

Brexit: an accident waiting to happen

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In the current British political crisis, caused by the Brexit vote, four factors, often ignored, are crucial:

- * electoral legitimacy (and the lack thereof of most Westminster governments since 1970);
- * the corrosive consequences of an unregulated media;
- * the increasingly poor educational standards prevalent in the UK;
- * the casual dismissal and degradation of politicians and politics generally.

Electoral legitimacy

The British Parliamentary system is designed to reflect the predominance of two adversarial parties: initially Whig/Tory then Liberal/Conservative and latterly Labour/Conservative.¹ After the franchise was extended in 1918 to create a true mass electorate, and other possibilities emerged, this was not especially 'fair' but as long as the voting affiliations of the masses remained determined by this 'us and them' syndrome, and they opted for one of two monolithic parties, a certain rough justice prevailed.² However, since 1970 (Edward Heath – 46% of the votes cast) neither Labour nor Conservatives have polled above 45% of the votes cast in a general election. Thatcher didn't get above 44%, Blair peaked at 43% and

1 This adversarial mindset even extends to the architecture of the House of Commons: two narrow rows of benches facing each other.

2 The electorate tripled in 1918 because as well as women (only over 28, at this stage) all men became eligible to vote. Pre-1918 the franchise had been restricted to male freeholders; i.e. primarily middle-class and upper-class men. The UK only achieved a one person one vote system for Parliamentary elections as recently as 1950 when university graduates and company directors (again, the upper classes) lost their right to a second (or multiple) vote.

Cameron only managed 37% in 2015.³ Turnout, too, has declined. In 1951 Attlee and Churchill took 97% of the votes between them on an 83% turnout. Compared with this, in 2015 on a turnout of 66%, 11.3 million (24.5% of the electorate) voted *for* the party of government and 19.4 million (42% of the electorate) *against*, with 15.5 million (33.5% of the electorate, a figure greater than the combined Conservative and UKIP vote) not voting at all. Despite this the UK system delivered Cameron an overall majority.

Historically the losers have been the smaller parties: Liberal Democrats, the SNP (until 2015), Plaid Cymru, the Greens, the SDP (1981-87), UKIP, the BNP and Respect. In the general elections of 2010 and 2015 these accounted between them for 31% and 30% of votes respectively. Had the 2015 House of Commons been elected on a proportional basis it would have 195 minor party MPs rather than 69, and David Cameron would either not have been Prime Minister or would have been Prime Minister of a very different government.

While the electoral legitimacy of UK governments since 1970 has declined, other factors have come into play. Despite the abolition of most hereditary peerages, the House of Lords has continued to grow. With a membership of 810 it is now, absurdly, the largest unelected legislature in the world. New peers are created by the Monarch or via nominations from the leaders of the main parties in the House of Commons: a system without parallel elsewhere. Coupled with this is an absence of proper regional government. While a limited version of this has existed since 1998-1999 in London, Wales and Scotland, unlike every other major country, the UK has neither a federal system nor properly constituted and resourced local and regional government.⁴ There is no sign this will be introduced. Finally, the UK lacks a written constitution – again, a unique feature – and no precise role

³ Wilson took 48% of the vote in 1966. A case can be made that Wilson and Heath were the last two successful consensus politicians in the UK, and that the period we have lived through since their demise in 1975-76 should be seen as a period of deliberate non-consensus.

⁴ Northern Ireland – of course – was different, enjoying fully functioning regional government between 1921 and 1972 and again since 1998.

exists for the hereditary monarchy and its prerogative powers.

As a result of these arrangements, successive UK governments since 1979 have been able to enact drastic changes that were absent from their election manifestos; and, memorably in the case of Thatcher and Blair, proclaimed that their conviction outweighed any need to follow or build a consensus. Ironically, throughout this period there was a noisy and growing clamour about the EU's 'democratic deficit'.

With this general political background it was hardly surprising that the conduct of the EU referendum was so amateurish. Most referenda (outside the UK) are conducted on simple questions. Should smoking be allowed in public? Should women be allowed to vote? Should it be compulsory to wear a seat-belt in a car? And most countries that hold referenda have conditions for their conduct: requiring a minimum level of turn out; a minimum level of support needed to enact the change; with supervision of opinion polls during the campaign; and strict rules about the funding of the campaign itself.

