


The quadruple irresponsibility of Brexit

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Now that the United Kingdom government has started to clarify its intentions for life outside the European Union, we can increasingly see that the decision to withdraw from the EU is a quadruple irresponsibility. First, we have decided to tear up the economic relations that we have enjoyed for over 40 years, not just with the EU, but with every part of the world. Second, in its determination to avoid any chance for reflection or second thoughts, the government is taking high risks with our democratic constitutional institutions. Third, it is also risking legitimating the ugly xenophobic forces that are at present stalking the advanced world in a manner unseen since the defeat of Nazism. Fourth, we risk crippling the EU, an act that would bring both economic and general chaos.

Irresponsibility 1: the economic risk

The referendum was itself set up irresponsibly, in that it imposed no obligation on those campaigning to leave the EU to specify what they meant by 'leave'. Did it mean becoming like Norway, outside the decision-making institutions of the Union, but participating fully in the single market – a market in the construction of which the UK had, under Margaret Thatcher, been an enthusiastic participant? Did it mean leaving the single market but remaining in the customs union? Did British voters realise that our trade with the whole world and not just EU member states was governed by our membership of the Union? During the referendum campaign, after it and on until mid-January, no-one knew. A variety of different positions was advocated by different advocates of 'leave', and

in any case the leave campaign concentrated on two themes: a completely dishonest statement of how much money would be available to spend on the National Health Service if we left the EU; and spreading panic about immigration from EU countries by dishonestly linking it to the Middle Eastern refugee crisis, which was in turn linked to Islamic terrorism.

Since the leave campaign was not a party seeking to form a government, but groups of people who came together for the referendum alone, no-one carried responsibility for reconciling the many contradictory and confusing things it said. Nevertheless, the prime minister, who herself had barely participated in the referendum, has now declared that the meaning of the vote was clear: people voted to withdraw entirely from the single market and the customs union, and want to renegotiate from point zero our trade relations with the rest of the world. Anyone who expresses doubt about the feasibility of such a project is told they are defying 'the will of the people' (well, the will of the 52% of the 72% of voters who voted), and should shut up. Meanwhile the country will spend the next two years tearing up all our trading relationships, and several years beyond that trying to build up new ones – with all our potential partners knowing that we are desperate for deals.

Irresponsibility 2: Damaging the constitution

That insistence by the government and the nationalistic 80% of newspapers that support it that the referendum outcome closes all debate about the desirability of Brexit introduces a strange constitutional principle. In the UK we do not have a written constitution, and we have only a small experience of referenda. The law courts have ruled, against the government's wishes, that parliament must be involved in the process of leaving the EU – a decision for which the newspapers and some ministers described judges as 'the enemies of the people'. People are also called enemies of the people if they suggest that there should be a second referendum to cast a judgement on the outcome of the Brexit negotiations.

But parliament's right has been defined in very narrow, formal terms, just to legitimate the government in implementing the referendum decision, not substantially to question its wisdom. The June referendum, it is being argued, was a once and for all time decision; neither parliament nor the people should have a chance to revisit that decision. Since the referendum question said nothing about the future position the UK wanted to have in the world, only the prime minister has the right to interpret what it meant. The referendum was therefore a plebiscite, conferring extraordinary unchallengeable power on the prime minister. At the time of the referendum itself, no-one knew that this would be the case. If we have little experience of referenda, we have none whatsoever of all-empowering plebiscites. Even more extraordinary, the leadership of the Labour Party, disturbed that about 35% of its supporters voted for Brexit, has accepted the government's position on the irreversibility of the referendum.

Britain was once famous for its capacity to make compromises. It was that, it was often argued, that protected us from revolutions and dictatorships. This changed fundamentally during Margaret Thatcher's rule. She made compromise into a dirty word. When that is combined with the majoritarian nature of our voting system, it implies a further disturbing constitutional principle: that minorities, however large, count for absolutely nothing and should be ignored. The 48% who voted to stay in Europe are a very large minority, but there is complete rejection of the idea that any concessions at all have to be offered to them.

Irresponsibility 3: Flirting with xenophobia

Mrs May deduces her interpretation of the referendum to mean complete withdrawal from the single market because she argues that the outcome turned on the issue of immigration, and that the only way to limit immigration from EU countries is to withdraw from the single market. She is probably right in saying that immigration was a key issue, though she does not distinguish between hostility to immigration from the EU and panic about refugees and terrorists, which has nothing to do with the free movement of labour, but which loomed large in the campaign.

This brings us to the third irresponsibility: the UK's now more or less official participation in the global movement of xenophobia. Many countries in Europe are experiencing the rise of far-right movements hostile to foreigners of

various kinds and attacking organizations of international co-operation like the EU in the name of 'the return of patriotism' – as Marine Le Pen of the French Front National terms it. This is not limited to Europe; Donald Trump's movement in the USA is built on a virtually identical stance: hostility to Muslims; hostility to Hispanic immigrants; a determination to weaken international organizations, including the EU. Important individuals in the Brexit campaign worked with the Trump team, developing together ways of exacerbating public concerns about the presence of foreigners in both countries.

Both the Brexit vote and Trump's election have been followed by an increase in hate crimes of various kinds against immigrants and members of ethnic minorities. In the UK these have not been limited to attacks on people from EU countries, but have included dark-skinned people whose families originated in the British Commonwealth, especially Muslims, and extending also to Jews. This partly demonstrates considerable confusion in the mind of the British public over which immigrants and ethnic minorities had something to do with the EU – a confusion at which the Leave campaign had deliberately connived. But it also demonstrates something deeper and more worrying. The referendum provided a new language in which racist and xenophobic sentiments can be expressed without shame. One can talk about 'taking back control', 'regaining sovereignty from Brussels', 'protecting the culture of our communities', 'the will of the people', without making a single explicitly racist comment. But the coded meaning is clear – especially if, with Mrs May, one says that the referendum was mainly about immigration.

