

Zugzwang: the need for a new conversation

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There is a scene at the end of Christopher Nolan's iconic 'The Dark Knight' where, hanging upside down over a precipice having seen his nefarious scheme undone, The Joker turns to Batman and declares "I think you and I are destined to do this forever".

And so progresses Brexit. Once again, we see a familiar scene played out in the media. In this case the setting was The Daily Politics, the leading Brexiteer top political philosopher and 'Penfold' from Danger Mouse lookalike Mark Francois, the Remainer 'luxury' 'communist' Ash Sarkar. The dialogue we will all be familiar with. One chants 'democracy', '17.4 million' and 'the will of the people'. The other retorts ambiguity, deceit, and some cannily-chosen quote from a leading Brexiteer intellectual to prove their point. Most commonly this is David Davis' one about a democracy's right to change its mind or Far-Age's 52:48 would be far from finished business.

Considering we are in a position of absolute political turmoil, it's quite astounding how boring the whole spectacle has become. A number of academics and commentators have started discussing Brexit as a form of collective mental illness considering the destabilising effect on politics and community. I however see it as something more prosaic; a form of drudgery, a purgatory to which we are exiled awaiting some magical route from the debacle. This is increasingly likely to be Charon's ferry considering Brexit's protracted nature.

The real issue here, both politically and socially, is we have managed to work ourselves into a corner from which there is scant choice that doesn't leave you in a worsening position. Political manoeuvring has seen some clearer demarcation emerge.

Johnson's Tory minority are pushing toward 'no-deal', Swinson's Lib Dems favour simple revocation, and Corbyn's ambiguity can only be translated as an attempt to capitalise on the initial success of the referendum itself. Each in their own way are playing safe, hoping to

attract a hardcore best able to exploit a first-past-the-post electoral system but failing to address enduring issues behind the crisis.

There is a term used in chess: zugzwang. It is used when a player finds themselves in a position where they have to move despite well knowing this action will place them at greater disadvantage. And so the cycle continues until the endgame. This is fundamentally where we see ourselves now, with no legitimate justification to either leave or remain.

To Remain would alienate millions of voters, risk migration to political extremes, and forever be smeared by cries of being undemocratic. Even were these risks mitigated, the UK's political capital within the EU would be so low any influence would be lost.

If we Leave, which in my view can only be achieved through no-deal, we execute an extreme form of Brexit favoured by a minority, risk an electoral response which would probably start the process of us re-joining sooner rather than later, and almost guarantee the dissolution of the Union.

More pressingly, we enter uncharted territory risking welfare standards both short-term through inflationary pressures and long-term through reduced bargaining powers for trade relations with larger partners.

The alternative, some cobbling together of meaningless hyperbole – 'Norway-plus', 'Super Canada-plus' – places us in a permanent limbo whose advantages even their proponents can't clearly articulate beyond the platitudinous.

So far, so grim. But beyond this is the reality the reasons for Brexit seem to have been lost in the conversation. Following the Lib Dem's conference, I felt it quite refreshing to see such clarity from Jo Swinson, particularly when we see both Conservative and Labour parties continuing to play with ambiguity to varying degrees.

Where they let themselves down however was by failing to follow this up with a portfolio of alternative interventions. Revoking Article 50 tells us what they are not doing, but what they are doing instead needs

greater clarity. This is the case for all parties as we meander towards a General Election.

In the series *Mad Men*, leading ad creative Don Draper had a simple mantra; if you don't like what people are saying, change the conversation. And this is what we desperately need to see over three years after the referendum. During the past 24 months, we have had a succession of damning reports emerge in relation to policy failures on employment, welfare, housing, immigration, and crime.

Yet the panacea to any and all of these issues sits fundamentally with leaving or not leaving the EU in the rhetoric of many. This is despite no Party providing a legitimate response to questions of how the process would and could benefit, either in the context of the aforementioned policy failures or in a broader sense.

This conversation needs to change as much culturally as politically. Over the last few weeks I met up with a number of friends I hadn't seen for several years. Every time the conversation was at least framed, if not dominated, by Brexit. And each of these conversations represents a microcosm of what is repeated *ad infinitum* on Question Time, The Daily Politics, Newsnight, or any number of other media platforms. I literally can no longer remember what we used to talk about before this whole fiasco.

Yet it's become ingrained, and regardless of whether we leave, remain, or negotiate some hybrid relationship, it will be the canvas for all political and economic interpretation probably until the majority of the adult population are dead.

So if nothing else, this blog is a call for a new conversation. A conversation which provides some foundation offering direct agency to citizens (not electorates) in a way reclaiming sovereignty philosophically resonated with so many.

The alternative is, like *The Joker* and *Batman*, we continue to witness what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. And replay the same conversation in perpetuity.