

Facing our Waterloo? The referendum was unnecessary, and its consequences ironic

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The shy pro-Europeanism of the last 40 years, together with the ways the EU was being abused for domestic purposes, all contributed to Brexit, writes [John Gaffney](#). But the irony of it all is that the likely consequences of the vote could include both the break-up of the UK and that of the EU itself. An unnecessary referendum will therefore change the course of our history.



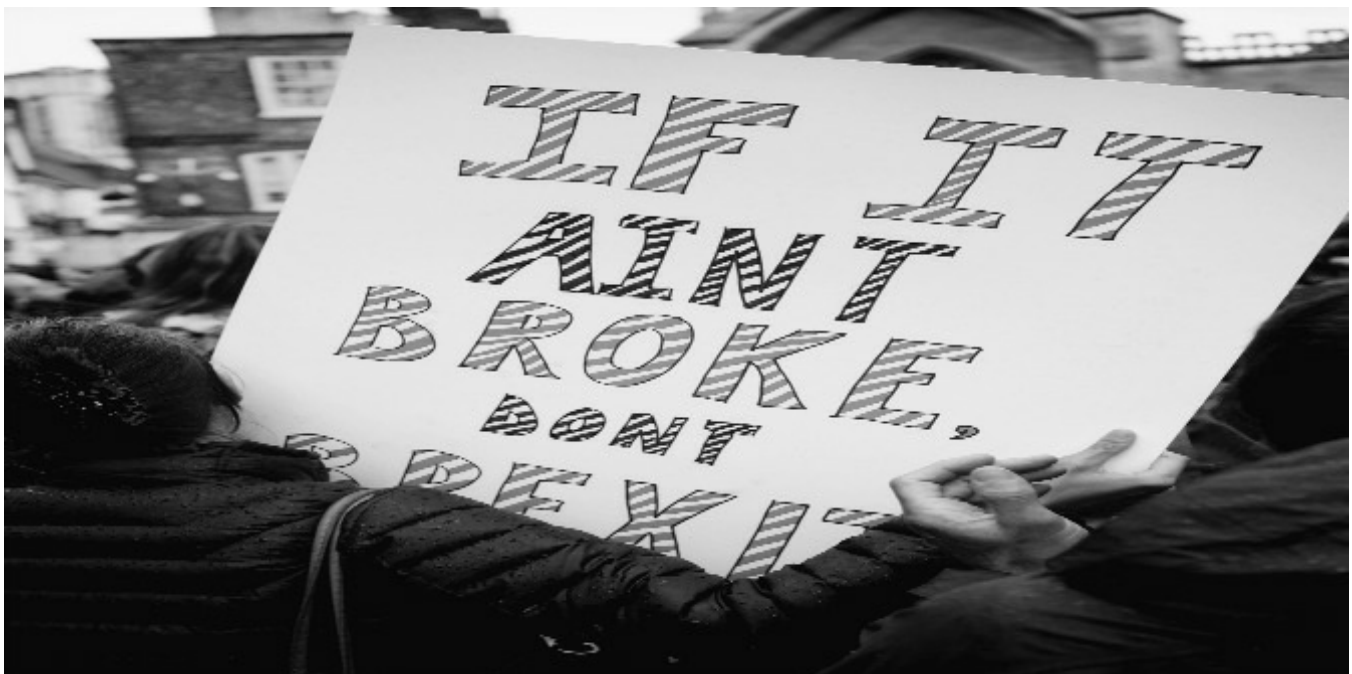
The four ironies of Brexit

We're in the middle of a chain reaction. And the turmoil in both the Conservative and Labour Parties in the aftermath of the referendum is just the surface fallout of a deeper explosion within UK culture.

What a sad irony that this unnecessary referendum will change the course of our history; and a sadder one that a national-centred gesture against the 'Brussels Bureaucracy' may well lead to the end of the United Kingdom – Scotland first.

The situation now in Ireland is as bizarre as it is unexpected. An at last invisible, normal border between the North and the Republic will potentially turn back to a 'real' border, reminiscent of the Troubles. Or perhaps no border. A united Ireland. Irony number three is that together with the prospect of having two land borders with the EU, Wales also voted 'Leave', and so Welsh nationalism is back on the cards. London too is not happy with its potential loss of European pre-eminence.

Sad irony number four: the Brexiteers will be thrilled that another of the unexpected consequences may be not just the break-up of the UK but that of the EU itself. By taking our ball home we may inadvertently bring the whole stadium down. However we define the terms, there are 'populisms' and Euroscepticisms on the continent, and UK populism will give them renewed vigour. In France, for example, Marine Le Pen's Front National is jubilant at our referendum result and, as things stand, she is certain to go through to round two of next year's presidential election. You would not think so, listening to the leaders in the member states or the Commission, but anti-EU feeling is spreading like wildfire across the EU.



Leaders' personalities matter

So why all this? Well, two related things. First the role of certain individuals was central. Boris Johnson's taking the leadership of 'Leave' was decisive. Without his 'populist touch', no one would have been able to capitalize on the situation – although his own performance would ultimately contribute to his divisiveness and his becoming a victim of his own strategy.

David Cameron conducted a serene, assured campaign, but severely 'underperformed' the messaging of what he had obtained in concessions from the EU; and of course he need not have called the referendum, and certainly not in the middle of the migrant crisis which was all mixed up in people's minds as being related to our EU membership. Jeremy Corbyn's 'Remain' role was lamentable in its half-heartedness; most Labour Party voters didn't even know what his or the Party's position was. And across the board, European leaders and others ('the elites', e.g. Barack Obama) fuelled the populist surge with their interventions.

Beyond all this, and this is my second point, the fault for all this mess lies not with the Leavers but with the Remainers. Tom Lehrer, the satirical songwriter, sang of the Spanish Civil War that Franco might have won all the battles but the Republic had all the good songs. The emotional rhetoric of the Leave campaign helped them win the battle; more precisely, the Remainers had no songs.

Shy pro-Europeanism

There are two aspects to this. First, in both the UK and elsewhere in Europe pro-Europeans [have kept very quiet](#) now for over 40 years, fearful of national feeling and afraid to develop a European discourse and rhetoric, and therefore identity. Second, and just as problematic, is the way that even pro-Europeans have abused the EU and used it to domestic purpose. Just like many UK politicians, in France, for example, pro-Europeans such as Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, and François Hollande have all at various times undermined the European idea to gain domestic advantage, particularly in electoral campaigns – even to the point of getting very close to the Leavers' pull-up-the-drawbridge style or blaming, in turn, the profligate Mediterraneans, the inflexible Germans, or the neo-liberal 'Anglo-Saxons'.

The EU is in desperate need of reform. Schengen doesn't work, the Eurozone doesn't work, the situation for the Greeks is dire, Brussels' public relations and communication are rubbish, many communities have been left behind by the EU, the immediate and longer term humanitarian aspects of the migrant crisis need a coordinated European initiative, and so on. These are the issues that should have been addressed. If Remain had called itself *Remain and Reform* it would have swung it. I started with an allusion to a song. Here's another: we are all finally facing our Waterloo.

About the Author

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