In the UK in June 2016 none of this applied.⁵ Neither 'side' knew what would happen if the vote was to remain in or leave the EU. Neither could predict what life in the UK (or the rest of the world) might be like in the next 10-20 years. (The Leave side were particularly big on the argument that it would all be worthwhile 'in the long run'.) It was an issue unsuited to a referendum with complexities that couldn't possibly be put, or answered, in such a format. For example: would an exit from the EU on the World Trade Organisation model destroy manufacturing? Would we all need visas to go on holiday in the future? What would happen to UK people resident in the EU?

The media

The UK has an abundance of poor quality, partisan, right-wing newspapers. Only two clear exceptions exist: *The Daily Mirror*

⁵ It really is striking that the opposition didn't put down a simple amendment requiring any of these when the legislation setting up the EU referendum was wending its way through Parliament in 2015.

and *The Guardian*.⁶ Other countries appear to have a greater spread of political preferences across their media and many have rules about whether or not media can be foreign-owned. The UK does not, and has a media that regulates itself with few encumbrances. Those seeking legal redress against any libellous or incorrect statement made about them in the UK media generally find this process ruinously expensive.

This has been the case for decades where the newspapers are concerned. What is new is that TV coverage of many political issues now seems to treat some (though rarely left) minority views as deserving equal coverage with mainstream opinion because of a supposed need to provide 'balance'. Had this logic been followed in the past, the National Front would have been debating on TV in the 70s with the Prime Minister and the clever and adroit Oswald Mosley would have been a regular panellist on the 30s equivalent of *Question Time*, had there been one. Who knows how UK politics might have turned out then if that had been so?

A further noticeable trend is the conducting of political discussion programmes on TV and radio in the manner of parlour games with a genial host (often a Dimpleby) acting as if cricketing rules are in order, despite extreme and uninformed views being bandied about. If this remains 'the line' then such programmes will cease to be adequate forums for public discussion and debate.

Another feature of most of the UK media is its endless misrepresentation of anything to do with European politics. Most recently this has been evident in the coverage of regional elections in Germany, where the line was that the right-wing AfD party were going to do extremely well (they didn't, finishing fifth) and that political changes would follow as Germany started to follow *our* lead (they haven't and the most likely outcome nationally remains a Christian Democrat-Social

⁶ Circulation of *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Record* (its sister paper in Scotland) and *The Guardian* – in hard copy – is 1.2m, 13% of traditional newspaper sales in the UK. Newspaper readership itself has declined dramatically since the '90s, and is now, proportionately, at half the level it reached in the mid '50s when papers were much better written.

Democrat coalition). Similar attention was also given to Hungary where a right-wing government wishes to prevent non-EU migrants entering the country. This is presented as being the same as the UK wishing to bar EU citizens from entering the UK. Attention was duly focused on the Hungarian referendum on whether it should accept a small quota of refugees from the Middle East – the inference being that this was similar to events in the UK. It wasn't. Hungary was not holding a referendum on leaving the EU, was not against free movement of EU citizens within the EU, and, unlike the UK, its referendum had requirements on turnout. In the event, the non-participation of most of the Hungarian population invalidated it when that threshold was not reached.⁷

Are we surprised that the UK media provide far less help than they should in clarifying current affairs issues for the public? As well as the long-established bias of most domestic newspapers, UK TV has been trivialized in the last couple of decades. BBC2 now shows cookery programmes; and contemporary drama (of which up to 200 productions a year, across three channels, were once broadcast) has declined to virtual insignificance. A failure to grapple with contemporary issues is now par for the course.

And this does matter. Studies suggest that as much as 10% of the public participating in an election are affected by media coverage. In other words, given the 4% difference in the referendum between leaving and remaining in the EU, the media misreporting, exaggeration of irrelevancies and prior position not to report positively on the EU may have been a critical factor in determining the result.⁸

⁷ In this context, the conduct of Viktor Orban, 'a talisman of Europe's mainstream right', could be considered to be to the left of Teresa May. The arguments in Hungary and the outcome – 100% acceptance of freedom of movement within Europe – illustrate the extent to which the UK Conservative Party should properly be regarded as an extreme right-wing faction.

⁸ For a US assessment of this see <<https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/effect-media-voting-behavior-and-political-opinions-united-states>>. This estimates a 7% effect. There is currently much on-line speculation in the US about the effect the media had in promoting Trump as a plausible candidate.

