

The long march to Brexit – a personal view

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Having been opposed to our membership of the European project under its various names and guises since 1972, I am mindful that others were there before me. The Campaign for an Independent Britain, often known as CIB for short, was formed in 1969 before Britain joined the then European Economic Community and included earlier independence groups as well as individual MPs and others from all parties and none. I think we are the longest established, pro independence group which has functioned continuously since then.

Being drawn from across the mainstream political spectrum, we are not a political party with members tied to a particular line of policy but our objective is clearly set out in our constitution and on that we are all united.

“To campaign for the restoration of full national sovereignty to the United Kingdom by its withdrawal from the obligations of the Treaties of European Union and the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 as amended so that Parliament may legislate freely and the United Kingdom may co-operate with other nations, as it thinks fit” .

So we are indebted to a long line of dedicated, doughty, undaunted campaigners who have gone before us and who started in a very different world from that of today. Considering the odds stacked against them and us by successive British governments and official institutions, I am reminded of John Newton’s splendid hymn “Amazing Grace”

"Through many dangers, toils and snares,

We have already come.

'twas grace that brought us safe thus far,

And grace will lead us home".

The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

We have come an amazingly long way but the journey did not end with the referendum victory. In some ways the subsequent years have been the most dispiriting, disappointing experience of all as it became apparent that there were such divisions within government, within parties and within Parliament as to make a swift achievement of our cause impossible, in spite of Parliament having voted by a large majority to respect the referendum result and carry out the people's instruction to leave the EU.

The government has managed to pass the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill which transfers EU law to the UK statute book so that we are not left in a legal vacuum. It also gives the government certain powers to modify the laws.

This may seem a strange proceeding to committed Leavers but it is very necessary that there should not be a legal vacuum – as would have happened, for instance, with food safety legislation and much else, if the Bill had not passed. In fact, such a Bill is normal procedure in countries which are becoming independent. The second Act of the newly independent Irish Parliament did just the same in 1922, transferring all the Westminster legislation to the Dublin statute book.

The odious aspect of the passage of this Bill was that people who had never had the slightest qualm about transferring massive powers to the EU suddenly displayed an entirely hypocritical attachment to the status of Parliament, claiming that the Bill gave the government "Henry VIII" powers.

Parliament can always sack the government – something which it could not do with either Henry VIII or, until now, the EU Commission!

The “Transition” or “Implementation” Period – A Vassal State?

So we are on our way out of the EU on 29th March 2019 but the government’s negotiating methodology has left so much work undone that a “transition” period will be necessary until they have sorted things out.

The proposed period runs from 30 March 2019 until 31 December 2020 but can be extended.

The terms of this transition are so penal and humiliating that some MPs have described it as a “Vassal State”. All EU law continues to apply, plus anything they dream up in the meantime and “ the Parliament of the United Kingdom shall not be considered to be a national parliament” during its currency. Neither will the Bank of England be considered to be a national central bank. (*Article X + 2 Institutional Arrangements, items 2 and 3*).

A Strange Negotiating Stance.

Looking back at the press and broadcast reports of the last two years, one could have thought that the negotiation was being conducted entirely between members of the British cabinet and Parliament rather than between the government and the EU!

A reasonable person would have thought that the five months between the referendum and the Prime Minister’s announcement of her policy in January 2017 was adequate for the government to agree a firm general negotiating position, to build sufficient consensus within the Conservative party and open discussions with the EU on a reasonably stable basis with united cabinet backing. But according to reports, Mrs. May would not allow cabinet discussions on Brexit and established

a strangely divided command with David Davis at DexEU, the senior civil servant Oliver Robbins, moved in September 2017 to where she could keep an eye on him in Downing Street, Boris Johnson as something of a loose cannon at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Dr. Liam Fox travelling the world to discuss trade agreements which the UK is not allowed to make whilst a member of the EU.

