

We need Truth and Reconciliation

In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, there was little evidence of the depths of division that have since developed in United Kingdom. The Scottish Nationalists played a predictable hand, there were disagreements about the tactics and truthfulness of both campaigns, but it was all normal within political debate.

Indeed, when Daniel Hannan appeared on Newsnight on 24th June 2016 he recognised that something close to free movement of labour would be necessary and, because of the closeness of the result, he was prepared to consider something akin to remaining in the Single Market and Customs Union¹.

In the following weeks, I encountered a senior backbencher close to the government who had supported Leave but was going away on holiday to “read and understand the rules of the Single Market and Customs Union”. In other words, his referendum position was built on ignorance and promises that had been made during the campaign which were ill informed.

By the time the red lines appeared in Theresa May’s 17th January 2017 speech, all the compromise of Daniel Hannan and like-minded colleagues was gone. The ignorance of the many opinion formers on the Leave side had to be forgotten to save face. A hard Brexit was needed despite not being argued for during the campaign.

Triggering of Article 50 before the Government had decided on its negotiating objectives and strategy to achieve these was foolhardy and poor tactically.

The increasingly hard line taken by the Government who were being driven by the ERG and ideologues rather than “Leave pragmatists”, left the Remainers who respected the referendum result voiceless because the ground they occupied was outside the red lines. They were perceived as “not honouring the result of the referendum”.

This discourse has inevitably led to a fractured debate. Yes, the result of the referendum can be partially ascribed to many voters believing they were not being heard, they would not have cared which model for leaving the EU was adopted, but they certainly did not vote to be poorer, but did they expect better medical services. What has happened is that the 48.3% are not being heard at all and the absolute blindness to their opinions, the consequences are serious and are leading to

- a breakdown of the political system as we know it;
- a questioning of the Union from those parts of it that disagree with Leave;
- a disregard for the Union among those Leavers who are English nationalists
- people espousing unpleasant views which they would never have contemplated before this descent;
- a bitterness and unwillingness to compromise on many aspects of life;

Our national leaders need to do something very different now. In the present circumstances they should stop trying to negotiate for the impossible damaging outcomes that have been pursued since 17th January 2017.

¹ <https://youtu.be/t5jTRoySFfo>

If a business is following the wrong strategy good managers realise that, learn from their mistakes and do something different.

We are in this mess because:

- A referendum was called without prior informed public knowledge as to what the outcomes might be;
- There was no attempt to build a national consensus once the referendum result was known;
- Our Union is appearing more ragged that at any time since 1916;
- The Government is only negotiating for solutions that will do lasting damage to our economy and the fabric of society, because ideologically it is wedded to something that requires that.

The response by other parties is flawed and fractured. The position of the Lib Dems ignores the referendum and is anti-democratic. The Labour Party has not provided a coherent alternative. The SNP seeks to capitalise on the uncertainty. The DUP appear to be controlling Government thinking.

Everyone needs to stop and think what we are doing.

I propose that the following course of action be adopted:

1. Article 50 is revoked and that at the end of the process detailed below a referendum is called to decide on the alternatives;
2. A United Kingdom version of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ("TRC") be established. Its terms of reference will broadly look to establish the facts about our membership of the European Union, the consequences and alternative methods of leaving; invite the EU and other member states to contribute, explore and agree with the EU on the viability of a "two speed" Europe;
3. The TRC will actively involve our religious communities, trades unions, business and civil society;
4. The TRC report would conclude with the options that are available to the UK and the reasoning why;
5. Parliament decides on the alternatives to put to the electorate in a final referendum with a sensible threshold for it to have legal validity;
6. Settle the matter in a referendum, which may include an option to have further referendums on Scottish independence and Irish reunification. Arguments deployed during the Second Referendum Campaign that have not been included in the TRC report should be identified as such during the campaign.

This is not perfect and is intended to start debate. Without something like this our country risks impoverishment, loss of influence and will be riven with division for a generation.

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