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Thoughts from a remainer

1. The UK vote for Brexit on 23 June was a shock to what might be called ‘progressive opinion’ in the UK. It was expected neither by the holders of progressive opinion, nor by the ‘commentariat’, nor by the ‘Brexiters’ themselves. Poll predictions had been for a small majority in favour of remaining. But with no recent comparable referendum, predictions were not easy for pollsters, as there was no opinion data with which pre-referendum surveys could be compared. Nor were UK pollsters in particularly good shape, having failed to predict the result of the UK 2015 General Election, which had given David Cameron’s Conservatives a small overall majority on the UK Parliament, contradicting pollsters’ predictions that no party would get a majority.

The campaigns

2. The Brexit campaign was politically noisy, though until the result was known it was difficult to assess the campaign’s real influence, given its divided leadership and diversity of opinions about what would actually happen in the event of a ‘Brexit’ vote. The campaign was generally judged to have lost the economic arguments, and increasingly to have concentrated on immigration. The ‘Remainers’ had by contrast been subdued but also lacked coherent leadership, none coming from business leaders or the Labour Party, though an impressive range of experts (eg economists and scientists) spoke out for ‘remain’. The minor political parties, the Scottish National Party, and the incoming Mayor of London were all ‘remainers’, but narrowly failed to sway enough opinion across England and Wales.
3. The main ‘Remain’ leader was Prime Minister David Cameron, together with a majority but not all of his ministers. Cameron had conducted a superficial negotiation for EU reform, expecting that the result would represent sufficient change to win the referendum. He was wrong. The referendum result made his resignation inevitable.
4. Both sides of the campaign were guilty of exaggeration. Cameron and his Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne had shown signs of serious panic about the effects on the economy, promising emergency cuts in public spending in the event of Brexit. But the ‘Brexiters’ had told obvious lies, notably promises to transfer the gross UK contribution to the EU over to UK schools and the NHS, and to cut immigration in imprecise but drastic ways.

The result

5. Closer analysis of the result shows the following:
 - The turnout at 72%, though a little higher than expected, indicates that 28% did not care, could not decide, or had other reasons for not voting;
 - The overall result 52:48 was close, close enough for decisive votes to have been exercised by people who believed the Brexiters’ falsehoods. There is also evidence that some of the ‘Brexit’ vote was motivated merely by disapproval of the Cameron Government. Some

wanted immigration reduced but otherwise had no quarrel with the EU. Despite these factors, the proposition that the vote was indecisive has had no traction, and a campaign and petition for a second referendum was not gained significant ground;

- Only three UK regions voted for ‘remain’: Scotland (62:38 with little local variation) and London (60:40 but with some areas in East London being against and several inner city areas being 73:30 or more for ‘remain’); for Northern Ireland see below;
- There was a division between large cities on the one hand, and smaller towns and rural areas on the other. There is evidence that the Labour Party is losing influence to UKIP in such ‘traditional Labour’ areas in the North of England, and it has lost significant ground to the SNP in Scotland at local and national levels. Of major cities, only Sheffield and Swansea had ‘Brexit’ majorities. All city leaders, some of them very conscious of how their cities have benefited from EU regional policy, were in favour of ‘remain’;
- So was the Wales Government, but Welsh rural areas voted strongly enough for Brexit to give a 52:47 majority, and again UKIP’s influence was felt in rural Wales at the expense of Labour and the Liberal Democrats;
- Northern Ireland voted 56:44 for remain, but there was a significant division between protestant and catholic areas, the latter voting for ‘remain’ and the protestant DUP (which leads the power-sharing NI government with the nationalist / catholic Sinn Fein) being for Brexit, despite the large investment of EU funds in the peace process. As the nationalist / catholic areas border the Irish Republic, there are as yet unknown implications as the Republic /NI border will become the UK’s only land border with the EU;
- There is allegedly a ‘young:old’ divide, the contention being that the Brexit vote was effected by older people against the wishes of younger ones, though this is being disputed by some surveys in the last few days which seem to show that the opinions of young people and old were not so starkly polarised.

Civil society and the not-for-profit sector

6. There was little sign of strong views on the EU coming from the not-for-profit sector – which has diverse perspectives. Some charities in deprived regions have been funded directly or indirectly by the EU. They will now be worried about their future, but hoping, perhaps naïvely, that the UK Government will simply divert the funds from its payments to the EU over to the charities direct. Charities are perennially desperate for funds, but the EU has a reputation as a very difficult and bureaucratic funder, whose slow procedures have been known to cause charities severe cashflow difficulties.
7. Other charities will have worked with (or sometimes against) the ECHR on human rights issues, again with funding which will prospectively cease. Still more will have worked in support of refugees and the rights of new immigrants to the UK, often in despair at the failure of EU policy on refugees.
8. During the campaign, the charity regulator for England & Wales, the Charity Commission, was forced to withdraw some tendentious formal guidance that charities should be broadly neutral in expressing opinions on the referendum issue. This was replaced by guidance that charities were entitled to make a judgement in the light of their charitable objectives. The confused guidance doubtless made some charities cautious. The Commission itself is becoming increasingly discredited by other efforts (also legally disputed) to restrict charities’ campaigning to change Government policy, prompted by the Government which has introduced policy restrictions and appointed several Commissioners known to have

Conservative sympathies (including one who issued a ‘pro-Brexit’ statement in his private capacity) and who lack practical experience of running charities.

