

‘Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit’: event review




Department of Government MSc Public Policy and Administration student **Perry Scott** reflects on the recent public lecture by Craig Oliver, who discussed his new book **‘Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit’**, at LSE on Monday 14 November.

Craig Oliver’s **Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit** is a frank attempt to write history from the view of the Remain side: “We wanted to tell our story before it was told for us”, he remarked early on. The book’s title comes from a conversation that Oliver had with David Cameron in the back of a car before announcing the vote. When asked for “one good reason” why he *shouldn’t* hold a referendum on Europe, Cameron replied “you could unleash demons of which ye know not”. Reflecting back on that exchange it seems that Cameron’s words were prophetic but what he would not have known at the time is the true magnitude of the demons of which he would unleash.

Vote Remain

The results of both the UK referendum and more recently the US presidential election have caused shockwaves in the Western world and have forced us to rewrite the rules of how politics operates. Herein Oliver describes what he views as the greatest error of the Remain campaign: “we put all of our chips on the closest thing we have to an iron law of politics – James Carville’s ‘it’s the economy, stupid!’”. In reflecting on the strategy, Oliver describes how the Remain campaign strongly believed that their economic messaging alone would be enough to secure a victory for their side. With the benefit (or perhaps the curse) of hindsight bias, it is now clear that this tactic was ineffective at best and counter-productive at worst as the majority of the public felt that they had nothing to lose by voting to leave the European Union. It seemed that years of grudging austerity and dogmatic neoliberal economic policies had come back to haunt David Cameron as people voted for change.

Vote Leave

Oliver then takes a few minutes out of his speech to share excerpts from Vote Leave campaign adverts and discusses somewhat controversial moments from opposition’s campaign. The -to-

familiar images of the bright-red ‘Brexit Bus’, Nigel Farage’s “Breaking Point” poster and Vote Leave’s ‘Turkey is joining the EU’ poster are all up for discussion. Oliver frankly concedes that the Remain campaign “took more punches than we thought we could handle” on these issues and admits practically ignoring the opposition’s immigration arguments. The decision not to dispute these topics was made so not to exacerbate Vote Leave’s arguments and to promote them to the public discourse. Taking this strategy however left a vacuum whereby key arguments from the opposition, such as the misleading ‘we send the EU £350 million a week...’ statement, were left to fester in public discussions unchallenged.

Boris was ‘wobbling all over the place like a wonky shopping trolley’

Throughout the evening the audience is treated to a selection of Oliver’s finest anecdotes from the referendum campaign. Humorous and engaging, stories about Michael Gove, Theresa May and Boris Johnson make for interesting listening. We delight in hearing how Boris was ‘wobbling all over the place like a wonky shopping trolley’ and learn that Theresa May earned the nickname of ‘submarine’ amongst Cameron’s allies as she ‘had a habit of disappearing’ when Cameron asked for help. As a professional spin-doctor at work, one does however feel that the stories are somewhat cherry-picked and that there is more going on behind the scenes. Oliver still speaks comradely of ex-political allies and those who, in the eyes of many, stabbed both him and Cameron in the back. Perhaps it is just Oliver’s calm disposition but one does feel that there is more lurking beneath the surface than he suggests. His anecdotes are nonetheless very gripping and go down well with the audience who revel in gaining a rare glimpse of personality behind these prominent politicians.

Cameron cuts a cool, rational figure

The one thing that strikes hardest from Oliver’s discussion is Cameron’s nonchalance throughout the campaign. Seemingly unbothered by the failure of Remain’s economic messaging, the opposition’s rhetoric, or being abandoned by close friends and allies, Cameron cuts a cool, rational figure. The problem is that this level of indifference also resulted in the failure of the Remain campaign to capture the popular vote. It seems that belief in the ‘business-as-usual’ style of politics was the downfall in Cameron’s referendum strategy. Whilst Oliver describes these as the failures of Remain as a whole, he has not a single criticism of his close friend David, whom he reportedly refers to as “DC”. This clearly comes across in the Q&A session which allowed the audience to participate and to share their own opinions on the referendum campaign. Jeremy Corbyn, the BBC and the newspapers are all to blame, whilst Oliver tells us that Cameron “was forced to” hold a referendum and should be absolved for blame on that part. Claims from the audience that he didn’t have to hold it this year are refuted with no real argument and it quickly becomes apparent why some critics have remarked that the book is thin on direct criticisms of those at the top of the campaign.

All things considered, Craig Oliver’s *Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit* talk was entertaining, personal and very easy to follow. His informal, anecdotal style made him instantly likeable and the evening flowed more like a conversation between Oliver and old friends. His points of discussion gave personality to senior politicians and made them appear more human than one is used to. This element was refreshing and his provided fertile ground for debate in the foyer afterwards. What one can say with certainty is that this conversation will be carrying on for years to come as Article 50 is still yet to be triggered. With this in mind, it appears relevant to revisit one of Oliver’s closing statements: “If you’re bored and frustrated by Brexit, *get used to it*”.





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Note: this article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Department of Government, nor of the London School of Economics.

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