

The Brexit Hangover

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, JUN 26 2016

When I first came to UWE, for a bit of fun, I made three predictions with the class of 2012/13. We sometimes talked about these through the three years of their studies, and much fun was had on them betting whether I would be right or wrong. The first two passed in my favour, the third is the subject of this blog post:

1. The Conservative Party would win a majority in the 2015 General Election. This 'prediction' was against the trend of polls and seemed to defy the logic of the time, but I got that one right because I could not see Ed Miliband as a Prime Minister and reckoned others would feel the same way. 1 out of 3 in the bag.
2. The Scottish Referendum would fail and Scotland would remain part of the UK. Although that debate may be re-opened soon, that one gave me 2 out of 3.
3. The UK would not leave the EU. This took longer than we thought in 2012 to play out, and the class of 2012 have since graduated. So, I'm sorry they aren't around to enjoy the event of my not making it a hat trick! Until the bitter end I stood behind this prediction, thinking I was on solid ground. I could not have been more wrong.

There is no person who has predictive power that can be reliable all of the time. The hope is that those who are well trained in disciplines and who have a decent understanding of issues beyond polls and data – a learned insight in other words – can get it right more often than they get it wrong.

What is *not* a bit of fun is how badly 'experts' have fared on the Brexit debate. Pollsters missed the result, spectacularly in some cases. Economists warned about it with complex and detailed data – but the majority of the public ignored them, content that 'things would be fine'. Politicians of all stripes attempted to educate Britons of the consequences of leaving the EU at just about every level of life (the so-called 'project fear') – but that had no effect either. People seemed empowered to 'know better'. Or, frankly, to just ignore the bulk of the experts and make a profound decision themselves.

It is this point that is the real hangover of Brexit for me. People do not (on majority) trust experts any more. It is beyond this short post to go into detail of how this trend has risen on every continent. But, you do not have to look far to see the new breed of populist rising to capture this new audience of the disaffected. Trump, Le Pen, Farage... the list goes on... In this new age when education and logic is repellent, populism is at its most dangerous. We should be wary of its rise. But, most importantly, we cannot use old arguments to defeat it as those risk failing when stress tested, as they did in Britain.

Experts, including those in the academy, need to deal with the Brexit hangover by adjusting their gaze away from traditional areas and more to understanding the European population. Textbooks need to be pulped and rethought, courses rewritten, minds refreshed, and old habits broken. For too long academia has become somewhat dependent on the EU. This extends beyond research agendas and funding into a general world-view that encompasses a supranational EU as part of normality. The EU may not last another 25 years. It has the most existential of crises ahead. Due to its overreaching and its structural problems it does not have sharp enough tools to endure those challenges. It may attempt to integrate further (or fully federalise) to gain those tools – an act that may trigger the series of referendums that will finally break it. Recall, the EU does not do well in referendum votes! Brexit was not the first EU-level referendum. But, I can already imagine the new editions of textbooks being prepared and them drawing

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back on how the EU overcame its prior challenges to emerge stronger.

I hope that I'm wrong and Brexit starts the expert industry off on a more nuanced path to understand why as each year of the EU's existence has passed, Euroscepticism has hardened and increased. If the EU project is to endure, then experts – including academics – need to understand how to recapture the European population and divert them away from an empowered, and sometimes dangerous, field of populists. I taught EU politics for 5 years, in two different universities. At the best of times it was hard going and tough to get students to engage with something so distant and Byzantine. Facing this in higher education, I can only imagine how hard it will be to re-engage the general public...

Writing before the referendum result, I noted the following in *the National Interest*:

It is unlikely that, whatever the result, the issue of member states seeking to leave the EU will be settled. In fact, there is a very real prospect that other member states will attempt to launch in/out referenda of their own. The migration crisis, and the eurozone financial crisis before it, has exacerbated a volatile and pervasive current of Eurosceptic opinion across the continent. As the migrant crisis continues, and sclerotic economic growth continues in the EU, this will only get worse.

And, with the result now known, the long hangover begins. It may be that the cure involves a Europe *without* the EU. Who knows for now? But, it is time for a new type of thinking and a new level of engagement. From under the clouds we all need to do some blue skies thinking and develop a sense of empathy and understanding with the new breed of citizen who seem to have little in common with the more predictable groupings/behaviours of the past. This means no arrogance, no looking down on people, no calling them xenophobes or racists, and no derogatory references to the 'poorly educated' (as Trump loves to say). Experts need to be experts in today's world – not yesterday's world or an imagined one.

About the author:

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