

The Damned Don't Cry

By Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design and Economic Acceleration (IDEA) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University

The title of this blog is based on the American film noir crime-drama released in 1950 directed by Vincent Sherman starring Joan Crawford, David Brian, and Steve Cochran. It is based on the story of Ethel Whitehead/Loran Hansen Forbes, the character played by Crawford, who seeks to find a way out of her tedious lower-middle-class life through involvement with the boss of a crime gang George Castleman. Ultimately, she falls foul of Castleman by falling in love with his arch-rival Nick Prenta.

Brexit, it increasingly seems, is likely to lead to a number of serious consequences for the UK if, as is speculated, and because, if either contender for leadership of the Tory Party is unable to renegotiate the Withdrawal Agreement, and fulfils their promise to allow this country to 'crash out' of the European Union (EU) on 31st October. Though 'hard' Brexiteers have long claimed that the predicted negative effects of a vote to leave the EU were overplayed, so called 'Project Fear' there is universal agreement that the economy will suffer an immediate downturn.

Indeed, recently published data suggests that whatever happens, we are likely to see production and services shrink leading to, quite possibly, economic decline and a fall in GDP for the remainder of this year; technically recession. This is the damage that has already been done to the UK even if we were not to leave on October 31st.

The chances of a 'no-Brexit' by which it is cancelled are, on the basis of what is being stated absolutely unequivocally by the two contenders for the Conservative Party leadership, Jeremy Hunt and Boris Johnson, pretty much zero. Moreover, though they acknowledge that a 'no-deal' will be harmful to the UK, in that, *inter-alia*, the abandonment of trading relationships that have taken the best part of half a century to establish, this is a price worth paying to fulfil the will of those who voted to leave over three years ago.

If we indeed do leave the EU without any deal in place by the end of October, the UK's fate may be resonant with that of Ethel Whitehead who' having been seduced by the promises of increased prosperity and enjoying the fruits of different relationships, discovers instead unhappiness and downfall. Whitehead is willing to take a risk after finding herself in what she considers a hopeless situation after the death of her young son and married to someone whose prospects as a labourer are not great.

As we know only too well, the reason why we are leaving the EU is complex. What we do know is that a majority of those who voted in the referendum in June 2016, offering a binary choice between leave and remain, plumped for the former. And as many, many commentators, myself included, have reflected, what 'leave' actually meant was never entirely clear.

It is speculated that whilst some of those who voted to leave felt that the EU represented an expensive and highly bureaucratic organisation that offered poor value to the UK on the amount it is required to contribute. Undoubtedly, some may have voted to leave due to varying forms of xenophobia. For such people, leaving the EU represented the long-cherished objective of so called 'Eurosceptics' who have always existed within both the Conservative and Labour parties.

However, a significant proportion of those who voted to leave, particularly those living in areas of long-term decline and deprivation due to the closure of 'traditional' industries, normally believed to be Labour 'heartlands' were probably motivated by a sense of grievance. This grievance was borne of having been, as they perceived, forgotten by politicians in Westminster and mistakenly thinking that money they could be spent on them was instead being used to assist others.

Perhaps, just perhaps, if those living in areas abandoned by industry in the aftermath of the Thatcher 'revolution', and seeing that the opportunities offered to them and their children were severely limited may have felt the same hopelessness as Ethel Whitehead. Lingering resentment at the vastly increasing imbalance in wealth that exists between the north and south of England may have been primary among the reasons for voting to leave an organisation that appeared

to do little or nothing to assist you or your family. When you feel you have little to lose, why not try something different.

The dilemma for many politicians in both Labour and the Conservatives – members of the European Research Group notwithstanding – has been in finding a way to respect the result of the referendum whilst supporting a withdrawal that achieves this objective with as little harm to the economic prospects of the majority of citizens as possible. ‘Squaring this circle’ was the underlying principle that was at the heart of the withdrawal deal negotiated with the EU that she was responsible for and which, after having been so comprehensively rejected by Parliament on three occasions caused her to resign.

Within the next couple of weeks we will know who the 160,000 members of the Conservative Party have voted as leader and, by virtue, Prime Minister to take over from Theresa May. Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson not achieving his long-held ambition of becoming PM is seen as an odds-on certainty. Over the weekend I heard some Tories speaking ‘off the record’ that they were disappointed at how poor his opponent had been in giving Johnson a tougher time

Observing hustings Johnson and Jeremy Hunt have attended so far tells us that should the EU refuse to offer better set of terms governing the UK’s withdrawal, neither will renege on their promise to take the UK out of the EU on 31st October with no-deal. Hunt’s declaration that he would do so with a “heavy heart” presumably gained him few additional supporters among members and will hardly bring comfort to those who are likely to be negatively affected.

One of the surprises of the last three years has been how consistently the divide between those who voted to leave and to remain has stayed. It would have been assumed that given the evidence that has been presented showing that any deal will make the UK worse off would have swayed people to revise their view that voting to leave was a good thing. However, as polls appear to demonstrate, though there would seem to be small majority who would favour remaining, the shift is not particularly significant.

If polls before the June 2016 referendum had been believed, there would have been a different outcome. Had the decision been to

remain it's likely that David Cameron would still be PM and the last three years have been dedicated to dealing with the systemic and structural problems that blight large swathes of the UK. That stated, Cameron and his 'chumocracy' never really showed much interest in dealing with the poverty and inequality that was exacerbated by savage cuts in public spending in the name of austerity.

The vote to leave in June 2016 begat Theresa May who proudly proclaimed her intention to make things better for all to make life easier for the 'JAM's ('just about managing). Significantly, May's hero, the first previous female PM elected in May 1979, babbled something similar and quoted Saint Francis of Assisi. Thatcher spent the next eleven years in 10 Downing Street overseeing a widescale destruction of traditional industries creating attendant social consequences that are regarded as one of the reasons that many people living in such areas voted to leave.

If these people perceived themselves to be damned then so be it. Let's face it, after Thatcher and John Major they got a 'New Labour' government under fresh-faced Tony Blair who, despite all the rhetoric of "being tough on crime, tough on the causes" was as disinterested in supporting industry as his immediate predecessors. And after Blair these people were given Gordon Brown whose commitment to reducing inequality and poverty is well known but was undermined by ferocious hostility by the press and the devastation of the global financial crisis.

So, in July 2019, over 40 years from the election of uber-neoliberal and monetarist Thatcher, and barring something spectacular – given recent events rule nothing out – we will have Boris Johnson as PM, someone whose economic policy is as incoherent as his belief that leaving the EU without a deal will not cause economic chaos and damage to a large number of companies. Add in the potential for a return of violence in Northern Ireland should there be a 'hard Brexit' and it's extremely hard to see how the lives of the damned will get better; quite the contrary.

Johnson's latest statement that he wishes to give Britain back its 'mojo' may be welcomed by his supporters in the Conservative Party. I can't see the disgruntled citizens living in areas of decline and deprivation cheering. Maybe the damned should consider joining a

significant proportion of the population in weeping at prospect of PM whose only objective has been in achieving his own self-aggrandisement.