“Having our cake and eating it”

Mrs. May announced her policy of leaving the EU, the European Economic Area (EEA) and Customs Union in January 2017 and it was widely publicised from a note photographed by a sharp-eyed cameraman in Downing Street that ministers expected to be able to “have our cake and eat it. Put into crude terms, they would say to Johnny Foreigner in a boorish Bullingdon Club sort of manner “Now look here. We’re leaving this club. Going to make our own rules, you know. But you’re to keep on taking our stuff as if we are still members. We’ll take yours too. Now be a good chap and cut along” . Needless to say, it did not work. This approach was quickly dubbed “cakeism” on the continent. This arrogant attitude had to be modified to get negotiations going constructively.

A Hugely Laborious Approach to Negotiation.

From the very beginning the EU side made it clear that it would not compromise the status of its external border and we, by Mrs May’s own choice, would be outside it – what is called a “third country” . Every single existing treaty arrangement with the EU would come to an end on 29 March 2019 unless it was replaced by a new agreement. This is an immensely laborious way of dealing with a complex relationship which has been built up for over forty years – to tear it all down and rebuild from scratch in a very short time. Mrs. May said she wanted to have a “deep and special” agreement but has only just specified, in July 2018, what she thinks that might be in her recent controversial Chequers white paper. Many people

think it will not meet the EU's known procedures for its external border. Others think it is far too large a concession to the EU.

Not Customs Tariffs but Border Health & Technical Controls the main problem.

Goods circulate freely between the EU countries because the authorities in each member state keep them up to the required standards and are themselves supervised by the EU authorities to make sure they are enforcing the rules. So there is no need for checks at the internal borders. Once we are outside the EU – what is called a “Third Country” – that no longer applies and the authorities in the EU state receiving our goods have to satisfy themselves at the external EU border that the products are up to standard.

As we are an EU country at present, HMRC and the British Port Health Officers carry out technical and health inspections on goods coming to us from outside the EU. Failing any new agreement, the EU coastal states will apply exactly the same standards to our goods after Brexit. I have printed out the first few pages of a relevant HMRC manual on food and feedingstuffs which will apply. This is bound to create choke points and traffic jams at the busiest transit ports like Calais and Dover and will have adverse effects on delivering perishable goods or items in other “Just In Time” supply chains.

The Return of Sovereignty

But whilst trade will be affected, it was never the main point of our campaign which always was the return of national democratic self government.

Theoretically that means that we make all our own laws about absolutely everything., but as I mentioned, we are in a different world to that which our founders experienced. For instance, they did not have mobile phones.

I expect everyone here has one . If you have been on holiday with it, you will know that it continues to work across national borders. That does not happen by chance but by a massively detailed system of international regulation. It comes to us through an EU regulation at present because we are EU members. But it was not made by the EU. It is GLOBAL. Similarly, if you take electronic gadgets with you on holiday, you can buy batteries at corner shops from Tooting to Timbuktu and they will fit. That did not happen by accident either!

I have yet to hear even the most extreme Brexiteer insist that we must make our own laws for mobile phones and batteries. It is so convenient that they are standardised internationally. The fact that they are regulated in very great detail by international treaties actually increases our freedom in practical terms.

The same thing is even true of passports. I loathed my EU passport when I received it and put a cover on it, so that it looked like a proper British one. So I am glad that we will be returning to real British passports – like a sort of union jack in our pocket.

Yet the design of passports has been regulated by international treaty since the 1920s and today's passports – apart from the colour , the country's name on the cover and the first page – are totally standardised across all countries by international treaty to be machine-readable and biometric at airports across the world. That actually increases our freedom to travel. We could insist on having our own different, special British passport but it would not get us very far!

Many years ago Boris Johnson was Brussels correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* and started a series of articles on the bonkers bureaucrats of Brussels and their potty regulations. They were very entertaining but not always truthful, as his former boss Max Hastings testifies.

UKIP jumped into that groove and wore it ever deeper. Just in the run up to the referendum, they were still stuck in it. You may remember their concern about “Mild Green Fairy Liquid” which was to be made to carry a warning – a red diamond frame with a white ground inside and a black exclamation mark. That is actually an internationally agreed symbol for a skin and eye irritant – which the product certainly is. Just try it in your eye!

