

## Brexit: Who will captain this sinking ship?



Shortly after the 2016 referendum, a friend of mine, an experienced diplomat, said of Brexit that it could best be understood as a type of cult, played out on a vast – and therefore catastrophic – national stage. We both knew of the likely range of disastrous consequences that would flow from the “decision” that the “people” had supposedly then just taken.

Since our conversation the cult aspect of Brexit has become even more evident: the setting of the day when the New Jerusalem triumphantly arises from the ashes of our European past (29 March 2019, at exactly 11 p.m.); the blind assertion of faith in the future in the face of all the evidence that Brexit will be chaotic and debilitating; and – more recently – a growing sense on the part of the leading disciples of Brexit that the New Kingdom may take a while to emerge after all: indeed, over a period of 50 years on the estimation of Jacob Rees-Mogg in a recent exchange on Channel 4 News.

My friend went on to explain why so many cult followers choose death over acknowledgement of their error: they prefer to kill themselves rather than accept the deep nature of their error. This is what we face on 29 March next year: a national suicide as an escape from the admission of terrible error – death rather than repentance and reversal.

What can those of us who are not cult members, who watch aghast on the sidelines, do? Must we assist the fatal process, seek to stop it, or just make our selfish plans to survive the liquidation as best we can, diverting our eyes from the mayhem around us, holding fast to our wallets and damn the rest? Many are working to secure a second referendum; some are seeking to steel the will of MPs to vote down the whole thing when it gets before them in some shape or other in the autumn; and others hope a new election will be called, and a Remain government is returned to power and so saves the day.

All three options are superficially attractive and some of them – or a combination of all three – might well work. So too might the de facto surrender on all points which the government may well feel

compelled to make as the Brexit cliff draws closer – leaving the United Kingdom with all the constraints of club membership (including the payment of annual dues) but no say in its organisation or governance: a suicide of gloomy servitude.

But the difficulty with all of these options, if any of them were to succeed, is with the longer term: we have not the slightest guarantee that the Brexiteers will commit political suicide if they cannot take the country with them. Rather the reverse. They will live on, saved from collective annihilation, to preach treason and betrayal at every turn and before every audience.

If Brexit were indeed to be formally reversed, Ukip would revive, and win a multitude of seats in the European Parliament in the 2019 election (from which, as things stand, they will be mercifully excluded). At home the fights with the EU over the reversal of Brexit would suddenly become the new *casus belli*. The servitude option would produce exactly the same effect. Endless battles would ensue to take back control properly by throwing off the Brussels yoke.

Nothing would be settled because none of the core problems that have given rise to this Brexit madness would have been addressed. What are these? First the sense of entitlement that pervades English culture, a sense of exceptionalism that makes even other faded post-colonial powers seem modest. Second, the ongoing absence of any kind of loyalty whatsoever to the EU, a relationship perpetually presented in transactional terms but with the bargains that come our way being always hidden while the costs get shouted from the rooftops. Third, the constitutional illiteracy of a society that boasts of having no constitution, where power is exercised informally through unwritten conventions and in which no serious reflection on the rule of law and respect for human rights has ever occurred. Brexit reversal or EU servitude would both exacerbate, not inoculate us against, these diseases of the collective mind.

So why must we be with Jacob Rees-Mogg? Every conceivable Brexit outcome overseen by Theresa May would be condemned from the sidelines by the chief Brexit cultists, who would claim they could have done better, that the “Remainers” have had their clever way (whether reversal or servitude) or that the chaos of a no-deal Brexit could have been avoided in some clever unspoken way had we been “tougher” with Brussels. The chief believers need to be in charge, leading the country over the cliff. A good start has been made with the ever perky Dominic Raab now getting his weekly tutorial in reality from Michel Barnier. But the whole ship needs to be sailed into disaster by a captain of unimpeachable cultist authority. And that is Rees-Mogg not Boris Johnson or Michael Gove, opportunists both. If it is to be surrender, servitude or chaos it must be unequivocally on the Brexiteers’ watch.

What then? Of course I hope for the best, with Rees-Mogg leading a dramatic reversal of Brexit on the eve of departure, with no domestic scapegoat to hide behind. But let’s assume the worst – that Rees-Mogg takes the United Kingdom into oblivion. That will be the end of him and his crowd as long as we still have elections – “Wait 50 years!” is not a resonant election slogan. Over time Northern Ireland will surely join *de facto* (and eventually *de iure*) with the Republic of Ireland. Scotland may be forced by chaos into independence and then a formal (fast-tracked?) application to join the EU will surely follow, and be successful. Wales will agitate for the same. And England? I may be an emotional Remainder but strategically I am a returner. Sooner or later, its imperial delusions smashed, its constitution exposed as broken, its young people will have their revenge. A European Troika from (let’s guess) Latvia, Ireland and Greece will eventually be invited in to assess the country’s suitability

for rejoining the EU. By then the Brexiteers will, on the whole, be dead or shouting from their political cul-de-sac. Rees-Mogg himself will have returned to the eighteenth century.

Of course the pain will be terrible. But it will be whatever course is now adopted – the catastrophe was the referendum. Rees-Mogg may be right that it will take 50 years to get over it – but not in the way he believes.

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