Racism and xenophobia

9. The focus of the Brexit campaign on immigration was unpleasant, despite widespread efforts to counter it by stressing the dependence of the UK (and the National Health Service in particular) on migrant workers, and attention being drawn to the many UK citizens who live and work in other EU countries. Concerns about immigration were widespread among Brexit voters, with frequent ‘vox pop’ interviews in the media with people who would typically say ‘I’m not racist, but there are too many immigrants who come here and take our jobs’. With a few exceptions (mainly among seaside towns with very high levels of largely seasonal labour from EU countries), public opinion in the UK’s mainly multicultural larger cities has shown itself far less concerned about immigration. Areas where immigration is low showed, conversely, high levels of public concern about immigration.
10. Overt racism in the UK is relatively rare but has been given a boost by the Brexit vote. Every racist of course voted Brexit. There has been a surge of racist incidents, including British-born offspring of migrant parents being told to ‘go home’, racist graffiti, and so on.
11. In the final week of the campaign, a Member of Parliament for a small Northern town who was a past member of staff of an NGO and known for her antiracist and pro-refugee work, was murdered in the street by a deranged individual apparently motivated by racism. Although this incident was widely condemned by both campaigns (and led to a short suspension of referendum activities), it is not unreasonable to regard it as a particularly unpleasant effect of the way that extreme opinions have been stirred up in what is on the whole (if one can still dare to generalise) a tolerant and broadminded country).

Could a referendum have been avoided?

12. The purpose of the referendum was to settle a debate within the Conservative Party, within which there had been strong internal pressures and a loss of members and support to UKIP. The proposal for a referendum was included in the Conservative manifesto for the 2015 General Election. The Labour Party had also conceded in advance that it would support a referendum, though it was not expecting a clear Conservative victory and had underestimated its own loss of support to UKIP. UKIP won 12% of the popular vote at the Election (though because of the vagaries of the UK electoral system it won only one seat in Parliament). Although we pro-Europeans regret that the referendum took place and will argue that referenda have very little place in a representative democracy (except on such matters as the electoral system), we must concede that practical politics made it impossible for David Cameron to avoid calling the referendum. But as indicated, the result was unexpected.

The immediate aftermath of the result

13. It was expected that, in the unlikely event of a Brexit victory, David Cameron would resign and be succeeded by Boris Johnson, the former Mayor of London, who had stood for Parliament in 2015 (having previously been an MP but stood down when elected Mayor). Johnson was regarded as having charisma and popularity with Conservative Party members. Although he had been popular as Mayor (winning two four-year terms),

it was increasingly rumoured that he was not respected by close colleagues in the Mayoral administration and lacked the ability to attend to detail or to implement coherent policy. His putative Conservative successor as Mayor lost the election badly.

14. Johnson's decision to support Brexit was made at a late stage in the referendum campaign. It was regarded as opportunistic, ie positioning himself to become Prime Minister when Cameron eventually resigned (as he had said he would before the 2020 General Election, by which time the EU issue could be expected to be settled). But the unexpected referendum result brought the succession forward.
15. The then Justice Minister, Michael Gove, was to act as Johnson's campaign manager, but rapidly became disillusioned when Johnson failed to guarantee him a major ministerial job and appeared to be making duplicate promises to others. Gove then denounced Johnson as indecisive and incompetent, and announced that he would stand for the Conservative leadership himself. Gove was denounced as treacherous by sections of the Conservative Party, and was reminded that he had previously described himself as unsuitable to be Prime Minister. Johnson judged that he now did not have sufficient support to win the Conservative leadership, and withdrew. Apart from Gove, there were three other candidates. A series of elimination elections was planned, in which Conservative MPs would reduce the number of candidates to two, from which the Conservative membership would choose a new leader to take office in September.
16. The election eliminated one of the five candidates, with Theresa May, then Home Secretary, well in the lead. Two others, including Gove, rapidly withdrew. The only remaining one, realised, being dismayed by some elementary press probing, that she wasn't up to the job either, and also withdrew, leaving Theresa May the only candidate left. She was then declared the winner and within two days became Cameron's successor as Prime Minister.

