

# Brexit Reveals the Persistence of Nationalism

by Theodore Dalrymple



The political cross-currents of Brexit are now so many, so various and so swirling that the average person, and perhaps the above-average person, no longer knows what to think. He becomes dizzy when he tries to do so, and thus averts his mind from the whole question and gets on with his life as best he can.

The British government and the European Commission have come to some kind of agreement, but there are many obstacles to its implementation, both on the British side and the European. To take only one: the Spanish threat to try to stop the deal over the question of Gibraltar.

Spain claims sovereignty over this tiny territory though it

has been British (by treaty) for 305 years and the overwhelming majority of its population wishes to remain British. But Spanish feeling remains high on the issue, and Spain was hoping to use Brexit as a means of leveraging more control over the territory (which has never been claimed as an integral part of the United Kingdom), and eventually cession of sovereignty.

Whatever the rights or wrongs of the issue, the Spanish threat to scupper the agreement because of it is revelatory of the tensions at the heart of the so-called European project—a project that can only be to build a super-state whose most likely eventual destiny is break-up, either violent or peaceful but nonetheless bitter, on the rocks of nationalism.

Spain is not prepared to put its national—or rather nationalist—interest aside in favour of whatever the other 26 countries might think is in the interest of the European Union as a whole. On the other hand, the Union might feel that it cannot afford to offend the nationalist sensibilities of one of its most important members, even if by assuaging them it harms the interests of the Union as a whole. Either way, nationalist feeling will have been revealed to be far stronger than pan-European feeling, which is, at most, a very pale ghost of the nationalist variety.

France is said to be unhappy over the question of fishing rights in British waters and will not accept what European negotiators in Brussels have agreed. In other words, it will not passively accept cession of its national sovereignty or interest to Union officialdom. Where does that leave “ever-closer union,” and what kind of unified European army as desired by President Macron could ever be established or ever deployed, if France is prepared to scupper an agreement as large as that between Britain and European Union over the matter of fish?

On the British side, of course, the waters are even murkier.

Mrs. May might or might not be able to get her agreement through parliament. She found herself dependent on the support of the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party to form a majority in Parliament after her miscalculation in having called a general election when she did not have to do so, but this party will not support the proposed agreement because it thinks it treats Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the United Kingdom and will lead eventually to a United Ireland.

Furthermore, there are many Conservative Members of Parliament who will not support her either, although it is still unsure how many they will be. Therefore, she will have to seek support from Labour, that is to say from opposition, Members of Parliament. Here, too, the matter is far from straightforward. Mrs. May has warned that the alternative to her agreement for Brexit is no Brexit at all, but many Labour Members of Parliament sit for working-class constituencies that voted solidly for Brexit. If they vote against Mrs. May, they may in effect be voting for no Brexit, thereby risking defeat at the next election. On the other hand, the Labour Party as a whole would like to bring down the government, provoking another general election which it believes that it would win. Were it to do so, of course, it would bring to power people who admire the Venezuelan model and believe in confiscation as the path to universal prosperity. They would make Brexit seem like a minor detail in the history of British difficulties. But those Labour Members of Parliament who voted to support Mrs. May would risk not being selected as Labour candidates in any future election. What seems likely is that the calculation of personal interest will far outweigh that of national interest in the minds of these Members of Parliament.

There are increasing calls in Britain for a second referendum, for what its proponents call *A People's Referendum*—as if the previous referendum had somehow excluded the people. By the word *people*, they mean, of course, the people who agree with

them: the others are not truly of the people, they are instead enemies of the people.

Unfortunately, it is not clear what the question to be asked in the second referendum would be. It might be, "Do you prefer Mrs. May's agreement to no agreement at all?" But the question the proponents would really like to ask is, "Do you now want to remain within the European Union"?

It is not certain, though it is likely, that the remainers would win such a referendum. If they did not, the whole situation would be once more up in the air; but if they did, Britain would then join the lamentably long list of European countries in which the opinion of the population had been solicited and then ignored, either *simpliciter* or by means of calling another referendum to get the answer right according to the opinion of the *bien pensant* bureaucracy. If this were to happen, one of the main aims of the European "idea" or "project" would have been fulfilled: the abolition of politics in favour of technocratic administration by a supposedly wide and solicitous, but certainly self-appointed and self-perpetuating, class of bureaucrat. The legacy, of course, would be a deep and bitter division in the British population, and increased tension in other countries in which support for the European Union is far from rock solid. M. Macron, for example, admitted that if the referendum had been held in France, there would have been a larger majority than in Britain for leaving, though this has not dampened in the slightest his ardour for "deeper" union.

One possible solution now would be for Britain to rejoin the Union the better to leave it: that is to say, wait for it to blow itself apart until there is nothing to leave. On the other hand, the political determination to keep it together, whatever populations think, is considerable and should not be underestimated. M. Macron's unified European army is not to defend Europe from outside invasion, but to repress the population should it ever revolt against the European Union

elite.

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