

## Qvo vadis, Britain?

Seven years after the referendum and three after the UK effectively left the European Union many things still puzzle political analysts. While outside the UK it is crystal clear that Brexit has been a disaster, many in the UK still think the opposite. Cognitive dissonance characterised the more extremists in both the brexiter and remainer sides, even though remainers were always more rational and fact driven and that may have been one of the reasons behind their defeat in 2016. In any case, it is astonishingly surprising that, 7 years after the referendum, the UK is still unable to hold a civilised debate over Brexit.

Brexit was a major disruption in British politics. A rational, calm and mature democracy like the UK suddenly fell into the arms of the extreme right nationalist populism and has not recovered yet. Proof of this is that the so-called Brexit heroes enjoy a high level of impunity when it comes to breaking the law, lying to Parliament or losing a bank account. In the eyes of their followers, it's nothing but the lefty, woke, EU and civil service elites trying to punish them for Brexit. They won't even argue whether they broke the law or lied, that doesn't matter and they will ignore it, it's the attack on Brexit itself that explains everything.

Brexit is the ultimate reason why they feel they are better than the French, the Germans, the Dutch or the Swedish and they are not going to let anyone or anything question that. Even if the economy and public services are crumbling, it is a price well worth paying because superior beings need to be sovereign which, in their view, means different and not mixed with other Europeans. It is true that the cost of living crisis is biting the support for Brexit though. Polls estimate that the proportion of Britons that would vote remain now is about 60% whilst 40% would still vote for Brexit. But it is astonishing that, given the state of the country, remainers do not double that 20-point lead. There are many factors explaining this, the main ones are:

- Brexit is still too emotional and facts are denied or reinterpreted by each side to accommodate their respective narrative. The war in Ukraine, COVID or the weather in Spain affect only Brexit Britain; whenever the EU makes a concession and allows the UK to trade in more favourable terms than any other third country, it is because we are better and they need us more than we need them; if not then it is because they want to punish us for Brexit. Whether it is to hate us or to love us, we will always be special. What they can't even consider is that the rest of the world doesn't think that Britain is special.
- The press is prolonging this situation not only because most tabloids have embraced the national-populism cause, but also because, when not, they tend to go not for the truth or the facts but for the middle point in any debate remotely related to Brexit, even if that means softening an outright lie with a half lie.

- The two main political parties don't want to touch Brexit even with a nine foot cane. The Tories have invested a huge amount of political capital in Brexit and they can't just make a u-turn and say "sorry, we got it wrong" and Labour thinks that they can take the remainder vote for granted and take the fight to the Brexiter red wall.
- The sense of entitlement that led to the leave victory in 2016 has somehow spread and most parties think that they can renegotiate the most inconvenient aspects of the deal with the EU and the EU and 27 countries will just accept any changes the Brits would honour them with a proposal.
- Brexit, like communism or any religion, is an ideal and as such it can't be questioned. Whatever happens it would be because Brexit has not been implemented pure enough, because we didn't believe hard enough, because this was not the Brexit people voted for or because of the works of the devil and you can replace devil with the blob, the establishment, lefty lawyers, civil servants or the EU.

In any case, as long as this sorry state of affairs in the collective British psyche doesn't change, it is very difficult to have a serious and responsible debate among ourselves and with Europe. A debate about what kind of relationship we want with Europe and, moreover, to convince our neighbours that any change in that relationship is going to last longer than the few years between two consecutive general elections.

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16 July 2023