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Will Brexit Make or Break Great Britain?[2]

Introduction: Brexit Comes From Afar

"In our bones we feel we cannot do it". So said Anthony Eden , the Conservative shadow Foreign Secy., when, thanks to the Marshall Plan, the idea of European integration began to evolve from the visions of a few exile intellectuals and politicians in WWII, into a serious political project, embodied in the first design of a European Coal and Steel Community of 1951, the Schuman Plan.

"In our bones we feel we cannot do it". In this short phrase are embodied some of the key characteristics of British attitudes to 'Europe' from then till now. <u>First</u> is its obviously negative character. No ifs or buts; unconditional refusal. <u>Second</u>, its unapologetic reliance on instinct, not reasoned analysis, to justify the negativity. <u>Third</u>, the unquestioned assumption that "we" includes the government, the Commonwealth and Empire, the peoples of the four corners of the United Kingdom…

Over the decades, British governments of all colours have shown in public little but skepticism and dislike for the European project in its various phases. During the Marshall Plan the British fought as hard as they dared against its drive to involve them fully in its quasi-federalist design. The greatest book yet written on the Plan – Michael Hogan's of 1987[3] – is dedicated entirely to this battle. In 1955 the British sneered at the Messina conference, where a European community was first con-

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2) This paper was originally presented at a joint Johns Hopkins SAIS – Institute for Political Studies event at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Sciences on October 25, 2018.

3) Michael J.Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952*, Cambridge 1987.

cretely envisaged, and after the creation of the EEC in 1957 they tried to set up an alternative free-trade area, EFTA, which reflected their underlying preferences – hadn't they invented free trade and developed the greatest empire yet seen on the basis of that principle ? But no-one believed in free trade the way they did, and EFTA got no-where.

In the 1960s, weakened very badly by the end of Empire and economic change, they tried against their will to join the new Economic Community, insisting that Europe recognize British priorities: control over the balance of payments and capital movements, New Zealand's interests, and bizarrely, sugar. These were literally the Labour government's formal demands in 1967. General de Gaulle saw that this was an attempt by the British to force the Europeans formally to recognize their exceptionalism, and precisely on those grounds rejected their application. This humiliation has never been forgotten or pardoned. When the British finally joined in 1973 – for purely opportunistic reasons, as EEC Europe was doing so much better economically than the UK – they assumed, according to veteran witnesses I've talked to, that they would be in charge. They were quickly disillusioned.

During the 1970s, the Labour Government tried to neutralize Euroscepticism with a referendum, which was largely about divisions in the Labour Party. There was no official government position. The country had never been weaker, economically, and the pro-EEC position won. But in the 1980s, with the EEC enjoying a new period of self-confidence, Mrs. Thatcher fought every effort by the Commission's President, Jacques Delors, to expand its ambitions, e.g. in defense and foreign policy, and of course obtained her famous rebate. Although Thatcher did not want to destroy the European Community as it then was, she wanted it to function on British terms, and in this she enjoyed significant success, as we shall see.

The start of the 1990s were a crucial time: the end of the Cold War and the end of the Soviet empire in eastern Europe, *German-re-unification*, and the need for western Europe, specifically the European Community to face up to the consequences, and take responsibility for them. The Americans made clear that now it was Europe's turn. No more Marshall Plans. The result was the process which led up to the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. In April 1990 a commentator in the pro-Europe London weekly *Observer wrote*:

'There is a rather uncharitable description of the British approach to the European Community that goes as follows: a group of people are taking a dog for a walk. The dog is on a lead, but instead of trotting cheerfully

along the pavement it digs its paws in. It can be dragged along, because the dog-walkers outnumber it and know where they want to go, but everybody arrives at their destination rather hot and bothered. The dog meanwhile, is barking loudly and seems to believe that by its behavior it has changed the direction of the walk.'

The British, said the writer, seemed to think that because *they* were so radically proposed to economic and monetary union, it would not progress. When they understood their mistake, they fell back on good old British pragmatism: deploring grand visions and insisting on the practicalities of everyday problems. All very well, but as a senior EC official told the writer, as the others 'moved up the scale of Community business to the political level, the British view no longer counted at all.'[4]

When Labour returned to power in 1997, it made clear that Britain's role would be as a 'bridge' between Europe and America, and set tests for joining the Euro which could never be satisfied. While Tony Blair was not unsympathetic to the EU, his Chancellor, Gordon Brown, never bothered to hide his contempt and indifference, eg refusing to participate in the joint ceremony for signing the Lisbon Treaty… It was Brown who somehow imposed on the EU, as it now was, the totally unknown, unequipped Lady Ashton as the first, post-Lisbon, High Commissioner for Foreign and Security Policy, now long forgotten. Of course he was not alone in destroying any ambition the EU might have had to develop genuine policies and power in this area

