Brexit McCarthyism](#) that has been immanent since the beginning will end up becoming a matter of State. We've already travelled further down that road than many would have thought possible a few years ago, with [civil servants traduced](#), judges [denounced as enemies of the people](#), a government minister [demanding to know what universities are teaching about Brexit](#), and [constant attempts to subvert parliament](#) even to the point of trying to suspend it from sitting.

So I mourn the country we have already lost, and fear for the one to come. For, dark as today is for so many of us, there may well be far darker days ahead.

**For more detail, see the previous 237 posts on the blog*

