

Brexomania

by Theodore Dalrymple



I don't suppose that there were many in the country who managed entirely to avoid talking about Brexit. The debate was simultaneously important and dull, in that respect rather like Mrs May. Passion in discussion was not necessarily proportional to knowledge, and many people gave up talking about it because it led only to pointless embitterment.

I was among those people. Why ruin a good dinner, let alone a friendship, over something you were powerless to influence? Better to swallow someone's opinion you did not share than ruin the convivial atmosphere to no purpose.

Few people admitted that there was something to be said on both sides of the fundamental question. Although I was a Leaver, I could easily enough construct a conservative case as a Remainer. Conservatives, after all, believe as a general rule that large changes should be made only in response to a real crisis, and there was no such crisis before the referendum. Many conservatives believed that the European

Union was bound to fall apart anyway under the weight of its own contradictions; why not just wait for this to happen? Britain's fundamental problems were not caused by the Union and would not be solved by leaving it; moreover, our own bureaucrats are hardly better than the Union's. The effort of leaving would therefore not be worthwhile.

I need hardly rehearse the arguments in favour of leaving. But moving as I do mostly in educated and liberal circles (liberal in the American sense of the word) I soon discovered that many in those circles did not believe that there were or could have been any such arguments. They simply assumed that a Leaver, ex officio, must have certain undesirable characteristics. In short, they committed what in other people they would regard as a cardinal sin: they stereotyped.

I noticed this many times when dining (my main social activity) in the company of Remainers. They spoke of Leavers with disdain or distaste, or both, with the slightly curled lip of snobbery. For them, Leavers had the following characteristics: they were ignorant and poorly educated; they were intolerant and xenophobic; they were fearful because they were unskilled in a world which has no use for the unskilled; they were uncouth.

Now normally, of course, and in other contexts, such Remainers would have affected great sympathy for the unfortunates that they assumed Leavers to be. Poor things, they had been given no opportunity to better themselves by our unfair and unjust society. What was necessary to raise up Leavers to the elevated condition of Remainers was yet more social engineering directed by government and paid for by taxation.

The referendum result, however, revealed to their horrified eyes just how numerous the primitive portion of the population was. Furthermore, the ignorant and ill-informed had been handed the power to decide the fate of the country! They had turned Britain into a laughing stock, even though President

Macron admitted that, had a similar referendum been held in France, an even bigger majority than in Britain would have voted to leave: from which he drew the obvious conclusion that what was needed was further European integration in the hope that the advantages of such integration would one day show up and reveal themselves to French voters.

For the Remainers with whom I was friends (and remain friends), there was another explanation, other than ignorance and stupidity, for the prevalence of Leavers: they were manipulated, often by sinister forces such as the social media and Mr Putin. Campaigners for Leave told lies – the Remainers forgot that our very membership of the Union was founded on the admitted lies of Edward Heath and others.

No doubt lies were indeed told on the Leavers' side, as they are told in all such campaigns. But untruth is not the monopoly of any political opinion. A referendum is like a trial by jury, and it is up to the jury to decide who presents the better case.

Given what the Leavers believed was the manipulation (and the vulnerability to manipulation) of the British voters, many Remainers came to the conclusion that a second referendum, which they called a People's Referendum, was the only way out of what they saw as the impending catastrophe. Presumably the second referendum would be arranged in such a way that the Leavers would not be able a second time to tell their lies: untruth would have to be muzzled, for fear of it triumphing again.

The very term People's Referendum was interesting, in a sinister way. It seemed to imply that the first referendum had been organised on a highly restricted franchise, and was therefore a lie in itself; but what it really meant was that the People had an opinion that only Enemies of the People would or could oppose. The word People was used in a technical sense, as in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

If those calling for a second referendum – all Remainers, of course – had objected to the first referendum before it was held, on the grounds that plebiscitary democracy is very flawed and has a terrible past, and that large constitutional questions should not be decided on the basis of fifty per cent of the voters plus one, they would have had a point – with which, as a conservative, I would have agreed. But they raised no such objection; they objected only to the result. They were so far Europeanised (in the Union's sense of the term) that they saw referenda as the means to endorse a predetermined 'correct' answer, to be repeated until the population got the answer right. A referendum was a kind of exam; if you failed, you took it again until you passed, but once you had passed, you had passed. There was no need to take it again: indeed, there was a need not to take it again.

The first referendum result came as a shock to my Remainer friends. One of the explanations was that there was a generational disparity in the voting, the old being more in favour of Leave, the young in favour of Remain. The problem was that the proportion of the young who voted at all was much smaller than that of the old who voted. In the eyes of the Remainers this delegitimated the vote, for the old were seen to be mean-spirited, fearful, over-cautious and even cognitively impaired. Of course, it might have been that they were more experienced, with greater historical knowledge and memory, and more disinterested to boot, in so far as they had no personal axe to grind, but the Remainers did not entertain such possibilities, so certain of the virtue of their own opinion were they.

The referendum had one strange result: the proposal of a professor at Cambridge that the voting age be lowered to six. This was taken seriously in a subsequent article in the Guardian newspaper.

The proposal was allegedly inspired by the need to redress the balance between youth and age in elections held in an ageing

population. After all, it is the young who will have to live for much longer with the consequences of elections. Of course, the real motive was other: it was permanently to prevent 'wrong' results, such as that of Cameron's referendum. Six-year olds will do the bidding of their manipulators.

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