But the 1990s were a time of intense identity crisis for Britain as they were for most other western nations in the post-Cold War era of globalization. In *his Patriots. National Identity in Britain, 1940-2000*, the historian Richard Weight demonstrated how the decade witnessed the most intense inquiry into the nature of Britishness since the Suez drama of 1956. The political scientist Joel Krieger explained in 1999 that:

'…the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (are) fluid and vexed, the representations of nation hotly contested, the attachments at once robust and uncertain…'[5]

This post-Cold War effort of self-interrogation has never ceased and is still going on. Like France, the land has for nearly 30 years been caught

4) Isobel Hilton in *The Observer,* 26 April 1990.
5) Richard Weight, *Patriots. National Identity in Britain 1940-2000* London: Macmillan, 2002, p.665; Joel Krieger, *British Politics in the Global Age*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1999, p. 137.

up in self-conscious and politically-oriented debates on its ideas of citizenship, community, ethnicity, nationality and other identity characteristics and labels. Deep anxieties have emerged over everything to do with 'Europe', around immigration and multiculturalism, the unity of the kingdom, the monarchy, the structure and function of the armed forces, the welfare state, the mass media, and the education system. These were debates which brought into question the very basis of the nation's unwritten political and judicial constitution. Brexit has renewed and brought a new level of urgency to these discussions, especially in Scotland, as we shall see. Not by chance Welsh and Scottish nationalism were re-born in new and dynamic forms in the 1990s. In spite of its UK name and all-Britain ambitions, no-one doubted that *English* nationalism drove the birth and development of UKIP – the UK Independence Party – at this time, the party whose greatest success would be to force the Conservative government of David Cameron to hold a referendum on EU membership in 2016.

The financial crisis from 2007 and all that lay behind it simply made more urgent to the governing classes in Britain the dilemmas faced by their long-established national settlements. Now they involved the balance of the economy: the hegemony of financial services and the marginalization of manufacturing industry, the reliance on a bloated universe of private credit and ever-increasing house prices, the resentments of the winners and the losers in the trends of the previous 20 years, which had created unprecedented levels of economic and social inequality.

Yet the referendum of 2016 was a short-term tactical move which the government casually and complacently expected to win. Referenda have almost never been used in British politics, which have always prided themselves on the absoluteness of Parliamentary sovereignty. That was one of the great complaints against the EU: it over-rode and marginalized the sovereignty of Westminster. That was why so many conservative forces had opposed the devolution of power to Northern Ireland and Wales, and the re-creation of a Parliament in Edinburgh, a project realised by Labour but which completely failed to confirm Labour's hope that in this way Scotland's new civic nationalism would be neutralised. Labour did help to prevent a majority in the Scottish independence of referendum of 2014, but the party – long dominant in Scotland – was subsequently destroyed in the Scottish national elections of 2015.

Result of 2016 Referendum[6]

By now the underlying patterns and causes of these results are well-known:

1. Class status and poverty (like US) 'In the areas with more than 30% of people in working class jobs, the Leave vote was more than 20% higher than in the areas fewer than 20% of the population in working class jobs. 63% of people in working class jobs chose Leave. As in America, say Evans and Tilley in a detailed political science study, class politics are back: Brexit and Trump, they say, are the revenge of those left behind by the embourgeoisement of the two dominant parties since the era of Clinton and Blair, and their smug connivance with the ever-expanding gaps in wealth between the winners and the losers of the age of global finance. [7] The old mining town, Coalville, was called 'a dump' by DAvid Cameron. It voted 35,000 to 22,500 to leave, its public housing estates witnessing an 80% turnout. [8]

2. Age (like US) 'Brexit is an old people's home' writes Anthony Barnett in his penetrating comparison of the successes of Brexit and Trump. A survey of voters on referendum day showed 'the 18-24 age group backing Remain by 71%. It was the pensioners over 65 who supported Leave by 64%, and won the day. Among the under-25s, young women voted by an overwhelming 80% to 20% for Europe.[9]

3. Education (like US). There was a 20% gap in the Leave vote between the 62 areas with fewer than 20% graduates and the 99 areas with more than 30% graduates. 72% of people with no qualifications voted to leave, only 35% of people with a university degree did so. However we should remember that only a quarter of the voting population went to university.

4. *English provinces*; NOT London. 'It was England's Brexit', writes Anthony Barnett.[10] This was regional England sick of the overwhelming domination of London in all things powerful; the England resentful of all the immigrants (2.6m during the LAbour years, still a third of a million a year under CAmeron) ; the England left behind by first the industrial revolution and then globalization; by the shrinking of agriculture

6) https://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu_referendum/results.

7) Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, *The New Politics of Class. The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class*, Oxford 2017, Ch.10.

8) Cit. in Anthony Barnett, *The Lure of Greatness. England's Brexit and America's Trump*, London 2017, p. 51.

9) Ibid., pp.228-9.

10) Ibid., Ch.10.

and traditional country life; the England of so many TV historical dramas, including Downton Abbey Poldark..all the Jane Austen versions..

5. There was total lack of effort by UK parties, or the EU, to explain what the EU is all about: most still think it's just about trade. No EU leader was allowed to speak directly to the British people; the EU has no information office in major towns and cities as in say, Italy. The EU has always been very bad at communication, and it's not clear if this is a choice by leading members, or incapacity. The Commission has now relaunched its efforts in this area, but you have to be an inside expert to know it. One wonder how many voters on referendum day knew the difference between the single market and the customs union, to take an obvious question. No-one expects Facebook to explain that, and the role of the BBC & co still provoke debate. Of course ALL except one of the most popular newspapers, especially the Murdoch press, were and are militantly, even violently, anti-EU. So much for the British idea of themselves as mild, fair-minded and tolerant…

6. *Extreme* ambiguity of LAbour all along. I was tasked with following the LAbour referendum campaign by the Istituto affari internazionali in Rome during the months October 2015-June 2016. It was extraordinarily weak and ambiguous, and in fact remains so to this day. As always Corbyn relied almost entirely on Facebook; his Brexit 'minister' had no website at all, and the Party version was always out of date and incomplete. Corbyn dedicated 2 sentences to the question in his 2015 party conference speech and tried to avoid it altogether in the 2016 version. He himself is clearly anti-EU, as are his voters in the old working class communities in the north. But his Parliamentarians and the masses of young people who support his other policies are quite clearly for Remain, and lead the crowd demanding a 2nd vote. How he has handled this dilemma raises serious questions about his leadership abilities and aims..

7. Intangibles: Nostalgia (WW2); a certain idea of Englishness asserted itself, says Barnett, a militant nostalgia expressed in the most successful slogan of all: " Take *back* control", a spirit of rebellion that goes back to the 17th century. Here is pride in isolation (our nationalism saved us, yours destroyed you); in exceptionalism; in an idea of the traditional hierarchy of nations…79% of people who described themselves as 'English not British' on polling day voted Leave. [11]

Yet was all was said and done, the best indicator of all of the Leave voter , according to the British Election Study, was support for the restoration of the death penalty..[12]

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11) Ibid., Ch's 12-13.
12) David Edgar, 'Jailbreak from the Old Order', in *London Review of Books*, 26 April

Now a comment on the two special cases:

1. Scotland is radically different. With a 62 Remain versus 38 Leave, Scotland provided the most radical rejection of the Brexit vision. The Remain vote here increased by 4% between 1975 and 2016, while England's dived by 20%. The context of course is the political revolution of the last 20 years which has seen the re-constitution of the Scottish Parliament, the total eclipse of the once-dominant Labour party, the rise of the SNP and of course the independence referendum of 2014, won decisively by the *anti*-independence lobby, 55 to 45%. While the SNP after 10 years in power is not at all as dominant as it was 5 or 6 years ago, it makes sure that the independence question does not go away, and is watching the Brexit negotiations like a hawk, furious that the Scots remain majority is being ignored in the negotiations, and desperate to ensure that Brexit does not mean a reassertion of central power in London.

2. Ireland /Northern Ireland. Possibly the greatest shock of all to the Brexiteers and to the English in general is the discovery of the inevitability, even centrality, of Irish questions to the future of their nation. With the famous Good Friday agreement of 1998, it seemed that Ireland's problems north and south could be forgotten, and they were. Brexit has brought them back in greatly magnified form, if not – yet – with the potential of a return to violence as during the 30 years of armed conflict. As observers at Kings College London have said:

Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society and a contested space with different sections of the community having different constitutional aspirations. Notwithstanding all of the progress in the peace process, the region continues to have a major fault line.

The [Good Friday] Agreement provided a framework to manage these divisions and associated tensions, and, although it is not yet fully realised, the opportunity to transform the nature of society. [13]

The fact that Northern Ireland is without a government since Jan 2017, and that the Protestant ultra-Unionists of Leave are confronted by a majority of Catholic, social/democrat, green parties which support Remain, does not promise well. But three factors complicate the situation. First, the small unionist group sits in the London Parliament while the others don't. Second, that small group supplies Teresa May with her majority in London: she cannot survive in the House of Commons with-

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2018.

