

Tony Blair must be silenced

Do you know anyone who doesn't hate Tony Blair? The most I can say in his favour is that I know a couple of people who loathe certain other politicians even more than they loathe him. Most people wish he would just shut up and retire to obscurity but unfortunately, being an ex-Prime Minister, the media is still more than willing to listen to what he says – and as far as Brexit is concerned, he has been rather verbose recently.

His latest outburst shows that he remains stubbornly opposed to the government carrying out the democratic will of the people. He doesn't want us to leave the EU. Even though much of the article focuses on the problems of a future trade relationship, his support for the EU goes beyond trade issues. "Membership of the European Union is right as a matter of principle, for profound political as well as economic reasons." he asserts. He goes on to say "We are making an error the contemporary world cannot understand and the generations of the future will not forgive...Brexit isn't and never was the answer."

Naturally, we would disagree, but if Blair and his ilk are to be silenced once and for all, two things are necessary. Firstly, his arguments in favour of the general principle of EU membership have to be refuted, but secondly, the government must address the current weaknesses in its Brexit strategy.

The first of Blair's points, namely that EU membership is a good thing politically as well as economically, is so fatally flawed that no fair-minded well informed person could possibly agree. Thanks to our EU membership, we have found ourselves unnecessarily mixed up in the EU's empire building – for example, in the Ukraine, a part of the world where we have little strategic interest. We have found our excellent Common Law legal system compromised by our membership of Europol or the European Arrest Warrant. Furthermore, the direction of

travel in the EU is towards closer integration, which means in effect power will be taken still further away from the people and their elected representatives, given instead to a largely unelected and increasingly unaccountable clique of bureaucrats and politicians in Brussels.

In 2012, Angela Merkel told David Cameron, "Your vision of the EU is so cold, David." The point she was making is that for most of us, including our former Prime Minister, the EU was about trade. We have always been sceptical about grandiose political projects. and thus have always felt on the outside of the EU, most of whose member states do not share our scepticism. Only a few senior British politicians have ever embraced the EU's federalism wholeheartedly. One of these few, however, was Blair's mentor Roy Jenkins, the only Briton ever to lead the European Commission. As Prime Minister, Blair never felt himself in a position to display his federalist sympathies quite so openly as Jenkins but now Brexit looks like extinguishing the dying embers of his megalomaniac ambitions of becoming Emperor Tony the First, he clearly feels he has nothing to lose.

For those of us living in the real world, however, it is blindingly obvious that our political system needs to be reformed so that we digress further from the EU. In other words, power should be brought closer to the people – taking non-EU Switzerland as our model, which has one of the most accountable systems of government in the world. Indeed, we should seek to become the leader of Free Europe, as we were between 1940 and 1945, showing that there is a better way for countries to organise themselves than to emasculate their national democracies in favour of a remote, unaccountable bureaucracy in Brussels. We can do far more good and wield far more influence internationally this way than by remaining in the EU. The future generations, far from being unwilling to forgive us for Brexit, will be delighted that by leaving the EU, we made not only our country, but other lands too, a

better place. Blair's argument that Brexit was an unfortunate mistake will, unless the Government messes up badly, prove to be about as accurate as his conviction that Saddam Hussein possessed a vast stockpile of weapons of mass destruction.

Unfortunately, our opportunities to help the government address the weaknesses of its Brexit strategy (and thus avoid making a mess of Brexit) are more limited, but we must do what we can. Blair outlines four possible outcomes:- staying what he calls a "reformed Europe", leaving the EU but staying within the Single Market and Customs Union, leaving the EU but negotiating a bespoke Free trade agreement which "keeps us close to Europe politically" or leaving the EU and "negotiating a basic Free Trade Agreement and market ourselves as 'Not Europe'".

As far as the first option is concerned, the Conservative Party has spent much of the last 30 years trying to "reform" the European Union. last year's "State of the Union" speech by Jean-Claude Juncker and the strongly pro-federalist speech by Martin Schulz a couple of months later shows how deeply federalism which, above all, led to the Brexit vote, is still embedded into the EU's DNA. Perhaps Blair has forgotten that for all his talk of our "staying in the EU, using the Brexit vote as leverage to achieve reform" that David Cameron did come back from Brussels with some degree of reform nearly two years ago. He secured a sort-of exemption from ever closer union and a very weak concession that the EU might allow a limited "emergency brake" on immigration. The majority of the electorate wasn't impressed and voted to leave. 18 months on, there has been no indication of any widespread change of heart.

The way Blair frames the second option, he is either being devious or just plain stupid. Like a number of other remainers, he portrays the single market and the customs union as somehow joined at the hip. They are not. Staying in the EEA as a transitional arrangement would be a vast improvement on

the transitional deal currently being discussed, which would leave us as a colony of the EU with no power. The Customs Union, on the other hand, was never even discussed during the referendum debate. Apart from micro-states like San Marino, Turkey is the only non-EU country to be part of the Customs Union. The Turks do not like this deal and given that we would not be able to secure an independent trade policy, it would not be popular here either. It is an irrelevancy and the sooner it falls out of any discussion of our future, the better.

Blair's third and fourth options are more about politics than trade. Both assume we end up with a bespoke deal with the EU. Do we want to stay politically close to the EU or deliberately launch out on a different path? In reality, rather than a binary choice, the question should be phrased more on the lines of whereabouts on the scale of political closeness or political divergence do we wish to position ourselves? The answer is probably far closer to the "divergence" end of the spectrum than Blair would wish, as has been noted above.

Unfortunately, the muddle which the Government has found itself in may result in our ending up stuck in limbo between options 1 and 2 – a transitional deal which sees us effectively locked into the EU for a further 21 months and which gives us access to the Single Market but on far worse terms than Norway or Iceland. It is staggering that there has so far been so little critical analysis of the proposed transitional deal, as it is a very bad arrangement indeed. Somehow, the EU's harsh guidelines have been completely ignored by many politicians and indeed, much of the media. As mentioned above, we would essentially end up as a colony of the EU, forced to accept the full *acquis* but with no say in the framing or implementation of these laws. In such circumstances, it would be all too easy to end up saying "What was the point of the Brexit vote?"

To throw in the towel is exactly what Blair and co would love us to do. No one can deny that the last 18 months have been

exasperating and there is still little light at the end of the tunnel as far as a sensible exit strategy is concerned. If you are a leave voter who has become utterly fed up with the whole subject of Brexit, take heart; you are not alone! Perhaps, however, we should think back to that momentous day in June 2016. Our elation at the time should act as a reminder that we must not give up, no matter how frustrated we feel at the moment. To allow the likes of Blair to win by default, especially given the weaknesses of his arguments, would be the ultimate tragedy for our countrymen and a betrayal of all that we have fought for over the last four decades. Blair can only finally be silenced by persevering to the end, continuing to make the case for Brexit, seeking to influence the debate on how best to achieve the best deal – and persevere we must and shall.