This was not an EU initiative but part of a world-wide standardisation of such symbols to make life easier for customs and safety inspectors. The EU was merely the local administrator of a scheme which was making free trade easier.

I got in touch with a UKIP friend to tell him what an ass he was making of himself and his party but it made no difference.

Of the 5,900 or so regulations which apply to the European Economic Area (EEA), (the “Common Market” part of the EU), most are of this technical sort and most do not come from the EU but from international bodies which the EU obeys, such as UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission Europe) Codex Alimentarius (food), ISO (International Standards Organisation) and so on. They even define for the EU the acceptable curvature of marketable cucumbers!

Does anybody here feel that our constitutional rights or country's freedom are threatened by observing accepted international standards in such matters? Must we establish our own British standards in all these things? Will the world want to know if we do? I rather doubt it.

Sovereignty is important in things which really are important but I, for one, would not go to the barricades or to the scaffold over the internationally accepted standard for the sugar content of jam!

Of course, it is a scandal that we had no part in the decisions of the global organisations which decide these

things for the EU and the world. As an EU member, we were bound to support the line which the EU Commission decides for us. As a free country, we will get our voice back in the higher councils of the world.

The EU as Rule Taker not Rule Maker

The United Nations Economic Commission Europe was one of the bodies advocated by Winston Churchill, as a regional branch of the United Nations.

Hardly anybody has heard of it, yet in many economic areas it tells the EU what to do. In or out of the EU we will be following the regulations of its World Forum for Harmonisation of Vehicle Regulations (W.P.29), as does most of the world, apart from the United States. It covers all aspects of vehicle safety. So manufacturers which want to trade in the EU (and EFTA states) must comply with its regulations to gain the "type approval" for their vehicles to be saleable there.

So it's not just to do with marks on bottles of Fairy Liquid! I tried to explain this to a UKIP MEP and he looked at me blankly. "I am not campaigning against the United Nations" he said. The management at Toyota was telling its workers that we must stay in the EU so that the UK would be at the "top table" in Brussels where regulations are decided. Yet I had shown him that the top table was not with the EU but with UNECE in Geneva. Could he not go and explain this to the Toyota management? They might then stop telling their workers to vote remain. "I don't see how I could use this in campaigning", he said. "You don't have to, if Toyota start telling their employees the real situation" I said. But he was not convinced.

So there is not a great big unregulated free world market out there, waiting for buccaneering British manufacturers liberated from EU regulation to sell cut price, sub standard goods to grateful natives. As the world grows more prosperous,

so people insist on safe motor cars, aeroplanes which don't fall out of the sky, medicines which actually make them better and so on. Looking into this I was amused to find that the programme series "Only Fools & Horses" is a very successful export in countries which share the sense of humour. But the very unregulated firm "Trotters' Independent Trading" is not a template for a successful world trading economy!

The Hard Brexiteers

Having fought our membership of the EU for over forty years, I can well understand my fellow campaigners who want as little to do with the EU as possible, as soon as possible. I was talking to one such lady, a tremendous campaigner, the sort of person without whom we would never have got to a referendum, and explaining that we would have to be on some sort of terms with our European neighbours afterwards. "We can't just haul up the anchor and sail away" I said.

"Oh, I do so wish we could" said the lady in a deeply heartfelt way with which I could heartily sympathise. But, of course, we can't. Whilst there is much wrong with our economic relationship with the EU, it is far too important just to "walk away" from. Whilst I expect that our economy will develop closer ties with other countries, particularly the Commonwealth, that will not happen instantly. In the meantime some 30% of our food comes from the EU and we export quite a bit to them. Those are not the sort of supply chains you can replace overnight. In terms of overall exports, it is some 10% of our economy and, of course, many British people's jobs depend on handling the imports we receive from the EU.

