

Handle Brexit well, for the sake of European democracy

By Ferry Biedermann

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The Dutch are known as practical people, pragmatic seafaring merchants, at least that's how we like to present ourselves. Nothing reflects that practical, pragmatic bend better than the little-heralded doing away with the consultative referendum in July this year.

What had started as an attempt by befuddled centrist politicians in 2014 to bolster the public's trust in democracy, was barely allowed to survive beyond infancy after it became clear that it was in danger of becoming a tool for populists and might even lead to a Nexit vote. So, Brexit, in a way, killed the Dutch referendum.

In fairness, only two plebiscites had taken place under the short-lived law, one initiated by the right, on the EU association agreement with the Ukraine, and one that enjoyed more left-of-centre support on the new electronic surveillance law. Majorities voted against both the proposed treaty and the law, only to see their objections being addressed through changes that were cosmetic at best.

Thus, an initiative that started out mostly as a way to assuage the public's mounting disillusion with traditional politics, ended up only contributing to it. The stated reason for the annulment of the referendum law was that it undermined the system of representative democracy. Clearly it did, in more ways than one.

Seen from the mainland, Brexit cannot be uncoupled from the by now well-known litany of modern political plagues: Trump, fake news and Russian meddling. Recent revelations about Russian interference and alleged links between the leave campaign and Russia have not even raised that many eyebrows on the continent, as we had for some time assumed this was the case.

This spectre, as well as the overall turmoil in Britain has for now put a break on other EU countries' movements to leave the Union. This abating of the threat of a potential further breakup started with the Dutch general elections in 2017, in which anti-EU parties didn't manage to break through, and was then affirmed by the French presidential elections. This year's Italian election that led to a Eurosceptic government was mostly seen as a blip.

However, this might be too rosy a picture. First off, mostly right-wing Eurosceptic parties are still a powerful force in European politics. The Dutch PVV, led by Geert Wilders, might not have broken through but did come second, while there are now several smaller right- and left-wing parties egging on Euroscepticism. France might be out of play for now but other

countries, such as Austria, are drifting ever closer to the Eurosceptic camp, and of course there remains, as mentioned, Italy.

Still, it looks as if, at least for the duration of the Brexit negotiations, the UK will be met by a relatively solid pro-EU front from the other countries. Brexiteers must be aware of this, otherwise they'd try to delay negotiations for as long as possible rather than push for a quickie hard Brexit.

On the other hand, there's the second vote initiative from the remain camp, which appears slightly bemusing. If it's referendums that brought us to this impasse, it's hard to see how another one will remedy the situation. Wouldn't it be better for representative democracy to reassert itself? Even if in the UK case this would involve the unlikely scenario of the Tories campaigning for Brexit and Labour for remain in a snap election.

Writing about the Dutch giving up on referendums when parliament in The Hague first voted on it in February this year, the FT's Tony Barber mentioned former Brexit secretary David Davis: "In a 2002 House of Commons debate he called poorly managed referendums "a dangerous tool". Dutch leaders would agree with him 100 per cent."

Evidently they, and leaders of many other European countries, would. Yet, there remains a nagging feeling that the time bomb of public disaffection with politics has not yet been defused. French pollster Jérôme Fourquet was quoted in an article in *Le Point* at the end of July as saying that the apparent victory of the pro-EU forces in Europe, stemming from the Brexit disarray, may be a pyrrhic one because it fans the discourse among Eurosceptics that democratic decisions will be subverted.

Neither a second vote nor a change of heart by Parliament will do anything to counter this sentiment. The most that Europe can possibly hope for from the UK – at the best of times not an easy fit in the EU anyway – is to suck it up for now and deal with Brexit honestly and transparently, in the best tradition of representative democracy.

Austrian author Robert Menasse, who set an award winning novel in the EU bureaucracy, in a recent article in the German daily *Die Welt* quoted an "anglophile" Brussels official: in fifteen years' time the UK will beg to be readmitted, "pretty please".

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