Of course, members of the government deplore the rise in hate crime, and insist that Brexit is about a Britain that is open to the world, the very opposite of xenophobia. And yet, at her Conservative Party conference in October, Mrs May made an extraordinary attack on people with 'liberal' attitudes. People who thought they could be 'citizens of the world', she said, were citizens of nowhere, and she implied that they were likely to have uncaring contempt for their fellow nationals. Behind that thought linkage has to be the assumption that human concern can be felt only for one's fellow nationals.

Which is her real attitude, that expressed to her party conference, or the theme of 'global Britain' that she presented to an international audience when she outlined her Brexit hopes on 17 January? Different audiences, different messages. Only a complete rejection of the former attitude can prevent her government and party from slipping into the same camp as the xenophobic forces that are rising in the rest of Europe and the USA. This will be particularly the case as we finally leave the EU and the negative economic consequences of that act accumulate; even those who believe that the UK outside the EU will be in a powerful position to build new trade relationships accept that there will be a difficult transition period. People will become angry that their standard of living is declining; and they will see that there are still many immigrants and descendants of immigrants in the country. Did they not vote to get rid of them? There will be a strong temptation on politicians who have accepted the new nationalistic rhetoric to blame immigrant communities for the country's problems. To what policies will that lead?

Irresponsibility 4: the threat to the EU

In her 17 January speech Theresa May stressed that it was in the UK's interests that the EU survive and thrive, and that she wished it no harm. However, she also said that, unless the 27 EU member countries were willing to give the UK everything it wanted in negotiations, Britain would become an offshore tax haven, with a low-regulation economy – implying (though not in so many words) that we would drag the rest of Europe into a 'race to the bottom' of social standards. This seemed like a threat to engage in self-harm, but the newspapers that support her interpreted it as Britain's threat to 'crush' the EU if we did not get our own way.

There is here therefore another ambiguity in the stance of Brexit protagonists: does the UK want to exist alongside a strong and stable Europe, or does it want to destroy institutions for European co-operation, reducing trade relations among European countries to trade wars, and with central European countries left alone and exposed to a return of Russian domination? The great majority of British people who voted leave probably do not care anything at all about what happens to the rest of Europe, but within the political class there is a division between those who want the EU to continue its vital work (they just don't want to help in it) and those who would like to destroy it. The UK's capacity single-handedly to crush the EU somewhat exaggerates the country's power, and one might have thought that this

was just a right-wing extremists' dream. But it is a dream shared by more powerful forces. Donald Trump has made clear that the break-up of the EU is one of his goals, and that he intends to use Brexit as the first step in this. Without a strong Europe, the USA could gain more unilateral power across the globe. This is why he is generally hostile to international organizations. Vladimir Putin would also like to see an end of the EU in order to regain various kinds of access to central Europe for Russia. For quite different reasons, Trump, Putin and Le Pen all want a world of competing, conflicting states without much in the way of intermediary institutions. The UK is in danger of slipping into their camp.

This is not one of Trump's idiosyncrasies, but a long-standing goal of US neoconservative opinion: if there are no international bodies but just individual states, then the US is clearly the most powerful force on the planet. We saw this in the position of the Bush Junior administration on the Iraq war. It demonstrated a refusal to accept decisions of the United Nations and the preferences of a majority of NATO members, and a determination to build 'coalitions of the willing' around and under the control of the US. And no government was more willing to help it in that task than Tony Blair's New Labour in the UK. British politicians pride themselves enormously on what they call their 'special relationship' with the US, which largely means doing what US administrations tell them to do in exchange for various minor favours. What chance does Britain now stand of adopting foreign policy positions autonomous of the US, when we are much in need of new trade agreements, and when the Brexit campaign shared so many ideas with Trump?

The return of imperial dreams

British governments seek through their relationship with the US to keep something of the global role the country enjoyed as the ruler of a vast international empire. By working closely with the US militarily and by running a joint global financial system, we feel we are still a global power. It is ironic that the Americans were the first people to rebel successfully against the empire, but the idea is powerful.

For the first three post-war decades British governments, Conservative and Labour, realized that we are better off without these lingering imperial delusions, and tried to teach us to accept the independence of nearly all the former colonies, that we are nowadays a regional European country – and that we should therefore be members of the EU. A minority on the left and the right never accepted this new vision, but they remained small – until immigration and perhaps wider anxieties about globalization led more people to listen to them. Nostalgia for the old British Empire, or at least a dream of turning the development, cultural and sporting body that is the British Commonwealth into a global trading bloc, stands behind Brexit and the willingness of many British people to accept its risks. A growing part of the political class is coming to believe that only EU membership prevented us from doing this. They forget that the Empire did not embody true free trade but a relationship with subordinate colonies. These countries are all fully independent now; they might well be willing to make trade deals with a UK desperate for them, but they will not be on generous terms.

This is the real danger for Britain of Brexit: that, with our judgement clouded by memories of the great days of the 19th century when we turned our backs on our neighbouring continent in order to dominate large parts of the world, we shall embark on a Quixotic attempt to reconstruct that situation as an economic future, leading us deeply into the embrace of a deeply worrying US presidency, and giving encouragement to the disparate forces – American, Russian, right-wing populist and Islamist – that would very much like to destabilize Europe at this difficult moment in its history. The battle cry of regaining 'sovereignty' dominated the Brexit referendum. Achieving this goal now means giving up our place as the second largest, full voting member of the EU in exchange for a minor, totally dependent, and entirely non-voting partnership with the US, at a time when that country itself is becoming highly unstable.

Photo: European Union