

Brexit: The View from Norway

Written by Iver B. Neumann

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IVER B. NEUMANN, APR 26 2017

'Leaving Europe' is no empty phrase. I should know, for as a Norwegian, I am a national of a country that never joined. For years I have observed what has happened to my country since a referendum returned a slim 'no' to joining the European Community in 1972, and then again in 1994. Despite rapidly increasing economic dependence on the rest of the world, interest in that world has steadily decreased. Despite rising immigration, the will to understand new countrymen and women has dwindled. Despite the fact that the murder rate has fallen steadily since World War Two (in a country of 5.6 million, it usually stays below 40 a year) six years ago, a Norwegian man by the name of Anders Behring Breivik murdered 68 children in the name of resistance to globalisation. I suppose it is only logical that an increase in globalisation and Europeanisation should produce some kind of reaction. Given the finding of oil in 1969, the deal struck with the EU in 1992 which granted Norway access to the Internal Market, and the general skepticism of small countries towards supranationality, Norway's aloofness is not a great puzzle. Neither does Norway's detachment matter much for anybody else.

Now, however, the same thing is happening in what has, for generations, been my family's second home country. I grew up with my father's (Henrich Neumann, MBE) stories of what it was like to teach in Britain after the Second World War. There was never any doubt that I would study in Britain. Five years ago, I proudly followed in my father's footsteps and took up a post at a British university. With Brexit upon us, it is easy to see all the signs of how Britain never really developed a broad-banded EU policy and never really came to master the role of a European country. The shopkeeper's daughter wanted 'our money back'. When the Channel Tunnel was built, France built a road straight from Paris to Calais. Britain prevaricated, talked about rabies, and did nothing about its dilapidated domestic railways. Britain never joined Schengen, never adopted the Euro. Instead, re-nationalising laws were passed. Brits abroad were increasingly financially policed. Conversely, a law was passed which says that anyone who works but does not reside in Britain must pay an additional income tax of 30% after seven years. People who work in Britain and live abroad are often people like me—highly specialised workers. We have here what I believe must be a unique case of a presumed knowledge-based economy saying 'buzz off' to high-skilled workers.

Does Brexit matter for anyone other than Brits and Anglophiles? Britain still has a nuclear deterrent and, being a former colonial power, certain special ties around the world (the Gulf for example). All that is nice to have for Europe. London is Europe's number one global city, and will remain so after Brexit. For a Euro-federalist like myself, it is sad to see it go.

It is also sad to see what Brexit is already doing to Britain. I am not talking about the murder of an MP and the roughing up of Poles. Those are obviously the work of people emboldened by the 'no' vote, but they are only interesting as extreme symptoms of a deeper malaise, which is that so few people want to own up to the fact that the country has been dissolving in spurts since 1922. With Brexit, the Scottish 'leave' campaign gets a new wind. A new boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic will invite new smuggling and renewed militarism. I register—half amused, half incredulous—that there is talk about making Gibraltar a *casus belli*. Sixty per cent of Welsh exports go to the EU. What will happen to this already struggling part of the country when the consequences of a hard Brexit dawn on the electorate? Despite what many Northern Brexiteers seem to think, there are no signs whatsoever that Brexit will trigger new interest in the North. As seen from outside, Harold Macmillan was the last Prime Minister to care much about what happened beyond Hatfield. Domestically, Brexit is a recipe for turmoil.

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'No matter', we are told. The rest of the world is there for Britain to be a great power in. As a life-long student of Russia, this message strikes a familiar note. Sovereignty is better than multilateralism and supranationality. Great standing in the world is worth a little belt-tightening at home. The questions to ask in this regard, however, are twofold. First, is it not the case that great powers also carry great responsibilities? What characterised the British prior to the Second World War and the Soviet Union after was the will and ability to underwrite a world order. Now Russia is reduced to dropping bombs on Syria to be noticed. What about Britain? The country is not world-leading in any field, and has no prospects of becoming so. It is, however, Europe-leading on two scores: financial markets and higher education. The irony is that with Brexit, both these claims to greatness will come under increased strain.

The City of London will, I suppose, be able to weather the storm somewhat. I do not think the same goes for higher education. True, the key enabling factor, language, will still be there, but the large number of incoming European students will taper off fairly rapidly as fees increase. Some of that may be compensated for by a renewed influx of Chinese students, but not all, and the substitution will make for a number of pedagogical problems. Furthermore, the high number of Europeans who teach in British universities will decrease. I, for one, am out of here when this academic year is up.

'No matter', the Brexiteers argue, Britain will always be great, because it is Britain. Well, is it? 'Englanders' used to argue that effortless superiority was the hallmark of the emerald island. Where did it go? There is nothing effortless about chest beating. One used to say that the defining trait of the British mind was pragmatism. There is nothing pragmatic about Brexit. The 1950s are gone. Leaving Europe is simply a symptom of the same kind of inward-looking, reality-denying spirit that has characterised my own country ever since it refused to join the EU almost half a century ago. It is an escape from, and not an answer to, the basic social fact that the world has arrived in our midst and refuses to go away. It is perhaps as it should be that little Norway has chosen to sit on the sidelines and watch Europe transform into a global continent. Is it really as it should be that Britain, which is 12 times larger and was once a great power, should do the same?

About the author:

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