

What song will we be singing when the Brexit 'comic opera' finishes?

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Music is a great way to evoke emotion. Some of the best-known songs have the power to impart powerful messages and can instantly transport us to the past containing memories, both good and bad. Musicals and operas are a wonderful way to tell a story in which there will be a colourful array of characters and containing a roller-coaster of emotions ranging from pathos to elation. Anyone who has seen the stage version of *Mama Mia* will surely attest to this. Though Abba songs are emblematic of the period they were in the charts, they are timeless. In terms of comic operas, my favourite is The Who's *Tommy*.

Brexit, I'd suggest, provides an incredible story that, whatever the eventual ending, includes the requisite characters and narrative making it ideal for an opera. There would be, of course, the decision as to which characters are seen as embodying virtue and those who do not. However, one question will remain unanswered for, in all likelihood, is what will the last song to provide the inevitable crescendo that is expected at the end?

Such a song might evoke, as Brexit's adherents contend is possible, belief in the beginning of a new age of enterprise and opportunity in which everyone lives, more or less, happily ever after. Alternatively, the final song of a Brexit might, as detractors assert, herald an age of in which UK citizens experience reduced prosperity in a country of diminished influence? Perhaps, as some are inclined to believe, the final song of a Brexit opera might suggest bathos due to the fact that everyone simply compromises and wonders what all the fuss was about?

Despite the seriousness of the debate, it's possible to sympathise with the view that Brexit has become farcical. It begins to seem that every time a politician makes a pronouncement intended to clarify matters, they achieve precisely the opposite. Undoubtedly there are some

whose sole aim is to obfuscate and, in the case of one or two who come to mind, to be mischievous and create animosity.

Commentators over the last two and a half years since the referendum in June 2016 have grappled to try and show what the effects of Brexit may be. Though much of what has been suggested is speculative, there is almost unanimity – apart from among the diehard Brexiteers – that leaving/’crashing out of the’ EU without a deal, will have an immensely severe economic impact in the short, medium and long-term.

It’s this sense of impending disaster that is being used to create leverage amongst the main players in Brexit. Theresa May has invested so much in her withdrawal deal with the EU agreed, we should not forget, after two years of intense negotiation, that she’s surely deserves to be called Tina which the late Mrs Thatcher came to be known as for her doggedness in not compromising and, when asked if there were other ways to break any deadlock, would reply, “There is no alternative”

According to reports, Mrs May, is willing to entertain new thinking to potentially create a solution to the problem of leaving the EU that won’t create economic havoc. Her problem, as her predecessors as leader of the Conservative Party will confirm, is her limited ability to manoeuvre without incurring the wrath of the vociferous Eurosceptic wing of her own party.

May is acutely aware that though her legacy will be the way in which she achieves Brexit, she does not want to be remembered as the leader who split the Conservative Party in doing so. Above all else, she wants her deal to be supported by all parts of her party including those who, in 2013, an ally of former PM David Cameron referred to as “mad, swivel-eyed loons” If that comment is not worthy of song in my imaginary opera, by creatures in suitably eye-catching costumes, then I don’t know what is!

Once he knew the result of the EU referendum, David Cameron recognising the difficulties that lay ahead, was only too happy to resign. However, it can be assumed he’d have believed that opposition from the Labour Party might have been more concerted

than has proved to be the case. Brexit is as toxic for Labour as it has been for the Conservatives.

As commentators on Brexit have pointed out *ad nauseum*, many of those who voted to leave the EU were from previously solid Labour-supporting constituencies. These people's prospects could be made immensely worse by a poor or no deal when we leave the EU. Jeremy Corbyn, a politician whose background and beliefs make him ambivalent to the EU, has been happy for the Labour Party engage in what is known as 'constructive ambiguity'.

Constructive ambiguity is an approach famously used by the likes of Henry Kissinger and Tony Blair when engaging in negotiations based on solving intractable problems and involving parties with diametrically opposed views. It seeks to employ non-judgemental language effectively treading 'middle ground' to explicitly avoid conflict. By keeping the process going, it is assumed, those involved will eventually, with similarity to so called 'Stockholm syndrome', in which hostages develop a psychological alliance to their captors, develop bonds and shared understanding.

The problem with Brexit, it seems, is that there has not been sufficient sharing of meaning and understanding. This should have been an immediate priority once the referendum result was known. Instead, advocates and detractors of Brexit have retreated to their bunkers and hardened their positions. Indeed, since joining the EEC on 1st January 1973, there has been insufficient effort in getting people to appreciate what membership actually meant. Too often the narrative has been dominated by those who believe that this country is losing out in terms of sovereignty and being ripped off by faceless bureaucrats in Brussels.

Given the wealth economic data that is already suggesting that the economy is slowing down, including the Office for National Statistics announcing that last year economic growth slowed down to its lowest since 2012 and that services, construction and production all declined, there is surely enough evidence to indicate that leaving the EU is a decision to be reconsidered. The slowdown is a combination of uncertainty caused by Brexit and global growth, most particularly in China, stuttering.

Many economists believe that a global recession, which historically occur in seven- to-ten-year cycles, is overdue. Respected thinktank, The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), argue that the chancellor's announcement made in last year's budget that austerity was coming to an end, coupled with his pledge to reverse spending cuts, is in danger due to lack of funds. Any slowdown inevitably reduces tax revenue.

Analysis by the IFS shows that a minimum of £2.2billion is required to freeze all budgets and protect them from inflation. On top of this, though, Philip Hammond needs an extra £5 billion to merely ensure departments maintain services in line with the UK's rising population. Leaving the EU, economic data is telling us, will make is likely to make matters worse. Many are asking is this sensible for the country?

Over the weekend The Guardian reported that a cross-party group of MPs proposed that should Theresa May achieve a withdrawal deal, there could be a second referendum in which the decision to confirm it or stay in the EU. It has to be said that given all the portents we are seeing, not leaving the EU would induce a sense of relief. Accordingly, in an imaginary Brexit opera, the final song would celebrate avoidance of potential disaster. I'd speculate that many would be happy to join in the chorus.