

## **DS1**

### ***Reflections on a referendum [ie UK EU Referendum 2016]***

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[This short note is taken from the opening chapter of a book I am currently completing on rebels against the British Empire, the Third Reich, the *apartheid* regime in South Africa, and the military junta in Burma. Those rebels are Oscar Wilde, Jean Améry, Nelson Mandela and Aung Sang Suu Kyi. The book will be finished later this year]

This paper does not discuss the political or economic implications of the EU referendum for British society. Instead, it tackles an equally puzzling issue: why it produced the result it did.

In the EU referendum called by UK prime minister David Cameron on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016 just over half of those who voted opted for Brexit; in other words, to leave the European Union (EU). Victory came from the votes of pensioners and older workers in traditional manufacturing communities, especially in the north of England, for example in places such as Sheffield, Hartlepool, Stockton-on-Tees and Doncaster.

These were traditional Labour voters. The issue to which they responded most strongly was immigration. A common view was that they disliked immigrants intensely. Not everybody believed all the promises politicians made to them about cutting immigration and spending a lot more money on the National Health Service. However, they voted against the government's position in the referendum to register their strong protest against being ignored and taken for granted.

David Cameron campaigned hard to remain in the EU. This was not surprising. He was trying to save his own skin. He lost. This result caused a political earthquake. Cameron resigned early on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2016. The UK's European Commissioner also resigned. The Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said she would start preparing for a new referendum on Scottish national independence. European politicians began to raise questions about the status of the City of London within the EU. A leadership contest began in the Conservative party. Labour MPs moved to try and unseat their leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Stock markets across the world had shocking falls. Moody's credit rating agency listed the UK economy as 'negative', suggesting that a downgrade might be coming. That was just in the first thirty-six hours after the result was announced.

It is obvious that David Cameron's decision to hold the EU referendum was a political judgment with enormous consequences, some very damaging. Not least, members of minority national, ethnic or religious communities in Britain were made to feel very uncomfortable. That takes us back to 1956 when Anthony Eden ordered British troops to invade the Suez Canal Zone in Egypt. Neither the 2016 referendum nor the 1956 invasion produced the intended outcome. Both split the UK down the middle.

The global response to the Suez crisis showed the British how shameful their government's arrogant imperialist behaviour seemed to others; also the racist attitudes that went with it. Race riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill during 1958 hammered

the point home, eventually leading to the Race Relations Act of 1965. Following Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech in 1968, the political establishment united to anathematize such racist talk. By 1973 the UK had joined the European Economic Community (later the EU) and seemed to have left its imperialist inclinations behind. However, in 2016 the tone of anti-immigration campaign run by the winning side in the EU referendum made racial prejudice seem permissible, even respectable once again. Conservative MP, Anna Soubry, for one, reported that some of her own constituents in Nottingham were 'frankly racist.'<sup>1</sup> Divisive feelings repressed for four decades had once again broken surface.

### ***The Empire strikes back***

The referendum and its outcomes seem like a humiliating joke played on Britain by Britannia's ghost. Britannia refers to the British Empire. In its heyday the Empire held sway from Galway Bay to the Bay of Bengal. By the mid-1960s it was basically a dead duck. Or, rather, it consisted of little more than the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It may seem tendentious to describe the UK as the rump of the British Empire but the idea does have merit. After all, northern England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland were all conquered territories. That is how they came to be united with the military and economic stronghold in Southern England controlled from London.

Political, economic and cultural influences are all highly centralized in London. Both historically and at present there are palpable signs of centrifugal forces pulling away from London. The Irish Republic broke apart from the United Kingdom in 1922. Scotland and Wales both have independence movements and separate parliamentary chambers representing those nations. Northern Ireland has its Assembly in the Stormont at Belfast. Sinn Fein is dedicated to reunifying Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. England does not have a distinctive form of political representation despite recent moves to give greater devolved powers to authorities such as Greater Manchester.

In 2016 David Cameron and his nemesis, the aging traditional English working class, had one thing in common. They were both locked into a hierarchical mind-set inherited from the British Empire in its prime. The Empire may have been almost wiped off the map but it was still present inside the head.

Cameron was related to several generations of Britain's imperial establishment, all born to rule, at home and abroad. These family connections included royal courtiers, career soldiers, lord lieutenants, and, not least, financial plutocrats. This establishment background was burnished by Eton and Oxford. It gave Cameron an air of superiority, a commanding manner that implicitly declared he was better than other people. He also had a considerable but, as it turned out, misplaced confidence in his ability to dance his way through absolutely any political minefield. When asked why he wanted to become prime minister he reportedly replied: 'Because I think I'd be rather good at it.'<sup>2</sup> It turned out that Cameron was not as clever as he thought.

Many commentators assumed that during the referendum campaign the supposedly deferential UK populace, especially the elderly, would heed the charming and persuasive words of their social superior, the prime minister. However, the allegedly powerful Cameron magic was stymied by opposing forces that were even stronger:

the visceral prejudice of many older English working-class people against foreigners and their deep resentment against the rest of the world. This was their inheritance from the British Empire.

Many of these voters lived in run down areas and neglected communities. They asked themselves whose fault that was, and wanted to know why it was happening to them of all people, the loyal indigenous population? Following the script given them by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), these voters blamed immigrants for their suffering and the EU for the immigrants. To put it crudely, in order to get immigrants out of the country they voted to get the country out of the EU.

