

The Foreign Secretary has a point

Germans often complain about the continued use of World War II imagery by some people in the UK. Yesterday, however, it was a Belgian, Guy Verhofstadt, who took exception to Boris Johnson's warning to France's president, François Hollande, not to respond to Brexit by trying to "administer punishment beatings" in the manner of "some world war two movie".

Mr Verhofstadt called the Foreign Secretary's words "abhorrent and deeply unhelpful" while later the same day, Malta's Prime Minister, Joseph Muscat, whose country currently holds the rotating EU presidency, insisted that any future deal "necessarily needs to be inferior to membership".

There is a flaw in this approach, however, and Mr Johnson, whether one approves of his rather colourful language or not, has hit the nail on the head. Any organisation which seeks to punish – or even to make life tough for – those who say "this isn't working for me" has a big problem.

To illustrate the point, last Tuesday, BBC Radio 4's *Call You and Yours* debated the quality of public services in rural locations. One caller rang in to say that she had lived in the countryside for several years, but was moving back to a town because rural life just wasn't working out for her. Other callers, by contrast, said how much they enjoyed such a lifestyle, but no one picked on the woman planning to return to a town because life in the country didn't suit her. No one would have dreamed of denying her the freedom to exercise a lifestyle choice.

By contrast, let us consider the organisations that do – or have – punished deserters and dissenters. To the Second World War POW camps mentioned by Mr Johnson. we could add the

Spanish Inquisition, the former Soviet Union, North Korea and, of course, many Islamic countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Somalia, Sudan and Afghanistan where apostates face the death penalty.

Are these the bedfellows which the EU wishes to keep? If the European project was really such a good thing, shouldn't its member states be bending over backwards to help poor little UK make its way in the big wide world after voting to leave its kindly embrace?

The harsh truth is that any talk of inferior status for an independent UK reveals a great deal of self-doubt about the whole EU plan. But then, given that in 2014, the EU spent a staggering €664 million on propaganda telling its citizens – and indeed the world – what a wonderful organisation it is, Mr Muscat's comments do not really tell us anything new.

This year marks 60 years since the signing of the Treaty of Rome, which formally launched what has become the EU. Everyone has had enough time to determine what they think of the project and surely after this time, it ought to be self-evident by now whether or not the EU is a good thing. The size of its publicity budget, not to mention the EU's own polling suggests that a significant and steadily growing minority of its citizens have already made their minds up in a way that is not to the liking of the Brussels élite. Mrs May tactfully stated that she did not wish to see the EU unravel in her speech on Tuesday, but the question from a staff member of President-Elect Trump's team about which nation will be next to leave will probably prove to be nearer the mark.

Photo by BackBoris2012 