

Brexit: The Uncivil War – what The Centre for Brexit Studies thought

It's almost three years since Great Britain voted to leave the European Union. We are yet to leave, almost everything to even do with Brexit is still very much ongoing and I think BBC Politics reporter Chris Mason hit the nail on the head when he said 'I haven't got the foggiest idea...ask Mr Blobby'. However, this didn't stop Channel 4 from creating a two hour long programme, Brexit: The Uncivil War, which aimed to show 'behind the scenes' of both sides of the Brexit camps in a dramatised special this week. The programme is essentially fictional, but based on fact. Actors play the key figures (Boris, Nigel, David etc) alongside real life clips from the likes of BBC News. This combination of the two made it unlike any other Brexit based programme to have graced our screens since June 2016.

We asked members of the Centre for Brexit Studies team to share their opinion on the programme...

Bethan Tolley, Communications Officer

Is it bad of me to know that something will be fairly good if Benedict Cumberbatch is in it? He of course made the role of Dominic Cummings his own, although at times his accent was all over the place. At times the programme was so dystopian-like, that if I hadn't have lived through the EU Referendum, I could have been mistaken for assuming it was another kooky episode of Black Mirror. I loved the combination of fictional and fact, and that for me, it didn't seem to be biased of either side of the argument. What hit me like a brick in the programme was that this is the first time that a programme has been made around Brexit, which isn't arguments on the Andrew Marr show. In fact, not many shows have been made about huge political events even in my lifetime, which then made me realise that those early morning hours on June 23rd, 2016, really was a moment in history. Watching it, it was the first time that I realised that children will be learning about this in school in years to come, and in fact, there is a real need for more programmes like this.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that normal, hard-working people would rather watch a drama than a political debate.

Which makes the programme more needed than ever; to give people an insight into what really happens behind the scenes, without all the jargon found on actual political programmes. After the show, I searched the hashtag on Twitter. Many people didn't really know what to make of the episode, but I thought it was better than I could have imagined. However, what really struck me though was the amount of people stating that the drama missed out many key facts. However, I don't believe that it is Channel 4's or writer James Graham's job to do so. It is fiction based on fact. If the great British public are in need of finding out all the key facts, surely there is one huge gap in the market for a whole host of investigation series and documentaries to do so. And if that's the case, I'll be first in line to watch them. Roll on Brexit TV!

Professor John Mair, Visiting Professor

Close encounters of the Cummings kind...

I was not surprised to see Dominic Cummings at the centrepiece of the Channel 4 Brexit drama. He was firmly at the centre of the melodrama of the June 2016 Referendum. When I was editing 'Brexit Trump and the Media (Abramis 2017)', I quickly found that he was the spider at the centre of that web. I approached him for a contribution to the book. At first he just simply ignored my emails then became alternatively tempting and evasive. No commitment at all. Eventually publication came and went and no Cummings chapter! He did though email to say he was 'looking forward to reading it!' Nothing since.

Strange man. Evil genius? Hardly surprising that the then PM David Cameron (remember him?) called him a 'career psychopath' when he got Michael Gove to sack him as his SPAD at education. Cummings later got his revenge served cold as 'The Uncivil War' showed so well.

Steve McCabe, Director of Research Degrees

The ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus (525 BC – 456 BC), whose forte was tragedy, is believed to have originally penned the quotation that, "In war, truth is the first casualty". Though Brexit is not actual war, the potential exists for repercussions to feel like as if are.

Brexit: The Uncivil War, demonstrates that in the 'cut and thrust' of the, frequently acrimonious, debate that occurred prior to the June 2016 referendum, what passed for 'truth' had many interpretations. Moreover, as is made clear, the guile of those involved in presenting arguments as to why the UK should leave the EU, particularly on the issue of immigration, proved to be no match for 'flatfooted' politicians who advocated the belief that remaining was in the national interest.

Perhaps in the fullness of time, David Cameron will occupy a place in history resonant with Guido (Guy) Fawkes and have his effigy burned in faux homage for having launched the referendum which, as we are now seeing, has blown apart British politics and caused divisions that may take generations to heal.

Brexit: The Uncivil War demonstrated that following a protracted period of austerity there was a fertile environment for the belief that membership of the EU has made working people poorer. The fact that a good many of those behind the campaign to leave are 'toffs' made no difference.

Dominic Cummings *et al* were able to use data analytics and social media to harness distrust of Europe among three million voters not registered to any political party. Such voters had become disenchanted with traditional politics and parties. And among these largely older people the leave campaign tapped the longstanding view that Europeans, who the UK saved from Hitler, are not sufficiently appreciative of how 'great' Britain was and, crucially, should still be.

The film exposes a sense of the campaign to leave that was ruthlessly single-minded in its goal to take back control from Europe. If Cameron conceived the referendum as a way to assuage concerns about continued membership of the EU, he failed. Brexit has created wounds in society and the political system exposing the nastiness of nationalism we'd hoped had been consigned to the dustbin.

On the other hand, if the leave campaign hoped to create chaos and stasis in effective government through taking back 'control' of the UK's destiny, they have succeeded. However, it's hard to see how all but a select few will enjoy any benefit. From that perspective Brexit is a tragedy worthy of being penned by Aeschylus.

Nigel Taylor, Visiting Industry Fellow with the Centre for Brexit Studies

The temptation was to sit with a check-list of pro-remain conspiracy theories and tick them off as 'Brexit: the Uncivil War' aired on Channel 4 last night. After all, C4's news intelligentsia is consistently unabashed and rather smug in its remain rhetoric. Indeed, the Guardian's Carol Cadwalladr was vociferously wolfing down 'the facts' from last night's show and unleashed a twitter storm of righteous howling as each of her theories were 'proven'.

Imagine my surprise then, the subject matter itself was the question of moral ambiguity surrounding political data mining and micro-targeted advertising. The plot's lack of bias is adequately summed up in today's headline reviews, Telegraph: Thumbs up, Guardian: Thumbs down.

There were of course a few passive-aggressive swipes that the leavers were 'baddies' and the remainers consequently 'goodies', and of course the lampooning of Banks/Farage was to be expected, but generally the plot focus on Dominic Cummings's psyche and his disruption of British political campaigning was refreshing.

The Zack Massingham character (AggregatIQ) only subtly hinted that this isn't anything new. He blithely suggested that President Obama's campaign had already written the book on this. They had. The thought of Craig Oliver being portrayed as a mild-mannered hero is amusing in itself, however the crux of the moral message revealed itself as Oliver confronted Cummings over a pint on his 'dirty tactics'. Dirty tactics I'm sure if you are on the wrong side of the result.

Let's not kid ourselves, political campaigning has always been persuading and influencing the electorate. It used to be that politicians would knock on your door, take out adverts and appear on TV. Does that mean they have always been telling the truth doing it the old-fashioned way?

The question raised was clear: Should digital campaigning be our future political landscape? Last night suggested influencing at micro-level is the inescapable future. While many are crying foul over this

new digital approach to campaigning, I would suggest that the same people are seeking ways to own and control it, by fair means or foul.