These Brexit voters were the white English people whose ancestors absorbed the jingoist propaganda of the Boer war (1899-1902). Their grandfathers and great-grandfathers had fought in the two world wars (1914-18 and 1939-45). Many of them were intensely disappointed with the way life had turned out for people like them after World War II. They hated the modern world in which Britannia no longer ruled the waves. The experience had been deeply insulting. After all, who won the war? Why had they not got the prizes they deserved? Instead they felt like losers.

It was true that the welfare state had been built up during the 1940s and 1950s bringing well-built local authority schools, the National Health Service, massive new council house estates and multiple additional benefits. But the welfare state had been chopped back brutally during the 1980s and repeatedly since. It was chronically underfunded. Staple manufacturing industries had been run down and local labour markets decimated. Trade unions were ruthlessly cut down to size and tied up in legal chains.

Meanwhile, the great British Empire ruled from London had become, first, the British Commonwealth combining independent white dominions with largely non-white colonial dependencies, then simply the Commonwealth, a voluntary association of independent states. London's financial empire continued to be global, helped by the capital's unique location amongst the world's time zones. The City of London was a massive node of dense and extensive financial networks. But like the Commonwealth, the City was no longer under British control. Since financial deregulation in 1986, the so-called Big Bang, American companies and multinational outfits of almost every stripe had bought up space and influence in London.

The cult of the royal family maintained a strong whiff of imperialist grandeur. This was a sustained display of what David Cannadine has called 'ornamentalism' (Cannadine 2001). This is the glamorous theatre of empire, once deployed to overawe the Britain's colonies, still kept switched on to dazzle readers of *Woman's Own* and the Sunday tabloids in the English provinces and, indeed, the Welsh valleys. Paradoxically, this did not produce deference. On the contrary, it puffed up the people's feeling of collective self-importance; for example, their tendency to assume that whenever England failed to win the World Cup it was a shocking disruption of the natural order. Tabloid editors understood this well.

The point is many of these English working-class senior citizens had a sense of their own national and ethnic superiority that was just as strong and deeply ingrained as Cameron's own class-based *hauteur*. For them the British Empire was still at large. In

their own minds these voters were at the top of a global hierarchy of merit. They took it for granted that all white 'Anglo-Saxons' were better than all other Europeans. All Northern Europeans were seen as superior to all Southern or Eastern Europeans. All Europeans were regarded as being a cut above all Asians and Africans.

Many of these voters had no etiquette for treating these other people on equal terms. They hardly ever met any as friends or neighbours. They did not want to associate with them. To them it was horrifically unbelievable that 'Europe' should be dictating to the English. It was absolutely ghastly that strange people from all over the world were muscling in on British jobs, houses and schools. It was disgusting that the government was letting such things happen instead of looking after much more deserving people who had lived and worked their whole lives in Britain. In other words, their own rights and dignity were being trampled on. It was insufferable.

Historically, these attitudes were reinforced and given respectability by newspapers such as the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, and after 1969 in *The Sun*, owned by Rupert Murdoch. Further intellectual credibility had been given to this strong sense of dissatisfaction by the so-called 'angry young men' who burst on the scene during the 1950s, authors such as Kingsley Amis (1922-95), John Osborne (1929-94), and John Wain (1925-94) According to Jean Améry, in his book *Preface to the Future* published in 1964, these British writers shared 'something absolutely negative, a universal, all-embracing, and well-reasoned rejection fed by deep emotional springs' (223).

Plays like *Look Back in Anger* (Osborne 1956) both reflected and helped to shape post-war Englishness. They 'produced a national myth. It was a myth of negation... The angry young men performed an act of comprehensive naysaying' (1964, 234). They expressed the anger of the generation who lived through World War II and became parents in the first post-war decade. They passed their feelings on to their children who became those elderly voters who swung the vote in the EU referendum.

These working-class baby boomers looked back over their lives with a great deal of anger. They felt bypassed and put upon. They were the victims of humiliation and they wanted either restitution or revenge. Brexit was a win-win bet. Campaign leaders said they would get their country back and regain control of their borders; that would count as restitution. Suppose that turned out to be a false promise. Then at least they could frustrate the ardent wish of the government to remain in the EU. They could assert their right to say no to Europe. That way they could take their revenge and recover some honour. Either way they were rebelling, giving the government a bloody nose.

There was another dimension also. Many of these English people resented the special treatment, as they saw it, being given not just to immigrants but also to the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish. They began to feel very much like second-class citizens. UKIP, whose message became central to the referendum campaign, offered them independence. On the surface, working-class English people were opting for independence from Europe. At another level they were seizing the chance to rebel against the central government in London. England lacked a national representative body such as those installed in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. In some respects

England felt like the last colony of the British Empire. The negative response of English working-class senior citizens to the government's plea for support to remain in the European Union – their resounding no - may be regarded as a kind of colonial-style insurgency, a release of long-repressed anger, an aggressive shriek from those who felt woefully under-represented and shamefully unheard.

## Bibliography

Jean Améry (1964), *Preface to the Future*  
David Cannadine (2001), *Ornamentalism*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2645720/Another-goal-Tories-The-minister-says-constituents-racist.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.express.co.uk/comment/columnists/leo-mckinstry/316056/Cameron-does-not-look-like-the-man-to-save-our-nation>