

Unleashing Arrogance, Complacency, and Mediocrity

by Theodore Dalrymple



[*Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit*](#) is one of the worst books on any subject that I have read in a long time. It is a blow-by-boring-blow account of David Cameron's referendum campaign, principally in the media of mass communication, to keep Britain in the European Union. It was written by Craig Oliver, whose job was director of politics and communications in David Cameron's administration, a title instinct with dishonesty. At least one knows what a second-hand car salesman does.

But a very bad book may, in its own way, be highly instructive, as this one is. If mediocrity can ever be said to shine, then it shines from these pages. The writer, though a journalist, has no literary ability whatsoever. He writes entirely in clichés, there is not a single arresting thought

in over 400 pages, wit and even humor are entirely absent, and he seems unable to use a metaphor, almost always tired to begin with, without mixing it ("We are likely to succumb on this if they get on their high horses and cry foul"). He has no powers of analysis and no sense of history; there is no plumbing his shallows.

Nevertheless this was someone at the center of power for several years. Everyone around him, including the Prime Minister (the dumbest man ever to hold the position), comes off as just as uninteresting as he; though it has to be admitted that the author could make Talleyrand seem a bore. The one outstanding quality that these mediocrities seem to share is ambition. It is disconcerting for the citizen to be faced so starkly by the fact that ambitious mediocrity is now the main characteristic of those who rule him.

Mr. Oliver provides no context for the referendum on Brexit, the calling of which was an act of absolute folly. Such was Cameron's political incompetence that it seemed never to have occurred to him that a vote on so profound a constitutional issue should not be held and decided on the basis of 50 per cent plus one of the votes cast. In the event, the whole direction of the country was changed by the votes of 37 per cent of the eligible population, not exactly an overwhelming mandate for change; only too predictably, indeed, it was a recipe for social conflict and division. On this, the author is silent.

Had those who were shocked or horrified by the result objected to the form of the referendum before it was held, they might have had some grounds for subsequent complaint. To demand overturning the result of the vote that they complacently did not expect, absent any protests beforehand, made it look as if they believed their own votes to keep the United Kingdom in the European Union should have counted for more than those who voted to leave. The implication: They were wiser than, and morally superior to, those of a different opinion from

themselves.

The reason that these philosopher-kings didn't object beforehand was that they were confident that the vision of the anointed (to use Thomas Sowell's pithy phrase) would triumph. So wedded to that vision is the author that he does not feel it even necessary to explain why Britain should have voted to remain in the EU. Beyond saying that serious economists, chief executives of large companies, the Governor of the Bank of England and the director of the International Monetary Fund were in favor of Britain remaining (which is, in essence, the argument from authority) he provided no arguments for his opinion—though, in fact, such arguments existed, the most convincing, at least to me, being Lord Falkland's famous principle that when it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change. Of course, when and whether change is necessary is always a matter of judgment, for no condition is perfect; but you don't wreck a room just because there is dust on the mantelpiece.

However, the main reason the author provides no arguments for his views is that he believes that there are simply no arguments against them, and that therefore everything goes by default. Apparently, anyone who is capable of reading a book must, almost by definition, agree with Mr. Oliver. Over and over again he says that the push to exit the EU was based purely on xenophobia and propaganda lies. One does not refute xenophobia or propaganda.

Unfortunately, to say that there were no arguments on the other side is itself a lie. It would be vain to deny, of course, that lies and xenophobia played no part in the campaign to leave, just as it would be vain to assert that Britain's manifold problems are principally caused by its membership of the European Union rather than by, say, the abysmally low cultural level of its population, including of the most highly educated class (as this book amply demonstrates). Culture is as much a matter of character as of

education, and it is precisely character that our leaders lack.

But the most eloquent man on either side of the debate was Daniel Hannan, a man who speaks Spanish and French better than Oliver writes English, and who argued that leaving the European Union would make Britain more open to the rest of the world, not less; that far from being isolationist little Englanders, as alleged by their opponents, those in favor of the Brexit were not little Europeaners who had failed to notice that Europe was no longer the center of the world.

Part of the weakness of the book is that its author, though allegedly open to the outside world, shows no particular knowledge of it—not even of France, a mere 20 miles from our coast. If he had read its press during the campaign, he would have realized that the criticisms lodged by French commentators and even former French government ministers was just as scathing as that of Hannan and other articulate Brexiteers—namely that the EU is corrupt, bureaucratic, cumbersome, archaic, inhibitory of enterprise, economically dysfunctional, and undemocratic, and that its two most recent major innovations, the single currency and free movement across borders, had been disasters for many of its members. The only difference between the French critics and the British was that the former thought the EU was reformable, and the latter did not.

Though the author was Mr. Cameron's director of politics, whatever that might be (certainly not an elected position), he shows no interest in, or even awareness of, the political dimension of the question of Britain's EU membership. He writes as if the referendum was only about economics and immigration, ignoring that it was also a sounding of the public's view of the EU's self-proclaimed goal of ever-closer union. He therefore does not ask what the purpose is of that ever-closer union, what problem or problems it is supposed to solve, or where pursuit of this goal is likely to lead sooner

or later.

This blithe unawareness of the political dimension is evident in the admiration Mr. Oliver expresses for a man called Bill Knapp, an American consultant (in what, exactly?) who came over “to sharpen lines for the PM’s *Question Time* appearances and the wider TV debates”—a tacit admission that David Cameron is a dullard, left to his own devices a terminal bore. Knapp’s “easy charm belies a razor sharp brain,” he writes. “His thoughts are interesting. Almost fact free—appealing to common sense or emotion.” And here is one of Mr. Knapp’s interesting thoughts: The purpose of the EU is the single market.

This establishes pretty conclusively that the consultant is either an unscrupulous liar or an ignoramus. The purpose of the EU has never been, and is certainly not now, the single market. Only someone completely lacking in political insight could take what such a man says seriously.

Unleashing Demons will prove a valuable social document if it causes future historians to wonder at the low intellectual level of people at the center of power in Britain at the beginning of the 21st century. Having spent the entire book saying that those who wanted to leave had no argument, Mr. Oliver writes, seven pages before its end (on page 401):

And yet even I, who am as metropolitan and liberal on immigration as they come, questioned being part of an organisation that insists on having unlimited freedom of movement to work. It seems to me it is an unsustainable situation that countries with such varying economies can continue with this system.

Indeed. But what is the EU if not a procrustean political bed whose purpose is to fuse very different countries in the hope that something powerful will emerge, so that European politicians may play a role on a larger stage than their own? Who would have heard of Mr. Juncker if he had remained a

former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Mr. Barroso he had remained a former Prime Minister (and Maoist student agitator) of Portugal, or Mr. Kinnock had he remained but a failed leader of the British Labor Party?

First published in the