

# Re-taking our place in the world

At least a third of voters always planned on leaving the EU and were not going to be persuaded otherwise. This didn't happen on the back of something written on a bus. This was cumulative. For many the final straw was the Lisbon Treaty which was in effect an EU constitution giving it a legal personality in world affairs.

For something that so radically changed our relationship with what was (and still is) viewed as a trade relationship, it should have been put to a referendum. That our political establishment set about ratifying it, using any means at their disposal to dodge a referendum, was evidence of a political establishment which had long since given up any sense of obligation to seek consent when acting in regard to the EU.

What compounds that act was the fact that those who voted for it had very little idea what they were agreeing to. Remainers often complain that there was no impact assessment for Brexit, yet where was the comprehensive national debate over ratifying Lisbon?

We leavers warned that Lisbon would make EU membership all but impossible to reverse – and to an extent we were right. Brexit is no easy feat – and to do it properly will take more than a decade. Our main concern at the time was that the EU is a long term project which gathers its powers by stealth, creeping ever more toward a federalist entity.

Where possible I have tended to avoid the term “European superstate” largely because that kind of terminology lands you in kipper territory where that kind of hackneyed rhetoric is an instant turn off. But that is exactly what the EU is and though remainers can nominally say that we retain our

sovereignty, the question is over what? – and for how much longer?

In that regard you have to look up the chain to see how this affects the UK. As we continue to argue, the centre of the regulatory universe is increasingly Geneva, not Brussels – where the WTO TBT agreement provides the foundation of a global regulatory union.

Critics point out that implementation of this is hotly disputed and that its installation is piecemeal and subject to a number of registered exceptions, but like the EU, it is not the status quo that concerns us, rather it is the direction of travel.

While I have always been opposed to trade being an occupied field, the nature of trade agreements is changing, encompassing ever more regulatory measures extending far beyond what we would traditionally call a trade barrier. In order to eliminate distortions in labour, for example the shipping industry using Filipino slave labour, we increasingly adopt International Labour Organisation conventions in trade agreements.

Superficially there is no reason for alarm but what this means in practice is that for the EU to continue with trade exclusivity it must assume exclusive competence over areas not traditionally concerned with trade. In order to tie up these loose ends and overlaps there will eventually be a need for a new EU treaty which involves another substantial transfer of powers. But in the meantime, the ECJ will be the instrument of integration, confiscating ever more powers by the back door.

The eventual destination in this is the deletion of EU member states as independent actors on any of the global forums, with access to them controlled exclusively by Brussels. We would no longer have a voice in our own right and being bound to the EU customs code we would cease to be an independent country in

all the ways that matter. This, to me, is why Brexit is absolutely necessary and the high price is one worth paying.

Remainers would argue that we still maintain significant influence by way of being an EU member. Superficially this is correct and Brexit will, temporarily, lead to a loss of influence. But whose influence is it anyway? We are told that the UK was instrumental in pushing for EU expansion. That remains a bad idea and accession states will remain in a state of limbo until such a point as there is a major political or financial crisis – or they leave of their own accord.

But this goes back to the opening premise. It's no good to say that we have influence in Europe if we have no influence over our government. What remainers say when they say "we" have influence, they mean our permissive, unaccountable, political élites have influence – but actually only in those instances where their ambitions are in alignment with the ideology of the EU.

As much as Brexit is about severing the political integration of the EU, it is also a slapdown for our political class who have never had any intention of seeking consent – and where the EU is concerned, will tell any lie to that end.

In a lot of respects the classic arguments against the EU are legacy complaints where the damage cannot be undone. Leaving the EU does not reverse or remedy what was done to us and for the most part the UK has adapted to the new paradigm. What concerns us is whether there are the necessary safeguards to prevent yet more sweeping changes in the face of globalisation.

We are told that trade liberalisation is good for us – and on a philosophical and technical level I'm not going to argue, but on the human level, it has consequences that directly impact our lives. This is something we should have a say in, be it opening our markets to American agriculture or letting

market forces eat away at our steel industry. There are strategic concerns as well as the economic – and a dogmatic adherence to the principles of free trade is dangerous.

In recent times we have seen EU trade deals derailed because of concerns like chlorine washed chickens, but one suspects this is largely motivated by an inherent anti-Americanism, and were these topics included in any other trade agreement, nobody would have ever uttered the phrase “chlorinated chicken” – and we’d already be eating it.

The fact is that too much is going on out of sight and out of mind. Brexit is a remedy to that. We have already seen a robust debate on the shape of a future UK-US agreement and I fully expect other deals to come under similar scrutiny. I know the powerful UK agriculture lobby will be watching very closely indeed.

As much as Brexit is necessary as a defensive measure against hyper-globalisation, it is also about restoring the UK as an independent actor. As far as most people are concerned, foreign policy is just who we decide who to drop bombs on and who to dole out humanitarian aid. This is what happens when trade, a crucial element of foreign policy, is broken out of policy making and farmed out to the EU. It leaves all the strands of foreign policy happening in abstract to any coherent agenda while removing one of the more useful leverage tools.

Brexit is a means of reintegrating all of these separate strands so that we can have an effective presence on the world stage without seeking a convoluted compromise through Brussels – assuming we can get permission to act at all. The best part of it is that it does not preclude close cooperation with the EU. Obviously Brexit does not give us a free hand and our legacy ties with the EU will be a constraint, but it opens the way for more imaginative approaches than cumbersome EU FTAs.

One overlooked facet of the Brexit debate is that it gives us the opportunity to reconfigure a lot of the agreements we already have via the EU. In most respects, carrying over EU deals need not be a great headache, not least since we are maintaining existing schedules – but it's the extras we can reappraise. In the EU-Singapore agreement there is a dedicated section on renewable energy – largely reproducing WTO tract. We could either enhance or delete these sections, establishing new joint ventures and working parities, including a number of sectors not touched on by the EU.

This need not happen in competition with the EU, rather it can be a complimentary strategy where one of Europe's trading powers is free to explore avenues which could potentially benefit all of the EU. Having a major trading nation not bound by the bureaucratic inertia of the EU could well be a secret weapon for Brussels. That would make future EU-UK relations a strategic partnership rather than a subordinate relationship. There is no reason why Brexit cannot be mutually beneficial. All it takes is a little bit of vision.