Some people of this "Hard Brexit" opinion have told me that they think that "a few years" of economic hardship would be "worth it" to be definitively rid of the EU. I had to ask "Worth it to whom?" Well, changes of this sort do have consequences for businesses – not always intended. If you Google "Edward Spalton the Miller's Tale" and go to Episode 4,

you will see how Mr. Wilson's "fundamental renegotiation" of 1975 affected our family business and quite unintentionally destroyed the trade for our best product. I know because it was my job to sell it! That was just one effect of a high level treaty agreement on one small business. Mr Wilson certainly did not intend it! Perhaps I am being unfair to good people , often long serving campaigners, who seem to welcome the prospect of economic disruption and hardship as virtuous. "Like 1940" one of them said to me. They are personally honourable people.

Those I know are mostly nearer my age than my children's. They have raised their families, bought their houses and often have a bit put by or a pension. Just a little bit, they remind me of the caricature of First World War Generals in their comfortable Chateau, planning the next "Big Push". The expendable Poor Bloody Infantry in their grand scheme are the younger folk with jobs dependent on our trade with the European countries. I doubt whether they would relish their conscript role in such a "Big Push". If any significant number of jobs were lost, they would be very unlikely to feel much enthusiasm for independence but especially not for the government which made a botch of it. And we have an example which ought to be remembered by the Conservative party forever. Any good General avoids unnecessary casualties. Being cautious and planning thoroughly is not being cowardly.

What Happened When HMG Made a Real Botch of Things Last Time.

Much against her will, Mrs Thatcher was persuaded to join the ERM – The Exchange Rate Mechanism. The UK promised to keep the exchange rate of the pound Sterling closely aligned with EU currencies, particularly the Deutsche Mark. It was, in fact, a sort of antechamber to the euro currency although the government did not say that. When Mr. Major came to power in 1992, it all went horribly wrong. The government spent billions of pounds propping up the exchange rate in vain. The arrangement collapsed and Mr. Soros made a great deal of

money. To keep the exchange rate high, the government increased interest rates to try to keep its bargain.

In the first 9 months of 1992 there were

- 36,000 bankruptcies
- 25,000 businesses insolvent/liquidated
- 68,000 homes repossessed and
- 205,000 families forced into mortgage arrears

simply because they could not afford the interest rates which the government desperately increased to try to keep up the value of the pound.

Eventually they had to renege on their agreement with the EU countries and crash out of the system. Interest rates came down sharply and things improved.

Although both Labour and Conservative parties had backed the ERM and its EU motivation, it was the Conservatives who rightly got the blame. Their reputation for financial competence was destroyed. So the Labour election landslide of 1997 was not just due to that nice Mr Blair's fresh new face but to people's memory of Conservative incompetence which destroyed jobs, businesses and family homes. They did not attain a majority again for 18 years.

Before the referendum Professor Vernon Bogdanor gave a very interesting lecture on the consequences of the ERM fiasco and said how he thought the memory and effects of it would decide people's votes 24 years later. The crucial part is from about 50 minutes onward in the youtube recording. Just Google "Professor Vernon Bogdanor ERM Youtube"

A botched Brexit would have far more serious and long-lasting consequences than the ERM fiasco and could not be put right by reducing interest rates.

For good or ill the effects of Brexit will last for at least a

generation. Mr Rees Mogg says fifty years. So we have to be careful. That's not being cowardly. We are playing for keeps and not just for ourselves but on behalf of those who come after us.

It seems we may well be out of the EU in the hard Brexit which some desire by March 30th next year. So far, the government has made no preparations for this and given absolutely no guidance to businesses. So one has to ask how serious they are or ever were and whether they are simply play-acting in a Parliament which lost real power so many years ago that it cannot even put in place the basic preparations for the consequences of its actions.

I started with a verse from a hymn and will finish with one because I am sure that the cause of independence will proceed and that people will not forever tolerate incompetence and deceit in their government and public office holders.

The verse is

"Through the night of doubt and sorrow,

Onward goes the pilgrim band.

Singing songs of expectation,

Marching to the promised land" .