

## **A diminished Isle?**

### **Dr. Steven McCabe**

Exactly five years ago the UK public were asked to vote on continued membership of the EU. This vote, we were told, would be a way of deciding whether we wished to continue to be members of an organisation whose roots can be traced back to the chaos produced in the second world war.

The result of the referendum, held on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016, to leave, was achieved with a majority much less comfortable than would have been desirable for a democratic process which potentially could result in a decision with far reaching consequences. As we're only now beginning to realise, the desire by those who supported leave by the 'hardest' means possible, and who now control government, is resulting in a profoundly altered relationship with our closest neighbour and who, lest we forget, so much was endured to achieve freedom from the tyranny of the Nazis 76 years ago.

When historians look back as the period we're living through, they will have the benefit of hindsight. They will, at least have data showing exactly how damaging the vote to leave has been, predictions of which, prior to the referendum and in the years immediately afterwards, when a withdrawal agreement was being negotiated between the EU and UK, were cited by advocates of leaving without any deal, and instead switching to WTO (World Trade Organisation) rules, cited as being typical of what they disdainfully referred to as 'project fear'.

The diminution in trade between the UK and EU, particularly in food and drink sent from this country, has shown a marked decline. £1.7 billion of produce was exported to the EU in the first quarter of 2021. Compared to the first quarter of 2020 this represented a fall of 46.6%.

However, in early 2020 Europe was struggling to cope with the first wave of the pandemic and trade disrupted. Comparison with 2019 provides a better comparison. This shows an even more marked decline of 55.1% representing a decline of trade in food and drink of approximately £2 billion. In a world of big numbers, such losses are significant and, without recovery or replacement by demand from other markets outside the EU, may result in firms going out of business and jobs being lost.

Little wonder many commentators suggest that the immediate consequence of no longer trading with the EU on rules that had existed previously, departure has been disastrous. Dominic Goudie, who's head of international trade at the FDF, believes what we've seen already following trade barriers implemented on 1<sup>st</sup> January following the end of the transition gives us a "very clear indication" of what is likely to be faced in the longer term.

What's notable is the cabinet members from the PM downwards, all of whom were selected by Boris Johnson for their adherence to his purview of how to depart the EU, by implementing a trading relationship that is as close to leaving without a deal as possible, appear to believe such a dramatic dip in trade with the EU is unproblematic. Indeed, and with a consistency as unnerving as it is wrong-headed, they continue to claim freedom from the shackles of EU bureaucracy will unleash pent-up entrepreneurial talent allowing 'Global Britain' to do deals with countries outside of the EU.

Notwithstanding the impact on trade with the EU, problems emerge in a range of other areas. With depressing regularity, commentators stress the fact that all of these were as predicted prior to the referendum being held and that the vast majority of issues could be resolved by greater willingness to seek to align more closely with EU regulations for the sake of trade, jobs and, in the case of the most difficult part of the leaving the EU, the part of the UK which has a land border with the EU, the North of Ireland.

Two years ago, I was involved in editing a book, *Bordering on Confusion*, in which a number of eminent contributors considered the impact of how the border in Ireland could, if ever, be satisfactorily resolved following any departure of the UK from the EU. Apart from those who hoped that such departure would lead to reestablishment of a hard border in Ireland, in order to 'protect' the status of the six counties of Ulster as part of the UK, all commentators stressed how absolutely critical it was to avoid any semblance of checks on the border for goods.

It was the desire to avoid checks on the Irish border which, under PM Theresa May, gave birth to the notion of the notorious 'backstop' which, in the absence of any other solution, would have resulted in the UK remaining in the Single Market. The backstop proved toxic to the diehard Brexiters who, citing their desire to maintain the integrity of the union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, sought to destroy it and, in the process, its chief advocate, Mrs May.

This is what has led us to the creation of the Protocol which was intended to deal with trade in particular goods flowing from GB to NI and which, the EU strenuously argued, because of food standards, should not be allowed to cross the border. This was, it should be remembered the basis of the deal sold to the electorate in December 2019 by PM Johnson which would represent a "great deal".

Analysis by future historians of the UK's departure from the EU will surely focus on the way this objective was contrived by the use of arguments that were, at best, mistaken and, as many cynics contend, simply lies. That one of the chief proponents of leaving the EU was Boris Johnson, whose adult life is characterised with misdemeanours, stating falsehoods which, on two occasions resulted in him being sacked, is significant.