Education, education, education

Direct comparisons across the international spectrum are difficult but globally the UK is currently ranked around 20th in terms of educational standards. South Korea and Japan are the highest in the world; Finland, Estonia, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Poland are the best in Europe. None of these have 'free schools' or 'academies' on the UK model. In most of the EU the fees payable for attending higher education are much lower than in the UK – if students are charged at all.⁹

With literacy and numeracy lower than many other countries and a lack of information about how other similar countries manage their affairs (in part due to media misinformation), a significant percentage of the UK public are not well informed or advised about the decisions they need to take. So, is the 23 June outcome really surprising?

And such voters do affect electoral outcomes. One of the characteristics of contemporary politics is the search for the 'swing' voters, the people who 'make a difference', the people who – if you can somehow get through to them – will cast the votes that mean winning or losing. The media and pollsters are fascinated by this group. Normally referred to as 'undecided' voters, examples of these often appear on late night TV news programmes, responding to questions about how they *feel* about political personalities and issues; and, to a large degree, being coached through their answers – which in turn are conditioned by what the media does and doesn't report – by supportive moderators. The ruminations of 'Worcester woman', 'Essex man' *et al* are now keenly sought by those seeking office. As with Farage being given an equivalent platform to the PM in the EU referendum debates, how would elections in the past have turned out if so much publicity had been concentrated on those with no clear view or a chronic lack of awareness or interest in political issues?

As an example of this, the issue of immigration, which dominated the EU referendum, will suffice. The 'line' presented to the public (and largely unchallenged) is that the EU is uniquely responsible for the level of migration into the UK,

⁹ See <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-32608772>>.

thus causing the displacement of hardworking and qualified UK workers from jobs they could legitimately fill. Actually, the figures are different. The majority of migration into the UK has always been from outside the EU. Leaving the EU will not stop this and the UK work force isn't adequately educated or trained to work in the jobs currently occupied by EU citizens when the UK leaves the EU.¹⁰ Surely a better educated and informed public would be aware of this.

Degradation of politics

The business of politics has been degraded in recent years. Once it was expected that politicians would be 'in advance' of public opinion. One example of this was the decision to suspend (1965) and then abolish (1969) the death penalty. This position has been upheld ever since, despite public opinion being markedly different. Given this, the cross-party inability today to suggest that the public might have got it wrong with the EU referendum is very striking. It is either dishonest (given that 400 plus MPs favour remaining in the EU) or an ominous indication that the ground rules of political life have changed for the worse; and most MPs today feel unable or unwilling to put across a positive case if it goes against what is perceived to be public opinion.

As the membership of political parties has shrunk, so recedes the notion that within them balanced, representative and legitimate policies are framed. The Conservative Party now has no more than 130,000-140,000 members, mainly elderly and mainly in the south east of England. UKIP with less than 40,000 members, has an even more elderly and geographically concentrated membership. If the Conservatives and UKIP had to rely solely on membership subscriptions, neither would be able to function as significant national bodies.¹¹

One way of looking at the *impasse* the UK now finds

¹⁰ See <<https://fullfact.org/immigration/eu-migration-and-uk/>>.

¹¹ The funding, therefore, of the Conservative Party by City hedge funds is critical, as is the funding of UKIP by Arron Banks, much of whose wealth is based in offshore tax havens. Many may consider that funding any political party or campaign in this way should be illegal.

itself in must be that drastic changes are being enacted due to strife caused by (and within) two small, elderly, white English organisations. And it is a matter of great regret that the UK lacks robust political structures and processes that can resist crises instigated by unrepresentative minorities.

End game?

The position of those regretting recent developments in the UK is a mixture of public hand-wringing and private, desperate, *sotto voce* soundings-out of possible allies. Nick Clegg makes vague statements about wanting a Government of National Unity. But Clegg, who did a deal with the Conservatives in which very little was put in writing, and who supported Osborne's fatuous 'deficit reduction' tactics, may well be seen by many as being part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. In any case, with only eight MP's the Liberal Democrats are no longer in a position to do anything very much.¹² More serious are the machinations of Lord Mandelson and Tony Blair. The latter is reported to be making an announcement in early 2017 – by which time the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change will be up and running at its new London HQ – designed to rally support for remaining in the EU. To this end, he is reported to have had discussions with George Osborne.¹³

