

# Letter to MPs from a Remain voter: a plea for realism, tolerance and honesty

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This is the text of a letter written by **Richard Bronk**, a Visiting Fellow at the European Institute of the London School of Economics, to two Conservative MPs, one a friend, with whom he was in correspondence. The letter (which has been anonymised) was written to foster a better understanding of how many of the 48% who voted Remain are thinking and feeling following the vote – and thereby contribute to efforts to bridge the dangerous chasm opening up between most of the UK's great cities, universities and the young, on the one hand, and the new Brexit government on the other.



## Getting real, the young, and protecting the moral ethos and tone of debate



### 1. You argue that we all have to 'get real' and imply that much of the reaction among the 48% who voted remain has been hysterical and smacks of being sore losers:

I have had scores of conversations with Remain voters in the last four days in three very different locations – West Dorset, Oxford and the LSE and City of London – and several features are striking:

(a) **Large numbers of normally balanced, sensible and professional people from a great variety of walks of life tell me that they have indeed been in tears, felt sick or have hardly slept for days and are deeply afraid.** This should not be put down glibly to their being on the losing side in a battle of interests. The genuine fear and anguish comes from four concerns:

- **First, a loss of identity: many Remain voters in our great cities, universities and beyond genuinely identified with being European**, with being outward looking and tolerant. They deeply value two-way migration for cultural as well as economic reasons. *And many of them – me included – are in profound shock at waking up to find it is suddenly acceptable in broad swathes of the country (and among leading Leave campaigners) to blame the other, the foreigner, those of other religions for social ills that are almost entirely home grown.*
- **Secondly, a feeling of bewilderment since the whole tenor of their professional and social lives**

**involves integration with the continent, and this is now under threat.** Of the four families I know well in West Dorset with children in their early twenties, every one of them have sons or daughters who either work in other EU countries or live here with Continental partners. At the same time, university departments frequently have up to a third of their staff and many of their brightest PhD students from the continent, and they know that, without EU framework funding and EU students being able to work here while studying, all these links are under threat. Our great universities are *European* centres of excellence, rather than narrowly British.

- **Third, there is a genuine fear about the social fabric and upsurge of naked racism.** It is not just well reported cases of Polish centres daubed with graffiti or the terrible murder of Jo Cox. It is much more widespread. For example, my son campaigning in Central London was told 'I am voting leave so that we can get these immigrant c\*\*\*\* out'; my wife campaigning in Lyme Regis was accused of 'wanting a bloody mosque in Lyme Regis'; and a London cabbie told me he had voted out because he wanted to hear his own language spoken in his East End street. A Jewish friend with a parent who survived the holocaust says it all reminds her of Germany in the early 1930s. *Do you remember the collective determination of all parties and institutions to stamp out Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood narrative? Well now, thanks to the poison of the Farage narrative – echoed and exploited none too subtly by Boris and his friends – it is considered widely acceptable to demonise foreigners even if they are hardworking citizens of our closest allies.*
- **Fourth, the Gove narrative that 'we are tired of experts' – and the implication that facts are irrelevant and all that matters is the passion and simplicity of your narrative – is deeply corrosive of public discourse and decision-making.** It also effectively downgrades the esteem in which our educated young and older professionals are held. No wonder they are profoundly depressed.

**(b) Among the businessmen and women I have spoken to, the common theme is this: they can only see uncertainty and policy instability stretching out for years and they expect immediate delays to investment and an imminent loss of jobs.** For me, the most shocking thing about Friday was watching Andrea Leadsom faced with victory calling for 'a period of quiet reflection' while she and her colleagues worked out what to do. Ruth Davidson was right the Tuesday before to warn that these were revolutionaries without a plan. *The Brexiteers are mostly so divorced from the real world that – having put a bomb under the post-war order – they think they have the luxury of talking among themselves for months while the country sinks into recession and our continent into turmoil they have inflicted. You ask me to get real. Well, Tory politicians on the Leave side need to get real. And getting real involves understanding the following:*

- **Our business and diplomatic partners abroad now see us as a regrettable source of instability,** as unreliable partners, and as prone to sudden lurches in policy and naked national opportunism.
- **Article 50's two-year time horizon only covers the divorce with the EU, while the negotiating of the trade deals that must replace our membership will take much longer.** Trade deals always take many years to negotiate, even if as a country you have more than a handful of negotiators with any experience. Moreover, in the case of the EU, any new association agreement or trade deal will have to be decided on by unanimity (so that, for example, Spain can insist on Gibraltar in return) and often with national referenda and the consent of the European parliament. *Contrary to popular opinion, the EU does not consist of 'unelected bureaucrats' able to force through measures. The EU with whom we will be negotiating is a collection of elected governments with vetoes in key areas, and a directly elected parliament. (Incidentally it is on our side that terms will be mostly decided by unelected special advisers and lawyers behind closed doors and by a new Tory prime minister elected by a few tens of thousands of Tory party members.)*
- **Foreign direct investment and investment at home is already drying up much faster than you and your colleagues realise.** Many companies are already planning to relocate some operations to Dublin, Paris, Frankfurt or elsewhere; and many more to cut investment and jobs at home. I know personally of several local companies in the South West whose directors on 24 June felt they must begin planning redundancies in the coming weeks. More generally, universities, property and construction companies, and

many other firms in the process of rapid expansion, are left dangerously exposed by the Brexit downturn and any disruption of free movement.