That Johnson was able to achieve a majority of people to vote for something that's already proving to be so disadvantageous to many and which, because of the slavish adherence to dogma which characterises the approach of supporters of leave, should have been a matter of concern. Though comparisons with the way in which Adolf Hitler and his obsessive Nazi supporters seized power in 1930s Germany are very wide of the mark, it becomes possible to see how 'clever' oratory used to present appealing arguments meant to seduce can be highly effective.

Equally, that having achieved the vote in the EU referendum five years ago, having deposed Mrs May who, to her credit, understood the magnitude of what Brexit would mean, especially in terms of Northern Ireland (and gave him a cabinet post), and is now PM presiding over a country he states has ambitions of being a global player, we should be concerned about where the aspirations are taking us.

Though undoubtedly a man scorned, Dominic Cummings, widely acknowledged to be the 'brains' behind vote leave and who, until sacked as his chief adviser last November, a key component of Johnson's success in becoming leader of the Conservative Party, PM and winning the 'Get Brexit Done' election in December 2019, provides warning of what we should expect. Johnson, according to Cummings is "a pundit who stumbled into politics and acts like that 99% of the time".

Significantly, and with resonance to what many others have said about Johnson, notably including ex-Tory grandee Lord Michael Heseltine, Cummings argues government under him as become like "a branch of the entertainment industry" and that serious policy and change will not occur until he leaves.

The UK, it seems, is under the influence of someone whose approach has deliberately engendered upheaval and turmoil, but which was sold to the electorate as a way to improve their lives. Adoption

of 'Trumpian' tactics have worked in getting him to the job Johnson always craved. However, where will it take us in the future. Though easy to be pessimistic, it's essential we see the current phase as a form of transition.

Johnson and the coterie of unctuous ministers he's surrounded himself with will not last forever. The future, we have to hope, will be one when a different form of government is possible. Whatever one may have thought about previous Conservative administrations, it could not be argued they were led by people whose integrity was, largely, beyond reproach and whose interests were in ensuring the UK continued to be seen as a serious player on the international stage.

It is a sad state of affairs when the UK is led by a man who publicly pronounces willingness by his government to undermine and disregard parts of an international treaty he so enthusiastically endorsed when asking voters to vote for his party to achieve Brexit and allow us to move on. That this treaty, formulated to maintain a peace achieved in Northern Ireland after so much pain and suffering was with a group of countries whose origins may be traced to the utter catastrophe Europe endured because of the evil of the Nazis, makes the discomfort all the more intense.

Johnson, born in New York on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1964, and who privileged education included schooling in Brussels, where he was also a correspondent for the Telegraph, and whose former boss, Sir Max Hastings, warned us what to expect, might, following his recent marriage in Westminster's Catholic Cathedral, consider the examples of those who strove to achieve peace.

Boris Johnson would do well to consult the life story of French statesman and devout Catholic Robert Schuman who because of his "heroic virtues", especially as a founder of Modern Europe, it's reported, is being considered by leader of the world's Catholics, Pope Francis, for sainthood.

As well as playing a role in the founding of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 1949, Schuman proposed collaboration between European countries to ensure avoidance of future conflict. Creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1957 by France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, and which led to the EEC (European Economic Community) and EU in 1993, was initially proposed by Schuman in 1950.

Schuman's influence, is so seminal that the day his plan, known as the Schuman Declaration, was announced, 9<sup>th</sup> May, is celebrated as Europe Day.

Falling out with neighbours is something no sensible person is usually assumed to want to achieve. To engender conflict which results in loss of trade and good working relationships with those with whom, until recently, you enjoyed immensely valuable trading relationships seems fool-hardy in the extreme.

Arguments about establishing notional sovereignty as well as the desire to create lucrative trade deals with far away countries in preference to a trading bloc on our doorstep seem peculiar, especially in the light of sustainability and reduction in greenhouse gases.

Though those sceptical of Europe will not share my enthusiasm for the dream of a united Europe, the convulsions this country has undergone in the last five years, and which show no sign of abating, considerably reduce the UK's international importance and influence. This was apparent at the recent G7 summit held in Cornwall when, it's rumoured, American President Joe Biden demonstrated his commitment to continued collaboration and peace throughout Europe.

Johnson's government's arguments of the benefits of an independent UK free of the EU's bureaucracy and interference run contrary to Biden's aspiration.

As such we become a diminished isle.