

Reluctant Referendum Reflections

Today's British referendum will be best quickly done and dusted, one way or the other. Election campaigns tend to stoop occasionally to the gutter but it is not encouraged and usually quickly decried. I think the British like to think of themselves as moderate, balanced and well-mannered when it comes to politics. Alas, the referendum has exposed deep veins of nastiness in British society. Maybe this exposure is a good thing in the long run, but for now it makes uncomfortable viewing. One of my cyber-interlocutors has suggested very politely that I have been hinting at my opinion without clearly stating it, suggesting that there is a certain duplicity in this. A fair call, so despite my love for the Australian practice of a 24-hour moratorium on political debate the media before a vote, here is an answer of sorts. Some will resent clergy giving their opinion, being "lectured to", but why should we have less right than others to state our opinions and why we hold them?

Personally, the decision which way to vote has been a long time settling. There are arguments on both sides that deserve careful consideration, and the reduction of so much of the debate to bluster, invective, ad hominem attacks, sloganeering and meme-based propaganda has made cool examination of the issues very difficult. The referendum is not about Boris, Cameron, Farage or even Jo Cox MP (may God grant her rest). Dare I say it, I do think Jo Cox is indirectly a victim of the emotive nature of the referendum debate. For one mentally unstable man the emotiveness of it all seems to have pushed him over the edge. There have been some clever quips and ripostes, of the sort one hopes for in a British political campaign, both from the major players and also in the online debate in Facebook and Twitter. Yet some people have revealed sides of themselves I would not have guessed at, and which are often disturbing. That some of them are active and committed Catholics is dismaying.

To my imperfect eyes there appears, on the one hand, the claims of the "small is beautiful" school of thought. Mega-states, large and remote governing bodies, and the consequences of global economic compromises do indeed have their downside and some very un-Christian aspects. Some Christians, rightly or wrongly, would even raise the spectre of One World Government, which is seen as a tool of the Antichrist. It is not my argument but that does not mean the issue should not be raised, if only to be dismissed. The problem with macro-government, centralised, remote and unwieldy, is that it has little ability to respond in good time to local demands, needs and crises. The lumbering machine must rouse itself, get up speed and then enter into the often tortuous process of negotiation and compromise. There is something very attractive about small central government, and decisions being left to as local a level as possible. There is much to be said for the economic machine to be as locally-based as possible. There is so much that Distributism has to offer here, but that is another debate.

Yet, on the other hand, the danger of the return to a predominantly local vision of political and economic development is that insularity so quickly follows. That narrowed vision can lead to nationalism, and from there it is too often a short step to xenophobia and isolationism. Whether we like it or not, technological advances in computing, communications, and transport have brought the world

to our doorstep, and across the threshold of our awareness. When Russia sneezes, we feel the spray pretty much in real time. Moreover, so many of these nations into which so many want to retreat are relatively modern constructs, and the outcome of conflict, compromises for peace, just as the EU itself is. As the Flemish and Walloons fragment we can see that Belgium is a delicately-poised nation that could dissolve sooner than we think as so many of its citizens identify with an ethno-linguistic group rather than with the nation of Belgium.

To what, then, should we justly be directing our patriotic fervour here in Britain: to the United Kingdom? To England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland? To our counties? To ancient kingdoms like Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria? Where do we draw the line? Surely, if Britain votes Brexit, it has laid down at least in principle the basis for its own fragmentation. If Brexiters stand on the right to greater self-determination and freedom from centralised control, then what will they say if it turns out that English voters support leaving but Scottish ones support remaining? Surely it would be only just, then, to allow Scotland again to decide if it wants to stay in Great Britain if Britain has overridden Scottish desire to stay in the EU. And this time they might just vote to do so. If that is what the majority of all the British want then fair enough. But is it?

