COULD ANY GOOD COME OUT OF THE BREXIT VOTE?

COUPLING THE END OF THE TRAVELLING CIRCUS AND THE EMERGENCE OF A CONTINENTAL OXFORD

Will Brexit turn out to be, all things considered, a good thing? I very much doubt it. Essentially because what it amounts to is that a big chunk of the European population is opting out, for an indefinite future, of a major process of civilization. Civilization? Yes, civilization, that is progress from violence to negotiation and from negotiation to deliberation as a way of settling conflicts of interest between human beings and the communities they form. Between Britain and continental Europe – just as between all member states – the laborious process of European integration was very slowly replacing bargaining with arguing, negotiation with deliberation, and an interest-driven diplomatic logic with a fairness-driven democratic logic. Brexit, therefore, if and when it happens, will be a regression. The scope of the “We Europeans” among whom deliberation is taking place will shrink. With the British, there will be far more need for bargaining and far less room for arguing, and the European Union will need to defend itself against free riding and social dumping by a potential pirate state off its coast.

Yet the Brexit vote can be, in certain respects, a good thing. First, as a wake up call. Some people voted “Leave” because they don’t like...
Cameron, others because they don’t like foreigners; some because they never saw Britain as part of Europe, others because they are hoping to get their empire back. But many voted for Brexit because they think they have a better grip on decisions taken in Westminster than in Brussels. And many more because they see the EU as doing a lot to enhance the opportunities of a minority of “movers”, but very little to enhance the security — physical, cultural and above all economic — of the “stay-at-homes”, that is of the majority.

This last motive is not only a powerful factor behind the Brexit vote. It is also the main driver of populist upsurges, right and left, throughout Europe. If the EU is ever to regain legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of its citizens, it will be by doing more — and being perceived to be doing more — for their security, not through more privatization, competition, mobility and TTIP-type agreements. If the Brexit vote can trigger the veering of EU integration in this direction, it will at least have served one useful purpose.

But the Brexit vote should also provide an opportunity to progress on a more local, less complex front. In the Brexit campaign, few things were used to symbolise the repulsive nature of the European Union as much as the so-called “travelling circus”: the money-wasting, time-consuming and carbon-splashing back and forth of members of the European Parliament, their staff and many other Eurocrats between Brussels and Strasbourg, without the slightest benefit for the democratic quality of EU life. Quite the contrary: less time for the MEPs to interact with the pan-European civil society present in Brussels, and less time for them to keep in touch with their own constituencies.

There is nothing new about the highlighting of this paroxysm of euro-absurdity by euro-sceptics. For example, David Craig and Matthew Elliott

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“In our collective life at all levels, just as in our individual lives, we must be prepared for setbacks. For Europe, Brexit is definitely a setback. For Britain, it is even a calamity — at least my British friends think so. But as collectives and as individuals, we must relentlessly try to turn such setbacks into opportunities.”

devoted a long section to it in their 2009 book enticingly titled: The Great European Rip-Off. How the corrupt, wasteful EU is taking control of our lives. “Our hypocritical, self-serving MEPs,” they concluded, “cannot claim any credibility when they grab more of our money for themselves and lecture us about the perils of global warming as long as they continue with this economic and environmental insult to voters’ intelligence.” To put it mildly: they have a point. How could such a visibly absurd practice fail to undermine the authority of an institution that preaches economic austerity and ecological awareness?

Perhaps the shock of the Brexit vote could shake the deadlock on this issue too. To be fair to the allegedly “hypocritical, self-serving MEPs”, they are not the culprits. After having obtained, in the 1980s, the right to have offices in Brussels, and, in the 1990s, the right to hold some plenary sessions and all committee meetings there, they have been expressing time and time again, with a growing majority, their wish to stick to a single seat, close to that of the Commission and of the Council. The problem is rather that France is expected to veto any attempt to abandon Strasbourg. As one of France’s most prominent Europeans once told me: of course it is an absurd situation, and the French realize it too, but France will only be able to concede the single seat when it feels strong. And this may take a while.

