

## The myth of an inevitable Brexit must be confronted and challenged



Brexit, it ain't necessarily so: The myth of an inevitable Brexit must be confronted and challenged

Despite Lib Dem dissent and doubts in the liberal media, there appears to be a virtual consensus among England's political establishment that the result of the withdrawal process is not in doubt. Scotland's leading historian believes this is a myth that must be punctured

For more than 40 years, my generation lived through the Cold War and the threat of The Bomb; perhaps nothing can be quite as frightening as that possibility of nuclear annihilation. When the Soviet empire collapsed, it seemed to us that Europe was entering a long-term era of peace and freedom, and we looked forward to the spread of democratic government across the central and eastern nations of the continent.

The transformation did not come without growing pains, as the former Yugoslavia descended into savage ethnic conflict. But even that horror eventually came to a peaceful end due to the intervention of Nato forces and the hammering out of peace deals acceptable to the former combatants.

Harmony returned to Europe, buttressed not only by the military alliance of Nato but by the enlargement of the European Union (EU). Its founding fathers saw the creation of a common market after the Second World War as a bulwark against the catastrophe of another conflict in Europe. In that respect, at least, the project has been a stunning success.

BUT those who predicted "the end of history", with all the peoples of the continent contentedly living in liberal democracies and enjoying growing prosperity, are profoundly mistaken. We are living in the most turbulent period of European history since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and perhaps even since 1945. The financial crises of 2008 and thereafter have ushered in an era of austerity that has wrecked the uncritical assumption of uninterrupted material progress. Globalisation, once considered

the engine that would lift people out of poverty, is increasingly damned as the cause of unemployment and low pay in many communities.

Coupled with vast increases in immigration from distressed and war-torn areas of Africa and the Middle East, untrammelled globalisation has fed a surge in populism and the rise of new hard-right political movements, even in countries such as Norway and The Netherlands, long noted only for the dull predictability of their liberal political regimes.

The EU itself has rightly attracted passionate criticism from many quarters for its rigid bureaucracies, its lack of democratic accountability and its persistent failure to reform its creaking internal structures. A feeling that the project is turning sour is widespread. Even Pope Francis, speaking to EU leaders in Rome last week, has urged the case for reform before it is too late.

Meanwhile, a resurgent post-Soviet Russia is rattling its sabre and posing a real danger to some of its former satellites in Eastern and Northern Europe, while the superpower across the Atlantic, which has been the prime guarantor of European peace since 1945 through its membership of Nato, has elected a president and a government that, at the very least, cannot be said to command the complete confidence and trust of its allies in London, Berlin and Paris.

Brexit has its own particular British origins but it is hard not to see the 23 June 2016 vote to leave the EU as a national variant of that much wider and deeper geo-political malaise.

I am one of the very large minority of the British people who voted to remain in the EU and who, outside Scotland, have yet to find a powerful political voice to defend their democratic rights as the twilight war with Brussels comes to an end, and the real negotiations are set to begin. By turns, I have been saddened, angered and confused as “Brexit” has metamorphosed into “Hard Brexit”, with hardly a murmur from the Labour Party – an official “opposition” barely worthy of the name.

Who would have thought that the leader of the Scottish National Party at Westminster, Angus Robertson MP, would by default have become the most cogent and articulate spokesman for the large number of now virtually disenfranchised UK citizens who voted for Remain?

I am equally concerned by a cosy consensus that has emerged in recent months. Across the political establishment and virtually all organs of the print and broadcast media, including those once sympathetic to Remain, it is taken as read that Brexit is inevitable. There were indications last year that some commentators were at least partially aware that, in this life, and certainly in this period of contemporary history, nothing is inevitable. But those voices are now oddly silent. A new narrative holds sway: the British people have spoken, and to oppose their will would be anti-democratic, so let us just get on with Brexit and secure the best deal that we can from our old partners in the EU.

I beg to differ. Not to peacefully oppose a political decision brought about by whatever means, with which one strongly disagrees – and which very many other citizens also judge to be a threat to the vital interests of their country – would itself be undemocratic. In my view, the threat posed by Brexit is dangerously real. It has not yet become a reality, though the fall in sterling and linked increase in inflation are a small portent of what is yet to come. A range of academic authorities, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and the Treasury have all warned that after a hard Brexit the outlook for an economy

that has not yet recovered from years of austerity is exceedingly stormy.

Already, the Brexit vote coupled with the insensitive intransigence of Downing Street has triggered the demand for another referendum on Scottish independence and stoked deep anxieties in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland about how a hard border between the two might affect the hard-won stability of that part of the world.

A more aggressive and strident form of English nationalism has also emerged into the public domain. A recent poll among a sample of English people who had voted to leave the EU showed a continuing, clear majority for doing so, even if it meant Scotland leaving the UK. It is difficult to see how unionists in Scotland could combat this sea change in attitudes south of the border.

For those who think as I do, that Remainers deserve a strong political voice as the Brexit negotiations proceed, there is a necessary first step. The myth of an inevitable Brexit must be confronted and challenged. The forest of complexities ahead for the negotiating teams on both the British and EU side is daunting. Yet, the UK Government baldly asserts that the business will be concluded in 18 months, leaving six months for consideration and approval by the other 27 EU governments before the official two-year period between triggering Article 50 and formal departure expires.

Sir Ivan Rogers, the respected former UK ambassador to the EU, has suggested that a period of complicated, difficult talks lasting 10 years is more likely. I would be inclined to trust his opinion, as it is based on real experience, rather than that of the three politicians who will be fronting the negotiations on behalf of the UK. If Rogers is correct, the talks will stretch across a period that will include at least two general elections. That is hardly a scenario for inevitability.

The Brexiteers face a number of other potential obstacles. Each of 27 member states of the EU has a right of veto on the final outcome of the discussions. Lord Kerr, the Scottish peer who, as a Foreign Office official, helped to frame Article 50, stated categorically in the recent House of Lords debates and on other occasions that the UK can withdraw at any time from the talks, or even decline to implement Brexit at the end of them. The Government has also conceded, though it is not yet enshrined in law, that the Westminster parliament, as the sovereign legislature, will vote on the final terms of a Brexit proposal.

There are pitfalls galore on this tortuous road. Who can say whether or not future historians will look back on 29 March 2017 as the day the opening shot was fired in a long political war that eventually had a very different outcome from that which had once been believed.

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