13) http://ukandeu.ac.uk/all-simple-solutions-to-the-post-brexit-irish-border-fail-to-acknowledge-complex-realities/, 21 Sept. 2018.

out it. Third, the Irish government and Press have been deeply involved in the Brexit debate, fighting every inch of the way politically to avoid Brexit. For a minority in Dublin, the crisis could reunite Ireland. But the majority, and the government, know that the Republic's very economic survival and political stability depend on resolving the question of the border between their nation, fully in the EU, and the province of the north, fully out of it as an integral part of the UK.

Conclusion

So where are we now, more than 2 years after that fateful referendum? The short answer is: *we don't know*. On Saturday, the 21st October, 700,000 people marched through London demanding a second referendum. But London, as we've seen, is not typical. On the following Monday, in Parliament, May declared that 95% of the withdrawal deal is done, mentioning Gibraltar, Cyprus, citizens' rights, the divorce bill, but very little else, other than the possibility of a longer transition, to the fury of the Brexiteeers. On Tuesday she spent the morning in hours of discussion with her Cabinet on the risks and consequences of NO deal being concluded in time, amidst ever-more desperate warnings from the police, the National Health Service and the most senior scientists on the disastrous consequences for them all if no deal at is concluded in time for the March 2019 deadline. Big business has been saying the same for many months.

It's precisely because the threat of no deal is so serious that the sticking point has arisen in Ireland, that question of how to manage the border between northern Ireland and the Republic if there is no deal, but also after the UK becomes a 'Third country'. 'NO HARD BORDER', they all say, but if not what else ? No deal means the province stays under the rules of the EU, or doesn't it? The Republic is in Schengen, the UK is not, so what's to stop enormous smuggling of people – and goods – if there are no controls? The Irish press has been particularly brutal about British behavior. Its most eloquent commentator, Fintan O'Toole, wrote in July:

Has any country ever gone into international treaty negotiations hoping to emerge with a status greatly inferior to the one it already enjoys? What do we want? National humiliation. When do we want it? Now.[14]

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14) https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-britain-has-gone-to-huge-trouble-to-humiliate-itself-1.3558995?mode=amp, 10 July 2018

One of Britain's most senior ex-diplomats, Sir Ivan Rogers, a man with long experience of Brussels and Westminster, put the situation another way:

For non-British elites, the most striking thing about the Brexit vote was, after all, that the construction of a completely sui generis British place within the Union – permanently opted out of Monetary Union, out of Schengen, out of Banking Union, out of a common asylum policy, and with an ability to pick and choose which areas of internal security and legal co-operation to join – was still not enough for a Remain victory.

Having won so many of its battles in Brussels over the years, Sir Ivan went on – including the export of its neo-liberal philosophy, we might add – 'how could the UK's governing party talk itself into a revolutionary defeatist position, constantly convincing itself and loudly proclaiming to the public that the UK had no impact.'[15]

But the most remarkable of all the scores of polls on British opinion reveals how the passions generated by this whole process have destroyed any rational basis for the continuation of traditional ideas of British nationhood, including its place in Europe and the world. Published by the Centre on Constitutional Change in Edinburgh two weeks ago, their research shows that:

- *Clear majorities of English Conservatives would support Scottish independence (79%) or the collapse of the NI Peace Process (75%) as the price of Brexit.*
- *87% of (overwhelmingly Unionist) Leave voters in Northern Ireland see the collapse of the peace process as an acceptable price for Brexit and 86% say that of a Yes vote in IndyRef2*
- *Voters typically expect higher levels of policy alignment with Europe post-Brexit (roaming charges, food hygiene standards, etc.) than within the UK (tuition fees, prescription charges, free social care, etc.)*
- *In none of the UK's nations is a majority of taxpayers happy to see their taxes spent in other parts [of the country] when those parts are mentioned by name*

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15) https://share.trin.cam.ac.uk/sites/public/Comms/Rogers_brexit_as_revolution.pdf. Undated, accessed in Oct. 2018.

As the directors of this research said:

An overwhelming majority of Conservative voters in England would prefer to see Scotland become independent and a breakdown of the peace process in Northern Ireland rather than compromise on their support for Brexit.[16]

In other words, IF the emotions of the present Leave majority are to be allowed to determine the future of the country, the United Kingdom as we have known it since 1707 when Scotland and England joined together, or from 1920, when Ireland was divided into Republic and British province, that United Kingdom will soon cease to exist.

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16) centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/news/press-release-may's-'precious-union'-has-little-support-brexit-britain 8 Oct 2018