Theresa May's Government

17. Theresa May had taken little part in the referendum campaign, but had identified herself as a 'remainer'. She had been a very competent Home Secretary, having for example tackled the difficult topic of police corruption, and told the Conservative Party that it had to stop being the 'nasty party'. Her manifesto for Conservative leader, followed rapidly by her first speech as Prime Minister, set out a progressive social agenda which would not have been out of place from the left of the Labour Party. She also promised to be a unifier of the nation (and, by implication, of the Conservative Party). There have indeed been comparisons with proposals made in 2015 by Ed Miliband, then much derided Leader of the Labour Party.
18. May has said there will not be a General Election before 2020 (even though she would certainly win it).
19. May has cleared out several incompetent ministers, notably George Osborne and Michael Gove. Osborne has been replaced by Philip Hammond, the previous Foreign Secretary, who was a 'remainer'. Gove had indicated that he would be an unusually progressive Justice Minister, promising prison reform. It is not clear if this highly unusual policy will continue under his successor. Most (though not all) of the rest of May's ministers are moderate and sensible. But there are some silly appointments, for example Priti Patel, the new International Development Minister, who has campaigned to abolish the Ministry

for International Development. But it is clear that this will not be a right wing Thatcherite Government.

Implementing Brexit

20. May has said that 'Brexit means Brexit', so Brexit will be implemented. She has put three Brexiters in charge. Two, though Brexiters, are moderate pragmatists. The actual Minister for Brexit, David Davies, is a known progressive on civil liberties issues. Liam Fox (the fifth losing candidate for the Conservative leadership) is also a known moderate. The third Brexiter is Boris Johnson, whose appointment has attracted much derision in the UK and elsewhere. Among people he is known to have insulted are the likely next US President, Hillary Clinton. At the Bastille Day commemoration at the French Embassy in London yesterday evening, he was booed, though it is unclear whether the 'boosers' were French or British. (This was before the event in Nice.)
21. It is not yet clear when Article 50 will be triggered, but January 2017 is rumoured.
22. Much UK legislation implementing EU directives will have to be repealed.
23. May has backed off her previous policy of withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights.
24. British policy, insofar as one can divine it, appears to be that we will seek full access to the EU free market but will want restrictions on free movement of labour. This appears completely at odds with EU policy. At this stage, one simply cannot tell what will happen. It is however, highly unlikely that the present Government could go back to the UK electorate and say that circumstances have changed, a good new deal has been negotiated, so we now want to give the British people a chance to reconsider the EU issue.

Scotland

25. May has said it is one of her key priorities to keep the UK together. She is visiting Nicola Sturgeon in Edinburgh today. Sturgeon's policy of an independent Scotland joining the EU is difficult. The previous independence referendum was lost because the SNP failed to define what currency an independent Scotland would use. A condition for an independent Scotland joining the EU may well be that Scotland adopts the Euro. A form of independence within the UK may well be conceded, but this would not bring membership of the EU. Spain, fearful of the implications for Catalonia and other regions, would veto it. Belgium too might be concerned. A 'Europe of the regions' does not seem likely.
26. It is not clear how the Scottish electorate would vote in a further independence referendum. The Scottish Conservatives are having a small resurgence, with a popular Scottish leader. Even the Scottish Labour Party is not as unpopular as it was.

Other parties

27. Nigel Farage has resigned as leader of UKIP, having had no plan for a Brexit victory. On past form, he can be expected to resume the leadership shortly before the 2020 General Election, though an alternative possibility is that UKIP with its job done, might wither away. Meanwhile, Farage will continue his career choice of using his position as an MEP to insult the EU at every opportunity.

28. The Labour Party is in total disarray. Its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, elected by the general membership of the Party, does not have the confidence of the Parliamentary Party, which he lost partly because of his failure to speak out clearly for 'remain'. He is now being challenged for the leadership. Whoever wins, the Labour Party cannot advance electorally without making an alliance with other parties, as its electoral base in Scotland is not strong enough for it to win any Scottish seats. It may lose further ground to UKIP.
29. The SNP is the third largest party in the Westminster Parliament and likely to remain so.
30. The Liberal Democrats have collapsed in Parliamentary terms, though they say their membership is growing.
31. Although the Conservative majority at Westminster is small (12), they are unlikely to be threatened by defections, as they are united and the Opposition parties are not.

The future of the EU

32. To progressives in the UK, it is a matter of considerable regret that the UK will have no further influence inside the EU despite being influenced by it economically and politically. One no longer feels one has any right to express views on the EU's future.
33. UK debate is being dominated by questions of whether we would prefer to be like Norway, Switzerland, Canada, or the USA. Predictions of the collapse of the UK economy will be seen to have been foolish, but there is little doubt that the UK economy will diminish in the longer term. One can envisage an application to re-join the EU in perhaps 15 years' time. But the price will be too high for the remaining Brexiters (eg joining the Euro), and a full rapprochement seems impossible.

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London
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Feel free to circulate this paper – a personal opinion from someone with long experience in the UK not-for-profit sector. But be wary that events are moving rapidly.