

Brexit – a catalyst for political reform

Why do the Campaign for Independent Britain, Better Off Out, the Bruges Group, UKIP, the Democracy Movement and many other organisations and individuals support leaving the EU? Anyone who asked around would probably come back with a variety of answers – to escape from a failing political project, to curb immigration, to repatriate our sovereignty, to regain control of trade, fisheries and so on.

One benefit which hasn't been discussed as much is the potential for real reform of the UK's political system. Such reform is essential and a "leave" vote could provide just the catalyst we need.

Little has changed since a 2012 survey conducted by the *Which?* magazine revealed that only 7% of the 2,000 people surveyed trusted politicians or journalists. These two categories fared even worse than bankers and estate agents who jointly received the next lowest trust rating – a mere 11%. This is not to deny the existence of some honourable MPs – usually located on the back benches – and even a handful of decent journalists, but the low rating scored by politicians is not just a reflection of a cynical electorate but rather an indication of the deep flaws in our political system and its moral standards.

The recent resignation of the former Conservative Party co-chairman Grant Shapps following the tragic death of a young activist, Elliott Johnson, has shone the spotlight on a culture of bullying, affairs, blackmail, heavy drinking and dishonesty within the party, only a year or so after a scandal involving Lord Rennard engulfed the Liberal Democrats. We are also now hearing of bullying in the Labour party by its more extremist elements. This poses the question:- are such people fit to be entrusted with the running of our country?

The answer is a resounding NO, but what choice do we have? What are the alternatives?

We have to vote for someone to be our MP, but what does it say about the state of politics when the campaigning in last May's general election was so negative, with many voters voting not for a party (or candidate) they felt positively towards, but out of fear that the alternative would be far worse? What about the people who don't vote, saying "They're all the same"?

Such people have a point. Far too many MPs start off as political assistants on leaving university. Their entire lives are spent in the bubble of SW1. They have little experience of a "normal" job and the more ambitious types will be very dependent on the support of their seniors if their hopes of climbing the greasy pole are to be realised. This in turn means that rising stars are less likely to be original thinkers or men and women of principle but rather those who ensure their faces, opinions and behaviour fit with their party's ruling élite. They are not fit to govern in the real world.

It was very telling that, during a recent meeting with a "leave" campaigner who knows many MPs well, he referred to one particular MP as being a really likeable, pleasant individual – pointing out how rare such people are in the Palace of Westminster.

What has this to do with leaving the EU? Potentially a great deal. A successful "leave" campaign which marshals popular scepticism about our leading politicians – especially the Prime Minister – will send a tremendous shock through the Westminster Village.

David Cameron will be attempting to sell the "British Model" as a great negotiating triumph, a good deal for our country obtained in the teeth of ferocious opposition. Of course, it

will be nothing of the sort. It would be the worst of all worlds, locking us permanently into the EU's second division.

However. if Cameron's powers of persuasion, using his status as Prime Minister, backed up by the BBC, the Alan Johnson-led Labour in for Britain campaign, the European Movement, British Influence, Richard Branson, Britain Stronger in Europe and, of course, the EU itself fail to convince the electorate, reputations will be shredded and many smug egos will lie in tatters.

Of course, europhiles will not give up, even though re-entry to the EU would be a long, slow process with little likelihood of success. Norway's political élite has still not given up hope of shackling their country to the EU, a full 23 years after the country's voters rejected membership for a second time.

This is where a successful withdrawal campaign should seize the initiative.

The Harrogate Agenda which has been incorporated into the Flexcit exit plan as the final of the six stages of disentanglement from the EU, is exactly the type of reform we need – a decentralising programme making politicians more accountable to the electorate and reducing the power of ministers – with even the Prime Minister being chosen directly by the electorate rather than the current situation where the person leading the biggest party automatically gains the job. These changes, which would bring in real (i.e., direct) democracy, would hopefully ensure that the deceit and dishonesty which characterised the original accession process in the 1960s and 1970s and which are still part of political life in 2015 would not be repeated after withdrawal.

Quite how much opportunity for reform will be on offer by the time of the 2020 General Election remains to be seen, but a vote for withdrawal will add still further to the complexities

of this potentially fascinating election. David Cameron has stated his intention to stand down by then, probably before then, so as to give his successor a clear run. Would a vote to leave cause him to go sooner?

A vote to leave would also seriously dent George Osborne's chances of succeeding him, as he has been so closely associated with Cameron's sham renegotiation. Labour, come what may, will still be in a state of civil war while the Lib Dems, founded as an implicitly pro-EU party, are unlikely to recover from their drubbing at the polls last May if we vote to leave.

What future awaits UKIP? The party was founded specifically to campaign for UK withdrawal. With that target achieved, its mission would have been accomplished. There are still unquestionably many voters utterly disillusioned with the three established parties. Could UKIP change into something that will fill this void?

We can but speculate on such matters but one way or other, the momentum created by a vote to leave will not be dissipated. Those of us who see withdrawal as merely the start of a re-shaping of politics in the UK will find ourselves presented with possibly the biggest opportunity in our lifetime.

In the 18th Century, the French philosopher Montesquieu claimed that the UK had the best political system in Europe at that time, having the only government constituted for the specific purpose of maximizing political liberty. Sadly, the USA and, in particular, Switzerland, have overtaken us. Indeed, our subservience to the EU has been a step backwards as far as democracy and freedom have been concerned.

It is now time to regain the initiative and to become again a leader in the field of democratic development. Our country is crying out for something better than the current system and we owe it to our fellow-countrymen not squander the opportunities

presented by a successful “leave” campaign.