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Reflections on the democratic legitimacy of the Brexit vote

The UK's Vote to leave Europe is a surprise, but it can hardly be said to have come out of the blue. Whether the root cause of the result is that British people were deceived 40 years ago by their leaders when originally asked to sign up to the "Common Market", or whether the European Project has simply evolved in the intervening years in a direction they do not want to go, is hard to determine. But with an extended exercise in direct democracy, and more than 33 million participating, no one can argue with the democratic legitimacy of the result. The British and American political systems in particular, are designed to encourage the polarisation of views, and adversarial debate between them. This echoes their legal systems. Not for the Anglo-Saxons, the state's wise and experienced appointees pronouncing solemnly upon the right and just course of action. Political decisions are forged through a formalised process of debate, a ritualization of the actual physical conflicts that preceded this way of deciding things. For all its apparent wastefulness, illogicality and general maddeningness, it is a very defensible approach. Such an approach recognises the decentralised nature of knowledge in a large society.

The perennial British complaint about the European project has been that it has been driven by a political elites, who (high handedly, according to this critique) presume to act in the enlightened (but undemocratic) interest of their people. According to this view therefore, it is fitting that even a reluctant, internationalist, British elite has now been overruled by an exercise in untidy and raucous mass democracy.

I think those that criticise the Campaigners, the European leaders or the level of information provided in the media, are missing the wood for the trees. After 35 years of grumpy cohabitation within the structures of the European Union (as it has become), the British (or possibly even the English) political philosophy has proved terminally incompatible with the Continental one. The British don't have to be part of an eventual European State; there is much to be said for it, and I argued strongly in favour, but it isn't compulsory. The Japanese are an example of a people who now play a very positive role in the world but have no intention whatsoever of wholesale societal integration into it, and that surely must be their choice. It isn't deluded or wrong, they just prefer, on balance, a more culturally traditional and socially homogeneous way of arranging their affairs. The British have long since given up the Japanese option, but there is something between that and complete integration into

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Europe and the world. It is not that surprising that many native Brits, faced with the scale of the changes to their world, have opted to slow things down.

Whether, as a result, the UK will be able to do a significantly better job of arranging its affairs as a more independent nation remains to be seen. Its citizens are a rambunctiously disunited people, and without a European Union to blame, they will no doubt return to metaphorically kicking seven bells out of each other in the manner at which they excel. There are new potential divisions to generate political conflict in the early 21st century, to add to the traditional ones between classes; race, religion, generation and regional identity, to pick on a few. But if one is British, one must be optimistic. Britain is big enough and stable enough to be a governable entity, and it has many strengths, its democracy, property rights, tradition of tolerance and fair play, its justice system and open society. Smaller political entities may prove to be more responsive to their citizens needs in a rapidly evolving world. Britain will probably never again exercise dominating military power overseas, but we can be hopeful that the era of serious territorial aggrandisement is in the past now that communication between peoples is instantaneous and global. Perhaps a medium sized sovereign, mercantile, post-industrial, multi-ethnic state will indeed flourish in the 21st century world.

The binary nature of the democratic debate has encouraged many people on both sides to think that one option is deterministically preferable to the other. The course of circumstances is however, not predetermined and those whose job is to make us believe that it is are often deceived by their own rhetoric. Many politicians with their legal backgrounds are inclined to argue their case as though they had perfect knowledge of the future. Inevitably, they come to believe in their own arguments. In reality, the future is always clouded in extreme uncertainty. That is why, it is a relief that each of us only carries one 44 millionth of the responsibility for making this decision. Our system of democracy has however evolved over a very long period of time. Debates over the structure of the franchise have raged and been resolved over hundreds of years. Democracy is a process which determines how our society evolves and, judging by the improvement in the lives of our citizens over recent centuries, a pretty successful one. We are all very familiar with the strength of our own convictions, but democracy has the effect of subordinating our own most strongly held convictions, or that of any group, however elite, to the collective will of all the people.

In this important instance, the people have spoken.

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