Is there an 'invisible sun' to Brexit?

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Those who remember the early 1980s will note the reference to the song by The Police that was inspired by lead singer Sting's witnessing of events in Northern Ireland. At the time there was a belief that the hatred in the province was so intractable that contemplating peace appeared virtually impossible. Though the background to 'the troubles' were centuries the catalyst came in the late 1960s due to attacks on those marching for increased civil rights in terms of jobs and housing.

Invisible Sun was an evocation for a different future in which there would be better times if only we could look beyond the clouds of despair and hurt by communities engaged in conflict. Almost 40 years on from the writing this song, Brexit has induced the potential for conflict in all areas of the UK; including, worryingly, in Northern Ireland which has enjoyed over 20 years of peace following the Good Friday Agreement (GFA).

If injustice and fear of 'the other side' were powerful motivators in Northern Ireland during the troubles, it becomes ever more obvious that similar underlying perceptions were influential as reasons why many people voted to leave the EU in the referendum in June 2016., Research conducted by Dr Thiemo Fetzer, associate professor of economics at the University of Warwick, on behalf of the Social Market Foundation, *Austerity, Immigration or Globalisation: Was Brexit predictable?* indicates, a crucial determinant of a person's reason to vote to leave the EU was not their age or education, but their satisfaction with their personal circumstances and prospects.

Dr Fetzer's research includes data showing that in areas that voted strongly to leave, those who did so perceived themselves to have been unduly affected by the impact of the austerity measures that were introduced by the Conservative/LibDem coalition that came to power in 2010. And as the title of the report also suggests, many such leave voters felt that immigration had undermined their prospects in terms of impact on jobs and wages available.

Crucially, as this report also indicates, those who are poorest, and would traditionally have voted Labour, felt ignored by a party perceived to be far too willing to consider the needs of those other than themselves; particularly immigrants. Accordingly, Dr Fetzer concludes, such disillusionment led to increased support for UKIP whose central message was that continued membership of the EU had undermined this country's sovereignty and ability to look after its own people.

In the fog of argument that has characterised the debate around Europe for generations, facts are often distorted to suit whoever employs them. And there can be no doubt that once the referendum was called, those advocating leave were always going to argue that change in terms of departure from the EU offered opportunity for improvement. On the other hand, those arguing that we are should remain appeared less willing to embrace such. Criticism that leaving the EU increased economic risk were seen as imagined 'project fear'.

The red bus proclaiming that £350 million would be saved each week was hugely important. Saving this money, according to advocates of leaving, could, instead of being used on vanity projects to improve the prospects of other parts of the EU, be dedicated to assisting impoverished areas of Britain. This played well with the disaffected; as did the notion that the EU was an institution that was undemocratic and contained thousands of overpaid bureaucrats.

Over two and half years on from the EU referendum of June 2016, the Latin expression, *res ipsa loquitur,* meaning "the thing speaks for itself", comes to mind. As we are seeing, the reality of departure from the EU, 'hard' or otherwise, is beginning to become apparent. The decision by Nissan not to build a new model in Sunderland, an area of high unemployment and social deprivation, suggests that those who voted to leave having been seduced that their prospects would improve, are likely to be disappointed.

Manufacturing, an industry that back in 1981 when the Police released *Invisible Sun,* made up 30% pf the British economy. It is now roughly a third of that size and those running firms in this sector are seriously concerned that Brexit is undermining its capability in terms of investment and international competitiveness. As many

commentators assert, Nissan is effectively declaring that it has no confidence in the government's strategy of securing a 'soft' Brexit' to secure the interests of manufacturers and those within the its supply chain.

Worryingly, other major manufactures may decide that keeping operations in the UK isn't worth the hassle or cost, especially if the UK adopts WTO (World Trade Organisation) rules in the event of a no deal. Indeed, last week, The Institute of Directors (IoD), which represents over 30,000 firms, reported that 29% of a survey of 1,200 members felt that Brexit posed such a significant risk to their business in this country that they have already moved part of their operations elsewhere in the world or are actively planning to do so.

In Dublin there is a maxim that you know how upbeat the city's economy currently is by the number of tower cranes that can be seen. In the last year that number has increased significantly due, in no small part, to the intention of major businesses to relocate there. Barclays decision last week to move £166 billion of assets there because it "cannot wait any longer" to implement its Brexit contingency plan, will no doubt keep construction firms in Ireland busy. Meanwhile in the UK it has been announced that growth in the construction sector is down to ten-month low.

Sting was optimistic that things would get eventually better in Northern Ireland. The 1997 peace agreement was due to the dedicated efforts of brave politicians such as the SDLP's John Hume as well as former prime ministers of Britain, John Major and Tony Blair, and Ireland's leaders, particularly Albert Reynolds. When the GFA, an international agreement between the British and Irish governments, was achieved, no one envisaged a day when either country might no longer be part of the EU.

Brexit has achieved something that, hitherto, would have been unthinkable. If a hard border were to be re-imposed between Northern Ireland and the Republic, it would break the terms of the GFA and potentially set back peace that, sadly in many communities, remains all too fragile. It should never be forgotten that over 3,500 people lost their lives and tens of thousands were injured (some extremely seriously.

When remembering the troubles, it should also be remembered that, as the line goes, "the devil makes work for idle hands". Far too many of those incarcerated during the conflict were young people whose job prospects were, to all intents and purposes, hopeless. Perceived injustice and deprivation were powerful tools in the hands of the malign. No wonder one spokesperson from a dissident republican terror group welcomes Brexit; "the harder the better!"

If there is an invisible sun to Brexit, it's certainly taking its time to appear. In *Austerity, Immigration or Globalisation: Was Brexit predictable?* Dr Fetzer contends that those who voted to leave didn't want a no-deal Brexit. Instead he believes, "They probably want some sort of deal that means Britain leaves the UK without more disruption to public services and resources."

Many projects dedicated to assisting the economic prospects those in areas of deprivation in the UK were funded by the EU through ESF (European Social Funding) and ERDF (European Regional Development Funding). In the aftermath of Brexit no one is certain whether such funding will continue to be available. The irony of Brexit is that it has the potential to make those who are poor in the UK, and who, it seems, voted to leave the EU, even poorer. In these most worrying of times the expression "be careful what you wish for" never seemed more apposite.