

# The cult of Leave: fuel for the ‘fyre’

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I have just spent an evening with the Netflix documentary on the much-maligned Fyre Festival. It's a fascinating insight into ambition, fraudulence, and self-delusion. As the story unfolded, I found myself with one lingering question. The event was conceived by an unscrupulous individual with clear delusions of grandeur and little consideration for the potential impacts of pursuing his folly unplanned. In preparation however, the festival recruited a collection of key personnel with significant industry experience, all of whom in the documentary expressed reservations about the amateurish lead coming from the organiser and thus likelihood of success. In spite of this, all these industry specialists ran along with the project until its inevitable failure, in the process adopting some close-to-unconscionable practices.

Of course, in such environments the dissenter often finds themselves undermined when challenging decisions. In the case of the Fyre Festival, compliance with the failing project was underwritten by individuals' professional interests, from simply getting paid to involvement in a high-profile event. Part of the success of such ventures is however a fundamental question of belief, key to this being a social and emotional indoctrination and investment which makes it increasingly difficult to back out the further one ventures down the rabbit hole.

In a period during which the rug has been further pulled out from under the virtue of leaving the EU, cries from the ramparts of opportunities presented outside the bloc have if anything increased in volume. The rhetoric has however somewhat shifted. Gone are boasts of Brexit dividends delivered by liberated trade policy and reclaimed financial contributions. In its place is that of the Blitz spirit renowned for chivvying Brits through periods of hardship, recalled with such fervour it's hard to believe most Brexiteers didn't experience it first-hand.

This shift has run parallel to some serious blows for the Leave camp. JLR is cutting 4,500 jobs, Nissan has reneged on further investment in

Sunderland, Dyson is moving its HQ to Asia, Barclays is redeploying significant assets to their Dublin operations. Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf recently ran with the headline 'Brexit Goldmine' in reference to increasing UK jobs offshoring for the Netherlands[i].

Of course, these events have nothing to do with Brexit but instead relate to wider economic conditions and corporate management issues, we are assured by Jacob Rees-Mogg. In many respects, this statement is accurate. Related to these events are changes in market demand and expansion for firms, corporate decisions cognisant of such evolving and fluid conditions. Whilst these may not singularly be about Brexit, to insist the event is not material in their implementation is at best naïve.

As erstwhile Leavers continue chants for a 'global Britain', the escalating risks posed by annexing the nation from a supra-national bloc are becoming more prominent. The extent to which the UK depends on EU agreements to gain preferential access to many non-EU markets has seen growing attention, a fact missed by prominent Brexiteers (see James Dellingle's omnishambles of an interview on Andrew Neill's show)[ii]. Of greater significance is the harsh reality of the complex and integrated nature of trading relationships. Outside a supra-national block, how attractive the UK is for prioritising new arrangements is questionable (see Alex de Ruyter's blog, 8.2.19)[iii]. In addition, there is a failure to recognise any such arrangements are not simply bilateral agreements, but incorporate a range of parallel considerations shaped by existing trading arrangements, current national economic conditions, and broader strategic objectives determined by political and industry influences – the impact of trade deals in India here acts as a cautionary tale[iv].

Such particulars are naturally lost on the Leave faithful, caught up instead in quasi-religious fervour shaped by varying indefatigable beliefs in the free market and the nation-state. This is perhaps why we find such reticence to accept emerging concerns. Amongst what seems to be a growing proportion of Leave supporters is a fundamental reliance on the power of belief. At a recent talk by the artist Grayson Perry, he discussed the intelligent form of manipulation used by the architects of both Brexit and similar populist movements in the West. One of these architects, Breitbart, sum this up with a simple mantra: politics is downstream from culture. Conventional

political movements have relied on the continual reapplication of an orthodox framework lifted from Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign; 'It's the economy, stupid'. To counter this message, populist movements have instead activated a powerful mix of fear and sentiment in relation to traditional values.

Equally prominent here is the general absence of any form of solution. Like Voltaire's *Candide* outside Lisbon, our Leavers witness the oncoming tsunami but remain steadfast in declaring "all things are for the best in the best of all worlds". To defend this seeming irrational position, the most emotive of terms is employed; these are patriots. In the US TV show *Parks & Recreation*, a cult worshipping the lava-spewing lizard Zorp the Surveyor name themselves 'The Reasonabilists' to avoid criticism, as it would seem people are attacking those committed to reason. The term 'patriot' is similarly adopted by pro-Brexit supporters, campaigners, and media. Despite significant structural flaws presented by exiting the EU, particularly in relation to an increasingly inevitable 'no-deal', the stock response to any critique is accusation of negativity and not "believing in Britain". In place of horizon scanning and contingency planning, instead we need just be steadfast and hold the faith.

It is this tendency I find probably most disturbing. The key political parties representing us are the result of political movements and identities formed through centuries of discussion and debate. At the heart of them are political philosophies of substance; outdated perhaps, but with a foundation of historical documentation and critical debate. In its place we see something akin to a cult rather than a political movement, offering little constructive input beyond an intractable faith we will endure through soundbites and hollow truths over rational debate. Continuing rejection of reason moves beyond cries of fake news and post-truth politics; it is a regressive renaissance of faith over reason, and the path to a second Dark Ages.

[i] <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/3130837/brexit-goudmijn-duizenden-banen-en-miljoenen-onze-kant-op>

[ii] <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/media/2019/01/watch-no-deal-brexit-james-delingpole-hasn-t-read-trade-rules-he-s-calling>

[iii] <https://centreforbretitstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2019/02/08/postcard-from-australia-part-1-marvellous-melbourne/>

[iv] <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/business-others/asean-fta-review-shows-india-got-almost-nothing/>