

Death to the Centre for Brexit Studies?

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I have just 'returned' from the British Academy of Management conference. And by returned, I of course mean I've logged off of Zoom. This year's 'conference in the cloud' provided the usual interesting array of presentations and speaker. Amongst these, prize position went to Henry Mintzberg, Professor of Management Studies at McGill University, and ruminations on his latest book 'Rebalancing society: radical renewal beyond left, right and centre'.

Hearing from a luminary such as Professor Mintzberg is always enlightening, and his reflections on the state of the world, the disruptions created by populism in certain nations, and the challenges facing liberal democracy were insightful. During his talk, he raised issue with the performance of our current PM, candidly asking "I don't know why you put up with him?".

This question can be applied more broadly to the quality of politicians in general these days. We are now in the unenviable position of having a cabinet populated by shamed personnel or professional failure; Johnson himself, Pritti Patel, Gavin Williamson, Robert Jenrick. But beyond these individuals, accusations of a broad lack of vision, of ideas, of understanding, and of competence could be fairly pointed at all parties.

In the absence of such competence, it is little wonder we resort to faith-based policy rather than coherent plans and detail. By this, I mean we revert to positions underpinned by antiquated notions of 'left' and 'right' and reinforced through snappy but largely platitudinous slogans; 'get Brexit done', 'for the many not the few', 'take back control'. Each of these presents a proposition which is hard to disagree with, and each without substantial detail is meaningless.

It is therefore little wonder we find ourselves walking ever faster toward the much-vaunted cliff-face of 'project fear'. A series of stories appeared this week on either last-minute knee-jerks or post-horse stable door bolting as the realities of no-deal reach fruition^[i]. Rod McKenzie, MD of the Road Haulage Association, has repeated his

calls for the Government to address its slow progress over necessary infrastructure to mitigate the border challenges of either deal or no-deal^[ii].

The reason for this failure is fundamentally rooted in faith-based politics. And it seems an odd position considering the ongoing secularisation of the UK. Mintzberg's notion of reform beyond left and right is perhaps here important to revisit. We have over the years of our enfranchisement become locked-in to ideas of state- or market-led coordination and their hackneyed pros and cons. These are being unpicked before our eyes; as a centralised model of European 'socialism' empowers greater levels of localised democratic involvement, the neo-liberal UK under a banner of renewed sovereignty seems hell-bent on centralised control and continued marginalisation of stakeholders.

The question here is perhaps best summed up by Latour & Lepinay; *"And what if the choice had never been between Market and State...liberals and socialists, but instead between those who believe in the miracles of a pre-established harmony and those who refuse to believe in miracles?"*^[iii].

So whilst we are led astray by Candidians run amok (so named after Voltaire's eponymous anti-hero), where are the Rationalists, those focused on detail and process as much as objective? In the wake of Brexit, a number of research centres and thinktanks were established to provide insight on the challenges of leaving the EU and how the UK might restructure afterwards; the cross-institution UK in a Changing Europe (UKCE), LSE's Brexit 2020, our own Centre for Brexit Studies (CBS) to name a few. And yet with the direction of travel since 2016 and the current administration's approach, we can only conclude the impact of such insight has been at best negligible.

Such projects have rightfully sought to make sense of the chaos surrounding Brexit, asking important questions around both cause and consequence. Seeking some form of objectivity through being inclusive, apolitical, and non-partisan is a noble and worthy cause; in an environment where disinformation is weaponised and a reduction in citizen rights and protections is sponsored by citizens themselves, these platforms – and the people within them – have a responsibility

to be political, particularly as their Tufton Street alternatives have no such reservations.

This brings me back once again to Henry Mintzberg. Asking the question why we put up with clowns like Johnson, the answer is because little alternative is given. Characters like Johnson and Trump are not so much embodiments of a public swell, rather the fatberg which gathers in the absence of informed and intelligent discourse.

Because part of the systemic failure is about failures of the political class and parties. But as significant a part is a failure of civil society and of civic leaders to participate. We happily sit on the sidelines – observing, documenting, hypothesising, judging? – but don't commit enough to actually get in the water. And as we observe and document – enhancing our careers with exciting publications making sense of the unfolding chaos – we are as complicit in the decline of British democracy as its entitled architects and oligarch benefactors.

I would sooner see UKCE's Anand Menon PM over Johnson. LSE's Sara Hobolt Foreign Secretary than Raab. CBS's David Hearne Chancellor instead of Sunak, and Alex De Ruyter special trade adviser over Tony Abbot! Each of these options are infinitely superior alternatives, but requires the liberation – and wilful participation – of our experts to grace the political arena.

So burn down the Centre for Brexit Studies, and unfetter our academic experts and specialists from commitments to the apolitical and non-partisan. Because what is necessary now is not rumination from a secure (moral) high ground. We need the integration and application of this specialism in both the minutiae of the restructuring process and the direction of public discourse.

Disclaimer: The views expressed within this blog are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Centre for Brexit Studies and Birmingham City University.

[\[i\] https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-03/government-gets-power-to-build-brex-it-lorry-parks-across-england?sref=yMmXm5ly](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-03/government-gets-power-to-build-brex-it-lorry-parks-across-england?sref=yMmXm5ly); <https://www.businessinsider.com/brexit-food-companies-warn-boris-johnson-has-missed-labelling-deadline-2020-9?r=US&IR=T>;

[09-03/u-k-races-to-fix-critical-gaps-exposed-in-brex-it-border-plan?utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic&cmpid%3D=socialflow-facebook-brex-it&utm_content=brexit&utm_medium=social](https://www.bbc.com/news/09-03/u-k-races-to-fix-critical-gaps-exposed-in-brex-it-border-plan?utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic&cmpid%3D=socialflow-facebook-brex-it&utm_content=brexit&utm_medium=social)

[\[ii\] https://news.rha.uk.net/2020/09/04/brex-it-government-are-sleepwalking-into-a-disaster/content.html](https://news.rha.uk.net/2020/09/04/brex-it-government-are-sleepwalking-into-a-disaster/content.html)

[\[iii\] Latour, Bruno and Vincent Antonin Lépinay. 2009. *The Science of Passionate Interests: An Introduction to Gabriel Tarde's Economic Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.](#)