



The Brexit Drama – final curtain or prelude

By Melanie Sully
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Policy Recommendations

1. The referendum on British membership of the EU is the culmination of deep-seated frustration with the European project which needs to be addressed regardless of outcome.
2. A vote to stay would not be an endorsement of the status quo but the chance to shape a new reformed Europe for the benefit of all EU Member States.
3. An exit vote would not sever the strong links between the UK and EU but present challenges which should be faced without acrimony. The choice would be for an orderly exit or chaos detrimental to citizens in the Member States.

Abstract

For decades “Europe” has been a source of friction in British domestic politics dividing not only the Conservatives but also Labour and failing to inspire the country at large. A referendum was for long on and off the agenda and is more than the product of short-term political gain. It has prioritised a debate on Europe more than in many other Member States but a positive message is absent.

A vote to stay in the European Union should not be cause for complacency and certainly not jubilation by the Brussels Establishment. Euroscepticism is the default setting in much of British society but there

would be a chance, maybe the last one, to change a Europe increasingly out of touch with voters.

A Brexit would considerably negate EU and UK relations for many years to come and would require immense effort to salvage common bonds that have undoubtedly been forged over the last 40 years whether in law, economics, culture, or between countries after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Renewed bitterness on the Continent would further destabilise the EU at a critical stage in its own history. Damage limitation would need diplomatic finesse and astute politicians.



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A country of euro-sceptics embrace direct democracy

When the UK joined the Common Market in 1973, a singularly non-inspiring name, there was no dancing in the streets, no euphoria and the European flag and anthem non-existent. As the press reported at the time, “With a notable lack of ceremony, Britain slips into full membership of the EEC ... the nation’s Government centres in Whitehall will be dark and silent ...no official celebration has been arranged to mark the moment when Britain acquires a European dimension”¹. It was typically matter of fact in a country ridden by economic crisis, disputes and despair. Just at this time “Europe” appeared and soon after inflation steadily rose to around 30 percent - not a result of membership but who cared about that detail. Europe was bad news and stayed that way. For the most part both the press and politicians were content to play along².

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There was no referendum in Britain before joining Europe but in 1975 under Harold Wilson’s Labour government the first ever nationwide popular

vote was held on a renegotiated package. Referenda were denounced by none less than Margaret Thatcher for being an instrument of “demagogues and dictators”³. It was not until another Labour Prime Minister appeared on the scene some twenty years later that direct democracy in the UK became *au fait*. Tony Blair’s constitutional reform programme was accompanied by referenda for a Scottish parliament and decentralisation to Wales and Northern Ireland. The convention emerged that referenda could legitimise the transfer of power downwards. And if that was entrenched, then a referendum on the much greater transfer of power upwards to Brussels was the next logical step.

Blair’s predecessor as Prime Minister, John Major, had fought off calls for a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty and struggled to hold the Conservatives together with a vanishing parliamentary majority. He managed to secure an opt out from the social chapter of Maastricht which facilitated its passage through the House of Commons but the wish for a popular vote continued unabated.

Increasingly with more integration and the introduction of the Euro, many saw the EU as uncontrolled “mission creep” and support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) grew⁴.

When the Scottish National Party pushed for an independence referendum it had little idea that one day it would be in government with a mandate to push for one. Likewise when Cameron some years ago put the Brexit referendum on his “to-do” list he assumed he would be in a coalition with the Liberals who could conveniently be blamed for putting a brake on the idea. But to the surprise of one and all, Cameron was able after the last election to form a government without a coalition. The referen-

1) National Library of Australia, “No Fanfares as Britain joins the EEC”, The Canberra Times, 1.1. 1973 quoting the newswires from London. The Guardian at the same time, described Britain’s accession to the EEC in more funeral tones than joy, “Britain passed peacefully into Europe at midnight last night without any special celebrations”. See also <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2011/jun/02/guardian190-britain-enters-eec-1973>
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/rendition/nla.news-article110700403.txt>.

2) This article is largely an opinion piece based on the views of the author who has witnessed changes in British foreign and domestic policies since the 1950s.

3) See, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/102649>

4) See, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-21614073>



dum bill went through parliament and even Labour sceptical of the idea supported it.

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Obscure “technical talks” with the EU followed on renegotiations for a better UK deal which finally saw the light of day early this year⁵. The new settlement has been conspicuous by its absence in much of the referendum campaign so far and most would be hard pushed to articulate the main points. Indeed mention of the deal does not figure at all in the question on the referendum ballot paper.

The message of a remain vote would be for change

Democratic consensus for the European Union is as Cameron put it, “wafer thin”. The problem with a close result in a referendum is that this may not change. The feeling of frustration with elites at home as well as that mysterious set-up called “Europe” has eroded confidence in the political and economic system. Europe’s aims are to secure peace and prosperity but the latter remains elusive. Elites themselves in Britain have failed to understand much of what Europe stands for or has achieved.

„A close result for staying in will not be enough to stem the alienation felt in the UK towards Brussels.“

A close result (such as the referendum on Zwentendorf or the last Austrian Federal Presidential ballot) for staying in will not be enough to stem the alienation felt in the UK towards Brussels. The

yardstick for referenda has become the Scottish independence vote of 2014 with its 85 percent turnout and 55 percent majority for remaining with the United Kingdom⁶. It is unlikely that the turn-out will be so high in the Brexit referendum. Summer holidays are round the corner and many feel insufficient time has been allocated for a genuine debate. The Scots knew for two years there would be a referendum on independence and had all Summer with town hall meetings and packed clubs and an enormous engagement on social media transmuted the vote to a real democratic exercise. This time the government raced to hold the vote before the Summer in an effort to take the wind out the sails of the Brexit camp. Until the beginning of May much electioneering was focussed on the London mayoral vote and other regional and local elections. The Europe referendum has only just started to appear on the horizon.