However, at a time when the Brexit vote should make us more aware than ever of the need to get rid of such an easy target for euro-bashing, the prospect of Brexit should strengthen the case for something that could be a central ingredient of an honourable compromise that could achieve precisely that. Here is the argument. Currently, the European Union has three universities in the world’s top ten and thirteen in the top fifty. After Brexit, it would be left with six in the top fifty, and none in the top ten. Should we care? Yes, because the most attractive places within Europe for the best students and researchers from Europe and elsewhere will henceforth be outside the European Union. Can this be avoided? Can we build a continental Oxford? Why not in Strasbourg?

Here is the plan. I propose that the European Parliament agrees to the following deal with the French State and the City of Strasbourg. For twenty years, the budget of the European Parliament and the other European institutions will comprise an amount that matches what it currently spent in Strasbourg due to most of the plenary sessions having to be held there. When the twenty years are up, the “travelling circus” will be terminated. It can also be terminated earlier, if the French authorities so wish. If this is the case, whatever is saved each year as a result of the reduction of the number of sessions held in Strasbourg will be put at the disposal of the Strasbourg municipal authorities.

Some of the money they can use as they wish, for example, simply to soften the initial blow for hotels and restaurants, but half of it must be used to help turn the University of Strasbourg into a top university. Combined with Strasbourg’s other assets — a pleasant city, the presence of the Council of Europe, the availability of the Parliament building and the possibility of functioning in three languages (French, German and English) —, an intelligent use of this huge subsidy could be enough to permanently boost the quality, prestige and attractiveness of the university. My guess is that, once the deal is sealed, the local authorities will be the ones pushing, even more than the Parliament itself, for the end of the “travelling circus.”

Might the Parliament and other EU institutions not object to their budget covering these generous subsidies to Strasbourg, once some sessions are repatriated to Brussels? They should bear in mind that, with this plan, they would still save whatever they currently spend on transport to and from Strasbourg and all the time they needlessly spend travelling. Moreover, in the absence of a compromise of this sort, the alternative may well be paying for another fifty or hundred years — unless the EU collapses beforehand, having lost all credibility.

While the local political authorities may be happy
to have this money at their disposal, might the French government not object to no longer having one of the three EU “capitals” on its territory? The choice of Strasbourg as seat of the European Parliament was a historical accident. In 1951, Luxembourg was chosen as the seat of the Coal and Steel Community because the Belgian government did not want it in Brussels. But Luxembourg did not have an appropriate facility for the parliamentary assembly of the newly created Community. Strasbourg was not too far away and it was decided that the hemicycle of the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe could be used for this (very occasional) purpose.

The rest is inertia, coupled with a symbolic interpretation: a city at the French-German border can symbolise the overcoming of Europe’s murderous divisions. With the passage of time and successive enlargements, this symbol has lost its power. But it should still be honoured. Some important acts – such as the adoption of a new Treaty or the welcoming of a new member state –, including possibly some acts requiring the presence of delegations from national parliaments, could still be held in Strasbourg. All the routine in Brussels, the grand events in Strasbourg.

In our collective life at all levels, just as in our individual lives, we must be prepared for setbacks. For Europe, Brexit is definitely a setback. For Britain, it is even a calamity – at least my British friends think so. But as collectives and as individuals, we must relentlessly try to turn such setbacks into opportunities. The plan sketched above should illustrate this. Let us use the message of the Brexit vote to put an end to the shameful travelling circus and use the negative impact of Brexit on the academic strength of the European Union to work out a smart compromise.

The “Travelling Circus”: A recent EU report estimated that the cost of travelling between Brussels and Strasbourg for EU Parliament plenary sessions is as high as 100 million euro per year. Since the act was introduced in 1999, the total cost of the scheme amounts to approximately 2 billion euro.