- **Relying on a low oil price to deter Scottish independence may be foolish since, if Scotland became independent, it could be the recipient of large amounts of foreign direct investment and a pool of young mobile talent now likely to shun England.**
- You may dismiss credit rating downgrades, and a slump in sterling in the face of Brexit as overdone reactions. But, like many other people much more qualified than me, **I would be genuinely surprised if we do not find out within weeks that ‘project fear’ was ‘project understated warning’.**

2. **You suggested that highlighting how the views of the young have been swamped by the votes of the elderly is tantamount to accusing the elderly of being selfish. And you also implied that there is something unseemly in the young and cities not accepting with grace that they have been outvoted by those with identities and interests different from (and at odds with) their own. On both counts I think you are profoundly mistaken:**

(a) First, I found the generational divide was an effective campaigning tool because – when pointed out – many elderly voters were very receptive to considering what their children were telling them. And the key thing is this: **this is not a clash of *interests* between the young and old. It is a clash of world view and a lack of knowledge (on the part of most of us over fifty) about how the modern world works.** The world has changed so fast that the Platonic idea of respecting the greater wisdom of the elderly is out of date. *One of our 25-year-old campaigners in Dorset was yelled at several times: ‘You don’t know what you are talking about’. But, in fact, it is most of us over fifty who have no idea how social and economic life really operates in the interdependent, fluid and digital age in which our children live.*

(b) Secondly, **it is overwhelmingly students, young people and our great cities that vote for parties of the centre left that advocate, unlike your party, increased redistribution and investment into the UKIP voting areas that have suffered the ill-effects of globalisation.** *What the young and cities do not take kindly to is populist politicians stirring up the mistaken view that social ills in the forgotten towns and villages are the fault of immigration or European integration or London ignoring them.* They know that the fault lies with our own policy makers. And they know that the negative effects of globalisation for those in the East and North will only get worse if Brexiteers deregulate further and we suffer an unnecessary recession.

(c) The danger now is that a cry of despair in this vote from those in the North and East whose identity and interests have been eroded by globalisation will now lead to a policy lurch that will damage the identity and interests of our young and our great cities, while at the same time inflicting further dislocation and hardship on our forgotten communities. **Far from being a positive or zero sum game, Brexit is likely to be negative sum game.**

3. **Finally, many have implied that Remain campaigners have only themselves to blame for defeat since they lowered the tone of debate by accusing some of the leaders of the Leave campaign of lying. This view is based on an outdated view of civility among honourable gentlemen:**

(a) **I used to respect the House of Commons rule of not calling another MP a ‘liar’ in the days when MPs behaved honourably and in a gentlemanly like manner. But it has been widely reported that Boris Johnson has in the past been sacked by both The Times and Michael Howard for allegedly lying. More importantly, his whole Leave campaign was built on lies and innuendo.** He knew the £350m a week for the NHS was a lie because it was not the net contribution and did not take account of the lost revenue from Brexit dislocation, but still he had it on his battle bus. He knew that Cameron could not explicitly rule out Turkish membership of the EU without

doing irreparable damage to relations with a major NATO ally; and he knew full well that, even if the UK government did decide not to veto Turkish accession at some far distant point, every nation (including the French with a referendum, Cyprus and Greece) would have to agree, which made it almost inconceivable. The Turkish lie did great things on the doorstep for the Leave campaign and it was a deeply dishonourable tactic.

(b) So, like most Remain campaigners, I applauded John Major for calling a spade a spade, a lie a lie. **If we are not to be ruled permanently in future by demagogues willing to lie their way to power, we have to confront lies with resolute condemnation even if it offends the sense of propriety of some.**

(c) **And it is not only lies that matter – it is the use of jokey asides, verbal references and innuendo that suggest what you can then disclaim:** Boris Johnson repeatedly used the Farage line about ‘independence day’ (usually in combination with fatuous references to ‘glorious futures’) thereby subliminally adding his weight to the viciously racist undertones of the UKIP campaign; and when he explained President Obama’s opposition to Brexit with a reference to his part-Kenyan ancestry, he shamed himself, his party, and our country.

I remain, I hope, your friend, and a colleague in the task of reuniting our country.

Best wishes,

**Richard Bronk**

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.*

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