Some argue that the EU lays on Britain a complex and oppressive blanket of micro-managing legislation. In many respects this is no doubt true, and sometimes annoyingly so. But is it all bad? It can be argued that EU legislation has improved the environment, protected workers, enhanced regional cooperation and preserved peace in Europe. And of course, Britain sits at some distance from the EU compared to most other members. It is not part of the Eurozone, for example, and Britain has also opted out of the Schengen Agreement, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and the area of freedom, security and justice. Britain has not contributed to the bailouts of Spain or Greece. In other words, Britain does not have to do everything that the rest of the EU does.

Immigration has been a live-fuse topic, one that often stokes the fires we should rather not stoke. Yet if we were to leave the EU, that does not mean the government would necessarily restrict immigration any further. We already take very few asylum seekers compared to the rest of Europe. Our rate of asylum seekers is 185 per million, lower even than Iceland and Switzerland (who are not in the EU). Immigrants are less likely to claim benefits and make a net contribution to the economy of £20 billion. Many immigrants are temporary and do the jobs that locals seem unwilling to do, especially in the agricultural sector and the NHS.

A huge concern is that no one can give a clear picture of what Brexit will look like, how it will proceed, what effect it will have on the economy and social cohesion and vital services like hospitals, defence and security. We have been warned by so many major international bodies, think-tanks and commentators that Brexit would worsen our situation rather than enhance it. In effect, the process of departure would be in the hands of the politicians, those same politicians that Brexiters are labelling as liars and charlatans.

A vital question is whether Brexit would make us more Christian. There is no evidence at all that it would. Jacob Rees-Mogg opined that we give money to the EU which then funds abortions in Africa. Awful, it has to be agreed. But does Britain itself not fund abortions? In 2011 97% of abortions were funded by the NHS.

The EU has immense faults, but so does the British government. The EU was founded by people seeking to ensure Europe would not tear itself apart ever again, and central among them were the devout Catholics Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gasperi, and Konrad Adenauer. St John Paul II said of them in 2003:

How can we underestimate, for example, the fact that in 1951, before beginning the delicate negotiations which would lead to the adoption of the Treaty of Paris, they wished to meet in a Benedictine monastery on the Rhine for meditation and prayer? (Address to European Christian Democratic politicians in 2003)



It cannot be denied that the EU has grown beyond their original vision, and that Christianity has been marginalised in it. Is that reason to be abandon it? Is Britain any more Christian, despite being officially and constitutionally Christian? One huge blessing of this referendum, should Britain stay as nearly all of Europe wants Britain to, is that it would empower the forces of reform within the EU. The EU will not want any other countries attempting to leave the Union, and the resurgent Christianity in eastern Europe might be allowed a stronger hand in shaping the EU. For the same reason, we can be sure to be punished if we leave. Europe is not so tied to us in trade as is claimed. The US, China, Japan, Korea would all be able to supply much of what Europe gets from Britain.

Today, the celebrant at Mass made a brief and oblique reference to the referendum in preaching on this feast of the martyrs Sts Thomas More and John Fisher. As Europeans, he asked, what would they make of Brexit? Who knows?! But what we do know is that both of them refused to allow local, temporal and passing concerns override an allegiance to something greater and more permanent. Of course the EU is not the Church, nor as important as it. But in Henry VIII's destruction of the Catholic Church in Britain to satisfy his personal dynastic dreams we can discern the seeds of Britain's later isolationism. Catholicism, once the natural and unquestioned faith of the whole nation, was thereafter tainted with the brush of treachery, and after that with the brush of foreignness. The prejudice against Catholics still

has not died.



St Thomas More: “I die the king’s good servant, but God’s first”.

Catholicism sees things beyond national boundaries, which is the huge and real advantage it has over the Orthodox churches, mired as they are in their own, often petty, national interests. It sees that in this world we have no abiding city, and that our real sovereignty lies not in our nation but in our God. Nations come and go, as do leaders, as do prosperity and peace. God alone abides, and he bids us be faithful above all to Christ and his Body the Church, wherein only will we find true peace and prosperity. I prefer to be influenced by Adenauer, Schuman, Fisher and More than by Johnson, Bamford, Cameron, Corbyn or Farage.

Whatever happens today, may it prosper peace and the building up of God’s Kingdom.

Fr. Hugh