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Greater Britain?

What Role for Civil Society?

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When on the morning of 24th June, 2016, Europe and the world realized that the referendum in the United Kingdom had gone in favour of Brexit, everybody seemed to be under a shock. It was a slim majority, it was not the majority of the people, Scotland and Northern Ireland had produced a different result (and Gibraltar an overwhelmingly different one), but under the rules of the game, Brexit had won, and Remain had lost. Before resigning, Prime Minister David Cameron confirmed that the government would respect the outcome, which constitutionally he was under no obligation to do. His successor Theresa May hastened to add that “Brexit means Brexit“. Since then, the government has done all it could to make everyone believe it would see it through. Since then, it has become quite clear that the Brexit campaign’s most important assertions were false, and that the government had failed dismally in providing the citizens with adequate information both on existing facts and issues and on the consequences. The lack of sincerity in pleading with the citizens called upon to exercise their voting rights, was colossal on both sides. Obstacles and stumbling blocks have piled up, not least the 60 billion Euro

exit bill presented by the European Union, massive problems concerning EU citizens living in the UK, problems with Northern Ireland and Gibraltar, the possible end of the Union with Scotland, and the future of London’s financial services hub. None of this has seemingly made any impression on the ministers. Little wonder they are not trusted.

All this makes one think whether what we are made to assume to be the reasons why the referendum went the way it did, i.e. whether the dissatisfaction of the British people – and indeed many other Europeans – with the European institutions, or the immigration issue, or indeed the sovereignty of parliament at Westminster is really the heart of the matter. I am not – repeat not – in any way addicted to conspiracy theories, but as an intellectual exercise, it seems no more than fair to analyze in more depth whether there are forces in this world for whom Brexit would appear as an advantage, be it in political or economic terms, and who may have used popular sentiment deliberately to bring it about. There are just too many pieces that don’t seem to fit to make one believe it is all about regaining control – whatever that means in today’s intertwined world –, let alone living up to the traditions of merry old England and other irrational arguments that have been used to influence public opinion. As a man put it who had voted ‘Leave’ in the referendum: “If the vote was rerun today, mine would be an emphatic remain. I’ve been duped.”



In view of the huge and growing world powers, the United States, Russia, and China, plus rapidly emerging powers like India and emerging conglomerates in Latin America and possibly Africa, Europe, over the last 60 years has done the only sensible thing in aspiring to become a strong conglomerate itself. Henry Kissinger's famous quip that if he wanted to talk to Europe, he wouldn't know what number to call, was and still is true to some extent, but even in his time, it was not clear whether it was a sigh of exasperation or a sigh of relief. In many ways, Europe had grown together then and has even more today. Free trade, the rule of law, a liberal democracy, a vibrant civil society, regard for human rights, other fundamental values, and above all the attempt to combine unity where necessary with diversity and respect for different cultural traditions wherever possible, have become key elements of our political structure. We are not heading towards the United States of Europe in an 18th century sense of the word; we are, out of sheer necessity, heading for a new way of organizing political governance in a global society.

Clearly, this is not to everybody's liking. More often than not, and increasingly so, likes and dislikes, opportunities and threats, are discussed in an level playing field; civil society has increasingly not only acted as watchdog, where parliaments have failed to do so, but has actively assumed a participatory role in shaping political decisions. What happened in Central and Eastern Europe before and after 1989 is a shining example. This is fair, and indeed to be encouraged. In many cases, dislikes outside Europe are based upon arguments of Eurocentrism and neo-colonialism, and in some cases, this is undoubtedly correct. But it cannot be overlooked that strong players in global affairs neither believe in an open society nor do they see united Europe as a

blessing, and are tempted to use all kinds of instruments at their disposal to influence what happens. History has shown time and time again that in order to achieve a better position at the global gambling table, fight off competitors in the political as well as the economic field, preserve or improve power structures, and quite possibly gain personal wealth, leaders will resort to means that are neither acceptable nor spelled out in public.