Although it is impossible to determine in any detail how the UK might 'remain in the EU', the overwhelming support for doing so among MPs, UK science, law, politics, education, industry, the City and the arts is such that such an outcome must remain a possibility. Or, if not 'remaining in the EU', are we talking of an EU exit on the Norwegian model (outside the EU, but actually inside the EU)? Erstwhile Cabinet Secretary Lord O'Donnell seems to think we might be, writing in *The Times* that we should seek membership of the European Free

12 See Nick Clegg, *Politics: Between the Extremes*, (Bodley Head, 2016). This was reviewed in *The Sunday Times* with the headline 'Fatally out of his political depth'.

13 See *The Sunday Times* 21 November 2016 and *The Times* 22 November 2016. Backing is apparently from Richard Branson and is 'substantial'.

Trade Area (EFTA) (again) and the European Economic Area (EEA) and then 'reform' both of these to our liking. In other words, having failed to 'reform' the EU we join another international body and attempt to 'reform' that.¹⁴

These desperate – and in the case of O'Donnell, preposterous – suggestions are regarded with derision abroad. The German Social Democrats regard Mr Corbyn with particular incredulity, pointing out that by falling in with an exit from the EU he is neither providing a credible opposition, nor reflecting the views of the 16 million people who want to remain.¹⁵ Further, he is ensuring that, should the UK exit the EU, and the results be disastrous, few people will have a motive to support the Labour Party, as Labour will be seen to have clearly allowed such an outcome. But anyone with knowledge of the left in the Labour Party knows that Mr Corbyn (and Mr McDonnell) are both anti-EU on the grounds that it is not 'socialist'.

So: 2017 should be an interesting time in UK domestic politics. With Blair and Mandelson (and Osborne too) heavily damaged goods, one supposes they will find other people through whom to pursue their goals.¹⁶

The election of Donald Trump as President of the US

14 For the O'Donnell intervention see *The Times* 27 and 30 August 2016.

15 See *The Times* 14 November 2016, 'German socialist attacks Corbyn over "big mistake"'.
16 The assumptions made about Blair's objectives are that he – and his supporters (many and wealthy) – will campaign actively for a second referendum, probably on the basis of remaining in the single market (i.e. the Norway option). While May will probably get an unhappy House of Commons to vote to serve Article 50 at some point in early 2017, it is not at all clear the EU would seriously negotiate, at all, if there was any chance of a second referendum. On the issue of being given a free hand to 'deal' with the single market and all other issues, May can't 'call' an election either, that action no longer being in the gift of the PM. She *could* take a vote on the subject to the Commons, lose it, say it was a vote of confidence, and, if it were not reversed within 14 days, go to the country. However, this would be a convoluted process. Are we – possibly – in the early stages of a realignment of UK politics? In the event of an early election will the Branson-Blair organization fund a pro-EU election campaign and fund pro-EU 'National Unity' candidates against Brexiteers?

represents a further blow to the political centre and left still reeling from the referendum result. The figures for the US Presidential election are even more depressing than those for the UK EU referendum. Clinton beat Trump by 65.8 million votes (48.1%) to 63 million (46%). Trump 'won' because of the way the US distributes the popular vote among its electoral college. With turnout as low as 55.3% this means that 110.6 million US electors didn't actually vote and Trump's support amounts to only 25.5% of the electorate. Those who talk about 'a new politics' (a peculiarity of UK and US commentators) might reflect that all this amounts to in terms of *actual* votes is a referendum being held in the UK without any regulations of its conduct; and a candidate in the US, who finished second by some distance, ending up as President because of that country's imperfect electoral system.

What this may mean for the UK remains unclear. However, the Trump team, many Conservative MP's and UKIP have at least one thing in common: all have a visceral dislike of the EU, regarding it as a quasi-communist entity with which they will have no truck.

In corporate management speak, we are going on a journey, caused by two countries with defective electoral systems; rather, than as some would have us believe, being propelled down a populist route by public demand. A wide coalition against acceptance of this as a *fait accompli* ought to be possible. For those with a sense of history the comparisons with 1931-1933 in Europe (when the NSDAP rose to power without ever winning a majority) are unnerving, while for those whose support of the traditional political establishment in both the UK and US has been badly rattled in the last year, the words of Edmund Burke, echoed by JFK, remain prescient: 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing'.

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