

Life after Brexit – is genuine change really possible?



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Brexit really seems to have become ubiquitous to our lives to the extent that it's hard to remember what it was like before the process commenced. Though there can be absolutely no comparison to those who lived through the horror and privations of the second world war, we look forward to a time when 'hostilities' end and, it is to be hoped, a better future emerges for all.

Imagining what a post-Brexit Britain will look like, however, is fraught with difficulty precisely because, currently, it's hard to certain what will actually happen. Indeed, in the increasingly febrile process that Brexit has become, the possibility of not leaving the EU seems increasingly feasible.

Nonetheless, regardless of the eventual outcome of the process that is Brexit, 'fault lines' have been exposed in politics and society that have surfaced simmering tensions and resentments that will not be easily assuaged. Crucially, whatever deal – or not – that is eventually

struck concerning the UK's departure from the EU, there is a pervading sense that there needs to be radical change in the way that democracy and accountability is administered so that people, or our systems of governance, particularly outside of London, truly believe that their concerns are heard.

It's important to reflect that among the many reasons advanced as to why there was a majority in favour of leaving the EU, was a pervading sense that politicians in Westminster no longer know what really goes on outside the closeted and rarefied environment in which they exist. Though this is undoubtedly unfair to the vast majority of hard-working MPs who are dedicated to representing their constituents, the fact is that too many consider the machinations and drama of parliament to be too distant and irrelevant to their lives. This, coupled with our simple majority voting system which favours those winning a clear simple majority tends to alienate those whose votes were cast for candidates other than those elected.

Recent events and the current paralysis in terms of deciding what the terms of our departure from the EU suggest that the major political parties are more interested in point-scoring and engaging in interminable debate. Many people are surely asking, what difference will all of this make to my life? A cursory glance at newspapers suggests that they are distinctly unimpressed.

Words such as 'shambles', 'fiasco', 'farce' and 'disgrace' appear in articles written by journalists who report from constituencies outside of London. One, Richard Littlejohn writing in that bell-weather of middle England, *The Daily Mail*, makes it clear his understanding is that among those he talked to in Harrogate there is, he believes, 'utter contempt' for politicians and that Westminster 'now feels so remote from them, and their everyday concerns, that it might as well be the Moon.'

That people outside of parliament feel that the Brexit process has become something of an irrelevant sideshow 'pantomime' is another word that has been used and politicians are unable to form a clear view is unsurprising. Brexit is exposing the fact that, as far as traditional politics and parties are concerned, old allegiances and tribalism have no truck.

Since the heady days of 1963 when Harold Wilson opened a debate on science at the Labour Party conference in Scarborough in which he spoke of the opportunities offered by the 'white heat of technology' there has been considerable change. Industrialisation of the 60s was followed widespread disputes in the 1970s.

The widescale de-industrialisation of the 1980s, brought about in no small part by Margaret Thatcher who appeared to have no sentiment traditional industries and was convinced that finance services and 'Big Bang' in the City of London, created a lingering resentment among many communities whose future opportunity for advancement through employment disappeared. Promises made by successive governments to recognise such long-standing concerns and to address high unemployment in the regions has, despite a hopscotch of disjointed efforts, not led to long-term solutions in which all UK citizens feel they are being treated equally.

That those afflicted by the austerity measures introduced by George Osborne in 2010 in his quest to solve the budgetary deficit caused by the Global Financial Crisis were willing to vote no to remaining in the EU as a protest against government is, in retrospect, hardly a surprise. Arguments based on economic modelling that leaving would simply make the prospects of such people even worse cut no mustard. Political consensus, if ever it existed, is dead. The Brexit vote was if nothing else, a clarion call for something different. The question is, of course, what?

Writing in *The Guardian* last week, commentator Fintan O'Toole suggests that Brexit represents the unravelling of an imagined community [the United Kingdom] and the 'visible collapse of the Westminster polity [as well as] the result of the invisible subsidence of the political order over recent decades,' More stridently O'Toole believes that what we have witnessed since David Cameron's decision to call a referendum on continued membership of the EU is that the 'old system' is in its death throes in and that the 'fissiparous four-nation state cannot be governed without radical social and constitutional change.'

O'Toole is not the first commentator to identify that Cameron's ill-fated decision may lead to the breakup of the union. Constitutional expert Professor Vernon Bogdanor, Professor of Government at King's

College, has written *Beyond Brexit: Towards a British Constitution* to be published by Tauris on 7 February writing in *The Guardian*, cites an EU Select Committee of the House of Lords that declared the EU to be 'in effect, part of the glue holding the United Kingdom together since 1997'

Whilst many may mourn its passing, there is a compelling argument that the time may be right, especially in the aftermath of 'hard' Brexit for each of the four nations to go it alone. Such a vista does, of course, raise the question of what will happen in England which, as any student of history will tell you, until the reign of King Canute between 1016 and 1035, was effectively constituted of a number of autonomously and separately ruled regions/states.

Let's not forget that Westminster's overweening influence over the country only really took place as a consequence of its ability to raise taxes in the aftermath of the industrial revolution. Since then, as many, especially elder statesman Lord Heseltine contend, Parliament has effectively drawn money out of the regions and redistributed as it saw fit. It's hardly a revelation that some regions feel the 'settlement' they receive to be unfair; some would suggest derisory.

Events and perceptions suggest that the time is right for a radical rethink of the way in which English regions raise taxes locally that are, logically, spent to maximise benefits in their area of influence. If nothing else, Brexit's legacy should be a major overhaul of the political system that is utterly committed to demonstrating that change benefitting individual regions through increased investment and creation of meaningful and well-paid jobs more fairly is the overriding objective.

If such a model seems radical, it is seminal to remember that Germany's economic success is built on being a federal republic consisting of sixteen states (Länder), originally drawn up after the last war by the American, **British**, and French governments in 1949. In such an arrangement there would still be a role for Parliament for federal matters including, *inter alia*, foreign affairs and defence. That such a change to the political system will be complex and create very different England is accepted. The question that must be asked, is why the status quo that has failed should continue?

American anarchist and political activist Emma Goldman (1869 – 1940), cynically proclaimed that, “If voting changed anything, they’d make it illegal”. Brexit, it should be recognised, has created an opportunity to radically alter a political system that, it is widely accepted, is no longer fit for purpose. Whether politicians recognise this fact is debateable.

It’s surely the case that many, regardless of the outcome of Brexit, would dearly love to get back to the state of affairs that existed before the referendum. However, though the expression that ‘turkeys don’t vote for Christmas’ may seem apposite, history is replete with instances of politicians who wilfully ignore the mood for change and paid the price.