A constant flow of statistics fly around at random for both leaving and staying. A fact check is impossible since most concern speculative future scenarios. “Project Fear” as the British government’s campaign became known in Scotland to deter people from opting for the great unknown, has been recycled warning of Brexit dangers. There are signs that the barrage of statements from the government will have some effect in persuading voters not to bail out. But that will not mean they are happy members of some great European family. Even in Scotland often cited as more European friendly, scepticism lies beneath the surface. After all the dominant party goes by the name of Scottish National Party and its leader, Nicola Sturgeon, makes no apologies for putting Scotland’s interests first⁷.

5) Details <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2016/02/18-19/>

6) Full results, http://www.parliament.scot/Research-BriefingsAndFactsheets/Scottish_Independence_Referendum_2014_Results.pdf

7) See, <http://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/nicola-sturgeon-vote-for-a-strong-voice-in-london-1-3761697>



„Voters want less arrogance from their politicians and search for a genuine inclusion in controlling decisions made that affect them.“

Cameron returned from Brussels negotiations early this year claiming he had agreed to a deal for staying in a reformed Europe. Whilst some important concessions were indeed wrenched from the EU, a reformed package it was not. Following any positive vote to stay in though, the European Union leaders could seize the moment to work out something more attractive to its citizens. The danger is that Brussels will interpret such a vote as a triumph for more Europe and less national interests. It will be hailed as yet another victory for the European spirit and a defeat for supposed “populist” Eurosceptics. This would be a mistake. Voters want less arrogance from their politicians and search for a genuine inclusion in controlling decisions made that affect them. Whilst many on the pro-EU side respond to unsure voters with yet more information and glossy pamphlets, they fail to grasp that communication is two-way. They could listen more to what voters are saying to them however confused, contradictory or diverse that may be. In the dialogue with citizens politicians should be flexible enough to change their views; too often though the communication exercise starts off from the assumption that voters will better understand the problem and they, not the politicians, should change their stance. Here the EU could consider more deliberative citizens’ democracy for involvement in the process of politics. Examples in countries such as Ireland show citizen interaction with each other can also increase interest and provide voters with the tools they need for meaningful participation⁸.

A vote to stay in the EU could tempt European leaders to strike reform off the agenda. After all there are indeed other pressing issues requiring solutions from the Euro to new migrants and refugees. Many have seen the Brexit vote as an

irritating sideshow already absorbing too much valuable time. But the EU has pledged to implement the deal worked out with the UK on cutting social security benefits for EU migrants and on a special status with London. Failure to translate these words swiftly into deeds will fuel UKIP and the sceptics even more. The snag is the EU does not do “swiftly” and the risk after referendum day is that nothing much tangible will change for the ordinary voter. Pressure will mount for a second referendum on the grounds that the people were cheated. Should nothing really change much after a positive vote, Brexit can even be triggered without a referendum by the government of the day. Therefore Brussels and other Member States should welcome any vote to remain and at the same time remember this is work in progress and not job done.

Brexit – a process not a break

„There will be many calling for punishment of the UK, long a problem child, to show others this is not the way to go. But it will be in the interest of all to work out something sensible.“

If the pollsters have got it wrong (again) and the bookmakers erred, and they do lose money sometimes, then Brexit day will arrive. But come June 24 the UK will still be a member of the European Union with all that entails. Depending on the size of the majority, the government might well again opt for “technical talks” to ascertain just what Article 50 means in practice, the clause whereby a Member State gives notification of its wish to leave the club. At some point the UK will begin complicated negotiations with its partners for a life outside the EU. There will be many calling for punishment of the UK, long a problem child, to show others this is not the way to go. But it will be in the interest of all to work out something sensible and failure to do so will inflict wounds on other EU members such as Ireland. As the Estonian Prime Minister said during the negotiations on the deal with London, “if Britain

8) See, <https://www.constitution.ie/>



goes, the rest of us have nothing⁹⁾. It could take years before the UK formally leaves the EU and even then many laws, many regulations and ties will still be there. After the initial period of turbulence, even "Schadenfreude", all will have to sit down and digest the new situation.

Conclusion

Many of the problems facing the EU will remain after the referendum whatever happens. The Eurozone will increasingly go its own way and the UK will go in another direction. The frustration with Europe will not evaporate and expectations will be high in the event of a pro-EU vote that something positive will change.

And if the UK should really come to the conclusion that the EU is broken and incapable of reform, it will be a sad day. Sad because it should never have been necessary to resort to a referendum at this critical point; genuine concerns could have been addressed much earlier. The message of the referendum is for a more pro-active, self-critical approach by national and European politicians. It could just be after all that in some cases they have got it wrong.

When the UK joined the EEC over forty years ago it was not "with a bang but a whimper"¹⁰⁾ – should it leave it will be the reverse. But instead of the last act in a long drama, the referendum could be the prelude for shaping a Europe with active audience participation. Failure to do so could unfold the final act in a tragedy.

9) <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35620434>

10) T.S. Eliot, The Hollow Men.

Further Reading

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The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a nongovernmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for an open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has long-standing experience of promoting a European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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