Unquestionably, there are business interests that would gain considerably from an independent Britain and a weaker European Union. Furthermore, from their point of view, allowing people to speak their minds, having everybody join in political decision making, protecting minorities against majority domination, and a plethora of other values, do not rank high on the agenda. Moreover, while they might agree to a set of values in very general terms, people with power at their disposal do have a tendency to assume they are better equipped and better suited to make the really important decisions without the cumbersome procedure of ensuring the assent of people deemed to be intellectually and economically inferior. It should also be remembered that some political and business leaders everywhere in the world would not object to having a market economy and free trade without a democracy. The Chinese example to some is not as unattractive as staunch democrats (like myself) would like to believe, nor do they realize that in the long run, oligarchies are more stable than rigid hierarchies. In short, one may envisage that striking a blow at European values – and, of course, at European politics and the European economy – might seem attractive to some. Paradoxically, it is these people who try to mastermind public opinion by pretending to listen to the unsatisfied and left behind and ostensibly fighting the established and estranged elites.

Given this scenario, one does not need to succumb to a conspiracy theory to see there is a fight on, and that there is considerable interest in attempting to obstruct what has rather clumsily been described as an ‘ever closer (European) union’, and what is in fact a novel attempt to create a political structure. In the world of politics, this interest could be prevalent in Russia, China, and the United States of America, where the people have just elected a confirmed protectionist to be their President. In the business world, there could be corporations who do not see free trade as a business advantage. Indeed, in the world of civil society, too, which contrary to popular belief is not inherently ‘good’, there exist ideas that for a plethora of reasons, fear of the future being one of them, are not compatible with creating or embellishing what Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 called the ‘common house of Europe’. These ideas, more often than not labelled nationalism by opponents, and traditional values by their defendants, are usually seen as the main reason why this common house should be fought rather than cherished. But I would argue that in many cases this argument is no more than a smoke screen that enables other arguments to go unnoticed. I do not doubt the sincerity of many people who have grave misgivings about the way Europe has been allowed to develop, and indeed I would share some of their arguments, while on the other hand remaining a staunch supporter of European integration. I accept that some people find it difficult to imagine how a political space can work that is fundamentally different from the national state – the space we have got used to over last last 300 years or so, much as I myself look forward to overcoming it. But I doubt whether this alone would have been enough to help populist movements become decisive political players in France, the Netherlands, Great

Britain, Hungary, and Poland, and noticeable factors in Germany, Italy, and other EU member states.

It has always been known that Rupert Murdoch has very strong negative views on Britain’s EU membership and has consistently used his media power to influence public opinion. Why he holds these views, has never been fully disclosed. We now know that the American billionaire Robert Mercer, a close friend of Nigel Farage, with the help of ‘Cambridge Analytica’, a company he co-owns, was instrumental in providing Donald Trump (who wished to see Nigel Farage as Britain’s Ambassador to Washington) with tools to fine-tune his campaign that go well beyond traditional campaigning and provided ample funds to the Brexit campaign. What drove him, has yet to be acknowledged. What is driving certain hedge fund and real estate tycoons is probably easier to understand. We know that certain non-European business corporations in the past have put considerable pressure on European competitors to make them stay out of certain markets. Security considerations were put forward where in fact it was all about competition. It is obvious that Russia not only tried to meddle in the last US presidential elections, but is also not terribly keen to have a strong united Europe sitting on its western borders. Other big powers have been ambivalent in their position. More recently, we have witnessed Trump’s administration boycotting a G 20 declaration on free trade. And he has announced that there is more of the same to come. If we look at the remaining 27 EU members, we can see that after Brexit the protectionist members will have a blocking minority. Have we done all we should to try and understand whether all these or some of these bits of news are in fact parts of a puzzle?

As far as I can see there is as yet no compelling evidence that Europe has become the victim of a global orchestrated campaign that aims at destroying it, organized by forces we cannot hold accountable. But it is reasonable to assume there are vested political and economic interests around the world that would rather see Europe weakened than strengthened. Given that political movements, the power base for all populist “saviours”, do not develop beyond a certain point without an organizational backbone and require well-designed multi-level campaigns to be successful, I am less and less convinced there isn’t one going, or several, for that matter. Certainly, this would explain a few things. With the help of the instruments at their disposal, forces set on striking a fatal blow against Europe may well have identified Brexit as an intelligent and feasible way to achieve their goal. By cooking up existing popular sentiment they have succeeded in nudging the British people towards actually voting for this option, while pressuring or even blackmailing the government into acting as they wish them to.

