

BREXIT: WHY IT'S TIME TO SAY NO

by Simon Prentis

There is no precedent in history. Whether the fault of unelected monarchs or elected administrations, many costly mistakes in foreign policy have been made through the ages, but no government has ever knowingly, deliberately – let alone proudly – adopted a policy it knew in advance would be damaging to its country. To put it more bluntly, no nation ever chooses to harm itself. Yet that is precisely what the UK is now preparing to do.

This is not just a matter of opinion: the Government's own impact assessments, published through gritted teeth earlier this year, unambiguously show that even in the best-case scenario, the UK economy will suffer under Brexit – with the worst impact being felt by those living in the poorest parts of the country. Of course, money is not everything; but without a clearly defined benefit, choosing to impoverish yourself is rarely a sensible strategy – whether as an individual or a nation.

And yet a clear benefit to Brexit is looking less and less likely, despite the claims of its supporters. New trade deals, touted as the 'easiest in human history', turn out to be almost unimaginably complex. The much-trumpeted £350 million-a-week Brexit dividend to the Exchequer is off with the fairies. And as for control of our borders – well, with Northern Ireland we have almost given up on the idea of even having one. As we pull closer to the reality of what a post-Brexit Britain would look like, it becomes clearer by the day that on almost every measure we will be worse off – poorer, more isolated and less in control of the things that the modern world requires us to engage with.

Poorer, because barriers to trade with our most important trading partner can only have a negative effect on our economy. Let's not forget why we joined the common market (as it was then known) in the first place: as a post-imperial nation with declining access to markets around the world, the 'sick man of Europe' needed a helping hand. And we got it: with free trade, GDP per capita has grown faster than Italy, Germany and France since we joined – and by 2013, the UK was more prosperous than the average of the three other large European economies for the first time since 1965. Fact.

More isolated because, once out of the EU, our usefulness to non-EU trading partners will rapidly diminish. Indeed, the fear of such political isolation was always one of the main drivers of our decision to join. So much of the foreign investment that has sustained the UK's economic growth over the last few decades has been from countries outside the EU such as the US, Japan and China, who see value in the UK's position as a gateway to and intermediary with Europe; they can barely conceal their astonishment at our decision to leave, which looks like an act of economic and political suicide. Fact.

And less in control, because we will no longer sit at the table where the biggest decisions are made. Whether or not we stay in a customs union, post Brexit we will have no choice but to follow the rules and regulations that the other countries of the EU debate and decide on: if we want to continue trading with them, we will still have to match the standards that our biggest market demands – and yet, we will not be able to influence any of the decisions that affect them. From being a key partner in the world's biggest trading bloc, we will suddenly be reduced to the status of a supplicant. Fact.

So what drove the desire to leave? None of the above, obviously. Indeed, it seems that many people who voted Leave were ready to accept a degree of economic hardship as the price of what they consider to be freedom. But freedom from what? And freedom to do what? One of the biggest, most powerful slogans of the referendum was the idea that we could 'take back control.' Sovereignty was the watchword: people voted for the freedom to make our own laws, trade on our own terms, and control our own borders. But in an increasingly international world, that's largely a mirage.

For even with a 'no deal' Brexit, we would still not be fully in charge of our affairs. The WTO, an organisation we do not control, sets rules that we would still have to follow. The same is true for all the other global organisations we belong to, and the treaties and other agreements we are signatory to in a joined-up world in which cooperation is increasingly the name of the game. The loss of 'sovereignty' this entails does not begin to measure up against the gains – a debate that was had, and won, back in the 1970s. Fact.

It may be true that, post Brexit, Parliament could control more of 'our' laws – but when it comes down to it, how much control have we actually lost? Of the nearly 2,600 laws introduced by the EU since 1999, the UK was on the “winning” side 95% of the time (having won the argument in many cases), abstained 3% of the time, and were outvoted on just 2%. The only real difference between the EU and our own Parliament is that ‘we’ do not vote for all the MEPs who decide on legislation put forward by the EU Commission. However, nearly 10% of the 751 MEPs in the European Parliament are British, and we have always punched above our weight at all levels of EU decision-making. Fact.

But in the climate of ignorance about the EU and the wider world that persists in our schools and our media, little of this is generally known to voters in the UK. For both our politicians and our press, it is easier, more convenient and more profitable to blame the EU for our ills than to address the real concerns that fuelled the Leave vote. It is unquestionably true that almost all our infrastructure – housing, education and health – is under greater pressure now than it was thirty years ago. And yes, that is because there are more people living here now – but the number coming here from the EU is far less than the natural growth in our population, and yet we have neither upgraded nor expanded facilities to cope, nor limited the non-EU immigration that is under our control. Brexit will not help with that – and with less money coming in, it will only make it worse.

So how can we avoid this unprecedented act of national folly? Should we push for a second referendum, which polls are beginning indicate would perhaps squeak a victory for the Remain faction? If only for demographic reasons, more people will vote Remain who could not vote last time, and less people will vote Leave because they are no longer with us. For it is our young people who most oppose leaving the EU, since they see its benefits more obviously: Brexit voters tend to be older, whiter and more conservative, people who never accepted the argument for a wider ‘sovereignty’ in the first place.

But even if the result were different, a vote that was as close as last time would still be unsatisfactory. First of all, it would leave open the possibility of another vote being

demanded sooner rather than later – a best of three, if not a best of five. But more than that, it would not solve the core issue: whatever the people decide, in a parliamentary democracy, Parliament has to have the last word. Under the laws of this land so beloved by Brexiteers, a referendum cannot be binding on Parliament. As the Supreme Court has confirmed, it can only ever be advisory, and that's the point. David Cameron may have promised to implement the decision of the British people, but he had neither the right nor the desire to do so – which is why he resigned when the decision didn't go his way.

So the only honourable way forward is for the Government to step up to the plate and say what many more of us are now starting to realise: that Brexit is impossible to achieve without significant damage to the economy, our standing in the international community, and perhaps to our own Union – because if we leave the EU, Scotland will likely leave the UK (for exactly the same reasons that those supporting Brexit advocate leaving the EU). And in the absence of a realistic solution to the Irish border problem, it will not be long before Ireland resumes its ultimately unanswerable demand to be re-united, as well. In that scenario, even with Wales still reluctantly in tow, Little England would be headed in the direction of Portugal, and then Greece – two other formerly proud nations that once controlled a large portion of the known world, but now rely mainly on tourism and bailouts.

We need to get serious. Brexit is no joke. It may not affect my generation, nostalgic baby-boomers who will not live long enough to suffer the consequences. But for the sake of our children and grandchildren, we must stand up and demand that Parliament do its job and vote with its conscience. Most MPs well know that Brexit would be a disaster. Their job is to protect the country – from its own ignorance, if necessary. There was never anything final about the referendum. The only thing that is final is the sovereignty of Parliament. If we want to take back control, we should start by allowing the system to work.

It's time to say no to Brexit. If 'the people' don't like that, we can always exercise our right to vote in a UKIP government to do the job properly in the next election. But you know what? We won't. Because when you really start to think about it, it makes as much sense as cutting off your nose to spite your face. And that's really not a look to be proud of.