

How Brexit could save the EU from itself

This article by Allister Heath first appeared in the Daily Telegraph on 14th March. while not addressing the issue of how we withdraw, it does draw attention to the basic failings of the EU project – the fact that the nations of Europe do not constitute a single people which, in the author's view, dooms the EU to either totalitarianism or collapse. A UK withdrawal, rather than being seen as a disaster for the EU may be of great benefit to the continent as a whole.

It is those who love Europe, its diversity, its history and its humanity who should be the most enthusiastic about Brexit. A paradox? Not at all. The European Union, as currently constituted, has run out of road. It is doomed to fail, sooner or later, with catastrophic consequences for our part of the world, and the only way forward is for one major country to break ranks and show that there can be a better alternative consistent with Europe's core enlightenment values.

It would be far better if we, rather than a more socialist or nationalistic country, were the first to break the mould: Britain would have the opportunity to show that free trade, an open, self-governing society and a liberal approach could ensure the peace and prosperity at the heart of the European dream. Others would soon join us. If we vote to stay, we will lose the moral authority to speak out, and other, less benign, inward-looking, illiberal approaches may triumph instead.

The eurozone is broken, and another, far greater economic crisis inevitable. The next trigger could be a fiscal meltdown in Italy, or another banking collapse, or a political implosion in Spain or France, or another global recession. Nobody can be sure what the proximate cause will be – but there will be one, and the fallout will be turmoil of a far

greater magnitude than anything we saw in Greece. At the same time, the tensions fuelled by the migration crisis will grow relentlessly, especially if hundreds of thousands or even millions of people are settled across the continent over the next few years.

Many in the Remain camp agree that the eurozone requires drastic surgery, but their solution is naive. They believe that even more integration – a pan-eurozone welfare state, greater transfers between countries, central powers over fiscal policy – would help cancel out the currency's inherent defects. I doubt that this would actually work in purely economic terms, but even if it did, it is delusional to believe that such a model can be politically sustainable.

Democracy, the term, is derived from the ancient Greek: it denotes a system whereby the people (*dêmos*) are in power or in which they rule (*krátos*). One cannot, by definition, have a genuine democracy in the absence of a people; and there is no such thing as a European demos. The French are a people; the Swiss are a people, even though they speak multiple languages; the Americans are a people, even though Democrats and Republicans hate each other. But while Europeans have much in common, they are not a people. Danes don't know or care about Portuguese politics; the Spanish have no knowledge or interest in Lithuanian issues.

One could hold pan-European elections, of course, with voters picking multi-national slates of candidates; but, then, one could also ask every person on the planet to vote for a world president. Such initiatives would ape democratic procedures, but would be a sham. They would be Orwellian takedowns of genuine democracy, not extensions of it. There would be no relationship or understanding between ruler and citizen, zero genuine popular control, nil real accountability; coalitions of big countries would impose their will on smaller nations, and élites would run riot. We would be back to imperial politics, albeit in a modernised form.

Governments can forge cohesive cultures by using state schools, propaganda and government media; they can impose languages and a common, national identity where none existed before. There was plenty of such nation-building in the 19th and 20th centuries, with national cultures created from scratch. Yet to construct a new Euro demos today would be totalitarian: it would require, despicably, wiping out many of Europe's cultural differences and rewriting history.

Given that there can be no meaningful Euro-democracy any time soon, the only other logical solution would be to ditch the very idea of rule of the people, embrace a radical fiscal and political centralisation of the eurozone, and entrust power to unelected bureaucrats.

Such a solution would have equally disastrous consequences. While retaining a few trivial trappings of democracy, a new, fully integrated eurozone would become a technocracy: a trans-national conglomerate run by officials. Some intellectuals privately argue that the nation state was merely a momentary aberration in humanity's long history, and that representative democracy is failing.

But the public would rightly reject such nonsense: the real problem is that the people have too little, rather than too much, power. The next European treaty, which will represent another integrationist leap when it is eventually drawn up, will be an almost impossible sell.

We are therefore at an impasse. The EU faces a long-term economic, demographic and cultural implosion, and is staring down the abyss of illegitimacy. A small subset of European countries may be able to pull something off, and merge. I'm sceptical even of that, but it's certainly one possibility. But we need a new model of European cooperation for those who realise that neither the status quo nor more integration is the answer.

That is where Brexit comes in. A British departure from the EU, if executed correctly, could save Europe from itself: it would create a plan B, a workable alternative for those countries that want to be part of an integrated Europe but are unhappy at the direction of travel.

Within a few years, Britain could be at the head of a network of at least six or seven self-governing but closely integrated countries; these would surely include Norway, Switzerland and Iceland, but others would join in too, including perhaps some non-euro nations such as Denmark and even the Netherlands, an increasingly anti-EU country. As to the eastern Europeans, membership of the EU was the way they redefined themselves as post-Soviet, with Nato membership the route to security.

But if Europe were to split into two, very different groups, a decentralised one led by the UK and another, increasingly integrated bloc controlled by Berlin and Paris, there would suddenly be more than one option. Some Eastern European nations would hopefully end up following Britain.

The UK's new economic community could even be extended to other, non-EU states in the Mediterranean, such as Israel, or even further afield. Preaching and whining is no longer enough: Britain needs to lead by example, and show our neighbours that being good Europeans no longer requires being part of the EU.

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