

A glimpse into the bankrupt soul of a nation; why I now back ‘no-deal’

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I have just returned from a long weekend in Austria. It was planned as a much-needed respite from the escalating onslaught of Brexit, alongside a final hurrah into Europe ahead of the looming spectre of ‘no-deal’. In reality, we got only as far as the hotel lobby before the erstwhile John Bercow, resplendent with psychedelic tie, was festooned across the communal TV screen.

Aside from that stark greeting, the weekend passed Brexit-free. We spent more time in the past, as one cannot help considering Vienna’s museums, art galleries, and grand architecture, but brief interludes in the present illustrated limited interest and concern relating to Brexit. Little was mentioned in the press we cast our eye across, or on the news channels we briefly viewed.

Of course, the level of exposure to the effect of Brexit between EU countries seems to bypass most Brexiteers, rooted in a binary ‘us-and-them’ mentality (see the University of Birmingham’s analysis^[1]). It may however be indicative of a malaise, and perhaps fatigue, amongst political, economic and public actors over the whole issue. Whilst business representation organisations have been forthcoming in their concerns around contingency planning amongst UK businesses^[2], uncertainty has also seen a reticence for movement amongst SMEs in France^[3]. This is also however the result of a difficult realisation for the British – Brexit is not the only issue in town.

If we categorise Brexit as a primal scream of the marginalised escalating since the global financial crisis, liberalisation of financial markets and mass unionisation of British industry, the extent of response to these concerns has been fundamentally muted. Brexit proves the perfect smokescreen for political failures to address very deep-rooted and complex problems through reduction to the unquestionable domino effect of leaving the EU.

This is off course an utter fallacy, and one which Leavers have been worn down to admit. I have written previously of the potential effects Brexit may present for the most at-risk groups and communities[4]. At a time when the Joseph Roundtree Foundation estimate one-fifth of the UK population regularly find themselves in poverty, and 1.5 million are destitute[5], the callousness of calls to pursue a course of action which knowingly increases hardship seem unconscionable.

This however reveals something very uncomfortable about the British (yes, I mean the English...). Perhaps one reason French SMEs don't take no-deal mitigation more seriously is a faith in presumed British pragmatism. This seems fundamentally misplaced in both current and wider contexts. A few years ago, I went to a Bonfire Night display with some German friends. When explaining its historical roots, it was difficult not to surmise the seemingly innocuous event at which we encourage children to play with sparklers was at its heart a festival of religious intolerance where we ritually burn the effigy of a (framed) Catholic martyr. So much for immutable British 'fairness'.

Back in 2011, in response to the global financial crisis and resultant climate of austerity amongst national governments, I observed an interesting phenomenon. In France and Germany, coalitions of the wealthy actively petitioned their respective governments to tax them more in order to maintain services for the most vulnerable[6]. The same community within the UK instead held its tongue, favoured by the policy-position of a newly-elected Conservative coalition focused on framing the low-hanging fruit of benefit claimants and immigrants to rectify our economic woes.

Fast-forward to 2017. We see a humiliated Theresa May declaring her will to address 'burning injustices' faced by many citizens. This she saw as material in her losing the Conservative's majority (simultaneously picking up an extra 2.3m votes...). Six days later, burning injustice took an all too literal turn. Forward again to 2019 and we are living through a time during which almost 100 of the Grenfell Tower families have yet to be rehomed[7], homelessness has risen by 169% since 2010[8], knife crime escalates[9], poor diets and declining living standards have seen the re-emergence of 'Victorian' diseases[10]. Universal credit, wage stagnation, Windrush and the 'hostile environment'; the list goes on.

Such escalation is marginalised on the political agenda, as political and media classes toady to both the architects of a campaign won on lies, deceit, manipulation and illegality and the increasingly 'gas-lit' 17.4m. Similarly shameful is the response of UK citizens. Whilst the French create a *gilet jaunes* movement to protest vocally, and justifiably, for economic justice, our equivalent are modern-day Black-shirts appropriating symbols of fraternity to pursue the most divisive form of politics.

Were a second referendum held, I would vote remain again. If, however, we are to leave it should be on no-deal terms. Because it is only under these conditions, through this clean break, that collectively the British (English) will bear up to their failures. Re-emergence of jingoistic politics, of an inherently and unfailingly 'Great' country, is both cruel and callous in a climate where so many citizens are forsaken. No-deal represents the final nail in the coffin of a poorly ennobled 'United Kingdom'. Continued overt focus on economic issues, rooted in macro perspectives as is the tendency of the neoliberals bankrolling Brexit, fails to recognise the endemic separation of economic performance from citizen welfare. And there is little I see from either the proposed benefits of no-deal or the capability of domestic policy-makers to address ongoing 'burning injustices' of state-sponsored poverty and workplace exploitation. The economy may respond fine, but those most in need of its patronage – demographically, spatially, sectorally – will see little benefit but the fast regression to a Jacob Rees-Mogg and his "European Research Group" – sponsored feudal system. In an environment where we have so casually allowed ourselves to be consumed by lowest common denominator politics and political philosophies, the ignobility of no-deal seems a fitting reward.

[1] https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/the-implications-of-brexit-for-the-uks-regions/?_ga=2.85187088.841190261.1553102443-285320151.1553102443

[2] <http://www.cbi.org.uk/cbi-prod/assets/File/FINAL-Brexit-preparedness-survey-write-up.pdf>

<https://www.fsb.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/small-businesses-entirely-unprepared-for-chaotic-no-deal-brexit>

[3] <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/should-french-smes-be-better-prepared-for-a-no-deal-scenario/>

[4] <https://centreforbrexitstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2017/11/17/occupational-obsolescence-and-the-leave-vote-is-there-a-correlation/>

<https://centreforbrexitstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2019/01/15/the-year-of-living-divisively-a-brexit-polemic/>

[5] https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2018?gclid=EAlaIQobChMI4Lc3PGN4QIVDr7tCh05HAMtEAAYAiAAEgJM1fD_BwE

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/29/tax-us-more-say-wealthy-europeans>

[7] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/grenfell-tower-fire-families-housing-christmas-kensington-chelsea-council-theresa-may-a8696941.html>

[8] <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/england/the-homelessness-monitor-england-2018>

[9] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42749089>

[10] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/victorian-disease-gout-rickets-vitamin-d-mumps-scurvy-measles-malnutrition-nhs-hospital-admitted-a8795686.html>