So: What is really driving Brexit? Why did David Cameron’s government not provide accurate and comprehensive information before the referendum? What made Theresa May behave so high-handedly in its aftermath? What does she have up her sleeve that we don’t know about? Could it be that the whole Brexit issue was deliberately orchestrated not for the sake of Britain but in order to weaken Europe in the global arena? If any of this is even remotely true, the British people should be seen as having fallen victims to a power game beyond their control, and have deliberately been led astray. Lying about certain facts (like the 350 million Pounds) would be revealed as the tip of a very much larger iceberg.

The attitude the government has adopted, deriding world citizens, brushing aside

Scottish and Irish sentiments, alienating Commonwealth countries, and attempting to dictate the timetable to the European Union, has not helped so far and will not do so in the future. Still, strangely, should Brexit lead to Europe disintegrating, the United Kingdom would emerge on top by having been the first to leave and having left before the general scramble. But given the attitude adopted by the governments of all 27 remaining countries and, probably even more importantly, the steadily growing pro-European popular spirit with new civil society action groups starting up every week, this scenario now seems increasingly unlikely. Messrs. Putin and Trump, with help from Mr. Erdogan and others, and indeed Brexit itself, rather than adding to Europe’s chagrin, seem to have brought Europeans closer to one another than they have been for a long time. Determination to make it a success has grown rather than waned. The Dutch have been the first to show that anti-European feelings will not necessarily help win an election in a European member state. Chances that Marine Le Pen will be the next President of France are now much slimmer than even a few months ago. If anybody ever hoped that Brexit would make others follow, it looks as if these hopes have been dashed.

So, possibly, what we are seeing at the moment is a backlash. Of course dissatisfaction with the European Union has not just gone away, although the Commission seems to be on its best behavior by cutting down on the number of rules and regulations it had got accustomed to issue. Of course we need to tackle fundamental reforms. And of course, people with very different ideas are still around. But it looks as if a growing number of citizens know very well what the real issues are and have woken up to the fact they have to do something about it. Civil society is increasingly nudging governments towards Europe rather than away from it.

If any of this is true and proves to be sustainable, the United Kingdom will end up as a loser. Not only might the UK split up and might the government be landed with more problems on their hands than they can manage (and might the Tories be defeated in the next election). England in the end could find herself in a position exactly opposite to the one the Brexiteers said she would, and will not be better off for it. It may well be that some of the Brexiteers really do hope they can take England into a glorious future of its very own in a global world, once the ties with Europe have been severed. But judging from the reactions to Brexit from all potential allies to be anywhere around the globe, this does not seem at all likely. Foreseeably, not one of the global players who used the British people for their very own ends, will come to their rescue.

100 years ago, there was a big intellectual debate in the United Kingdom over the right way to keep its world-wide Empire together. One set of proposals advanced in many variations was described as 'Greater Britain'. This was to mean a global political and of course economic conglomerate that was to unite Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and a few other countries. There was to be some kind of a common parliament and a federal administrative system. None of these ideas ever became operational, except for a vague albeit quite strong feeling of belonging that did indeed unite these countries scattered around the world. The so-called special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom, at all times very much more a British than an American political directive, and the British Commonwealth of Nations, which is certainly much stronger and more influential than many people think it is, are probably the only tangible outcomes of all these ideas. Will they be strong enough to ensure England's position in the world of tomorrow? I wonder.

At the end of the day, England, by her insistence on being on her own, might be exactly that, struggling to live up to the responsibilities that come with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, an albeit minor nuclear power, and sovereignty over a very mixed bunch of fourteen little territories, ranging from bits of Cyprus to the Falkland Islands, all costly remainders of what was once the British Empire. World History will move on, but Great Britain, once the largest global Empire ever assembled, will have been reduced to an historical footnote, instead of extending its potentially considerable leverage through a Europe that has managed to reinvent itself.

I believe Britain can still avert this fate. Over the next two years, the government may still revise its policy and withdraw its application to leave. Or parliament can choose a new government. Or indeed the people can, by voting in a new parliament. It is just possible that one of these options might still be feasible. Britain will be greater for it. But it will depend entirely on civil society setting up the agenda and pulling professional politics after them.

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