

Brexit and the Mirror-Image of the Truth

by Theodore Dalrymple



Magna est veritas et prævalet—“Great is the truth and its prevails”—is one of the few Latin phrases that I remember. Unfortunately, I do not think that it is altogether true, nor is it true even in its often misquoted form, *Magna est veritas et prævalebit*, “Great is the truth and it will prevail”—memorably translated by Billy Bunter, an indolent and greedy hero of schoolboy stories of my youth, as “Great is the truth and it will prevail a bit.”

Alas, not even in this somewhat weakened form is it true. I think a more accurate depiction of the sociological relationship with truth would be “Great is the mirror-image of the truth and it will often prevail.”

A fine instance of this unedifying fact is the widespread response to the temporary suspension of Parliament by the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. It has been very widely depicted, both in the world's press and in Britain itself, as all but a *coup d'état*, the political manoeuvre of an incipient dictator, at the least an authoritarian measure. In fact it is the very opposite of these things: it is designed to *prevent* a coup. The mirror-image of truth has very largely prevailed.

The fundamental facts are these. The British Parliament agreed to hold a referendum of the population on the question of Britain's continued membership of the European Union. Although the referendum had no force from the purely constitutional point of view, it was clearly not intended as a glorified opinion poll and it was implicit that the winning side—that which obtained 50 per cent of the votes cast plus one—would decide the issue.

No strong objections were raised in advance to this foolish manner of proceeding by those in favour of Britain remaining in the Union because they felt they would win with ease. Despite—or perhaps because of—the strong support of both David Cameron, then Prime Minister, and Barack Obama, then President of the United States, for the campaign for Britain to remain in the Union, those in favour of leaving gained 52 per cent of the votes.

The British Parliament, the majority of whose members were in favour of remaining, then passed a resolution in obedience to the referendum result that Britain should leave. It would have been too brazen a defiance of the popular opinion that they themselves had, canvassed, quite without necessity, for them to have done otherwise.

But having done this, they then opposed both the deal with the Union negotiated by Mrs. May, and the withdrawal of Britain without any agreement as to the terms of that agreement. The European Union had plausibly reiterated that it would not

renegotiate the terms of the agreement: indeed, I had no reason why it should do so, given Mrs. May's craven surrender on all fronts.

Thus Parliament wanted neither the only deal then possible, nor no deal at all. The inexorable conclusion is that it was attempting to prevent any kind of withdrawal whatsoever, even in Mrs. May's extremely attenuated form. In other words, it set itself up against the will of the people as expressed in the referendum. And this is so irrespective of the wisdom or folly of Britain withdrawing from the Union.

In other words, Parliament was expressing its authority over popular opinion, presumably on the ground that it knew best what was good for the very people on whose opinion on the question it had just sought. If anyone could be accused of mounting a coup, albeit a slow-moving and indirect one, and of political authoritarianism, it was Parliament itself.

Let us suppose that the vote had gone the other way—that 52 per cent of those who voted had done so to remain. Does anyone suppose for a moment that the disappointed leavers would not have accepted the vote and instead manoeuvred to thwart the will of the majority? A few enthusiasts might perhaps still have argued for eventual withdrawal at some time in the future, but would certainly not have obstructed or threatened the continuance of the government as the remainers have done. Who, one might ask, are the democrats round here?

Those who now demonstrate against Mr. Johnson's manoeuvre do so because they claim to want Parliament to have its say. But Parliament has had its say for three years, without resolving the issue, and moreover with a clear determination to thwart any implementation of the resolution it had passed because it never had any intention of carrying out the people's wishes as expressed in the referendum.

To hold a referendum, or plebiscite, and then ignore the

result is now a European tradition, but to call it a democratic procedure is surely to twist the word beyond any possible meaning. Both the French and the Dutch publics voted against the proposed European Constitution by a wider margin than that by which the British voted to leave the Union, but got it anyway in a revised form, as a binding treaty rather than as a constitution. The political class thus triumphed over the population, banking on the fundamental apathy of the latter. But this a dangerous game.

The protesters against Mr. Johnson's manoeuvre are not trying to defend parliamentary democracy, about which they do not give a fig: what they are protesting against is that the votes of those persons whom they consider ignorant, uneducated, prejudiced, xenophobic, and so forth, have a chance of being taken seriously, indeed as seriously as their own. This is an outrage to their dignity.

But it has to be remembered that the educated are not *ipso facto* invariably wiser than the uneducated, nor are they necessarily the stoutest of defenders of freedom, a fact evident on many American campuses, where opinion is free only as long as it coincides with the current doxa. Indeed, the educated are among the greatest foes of freedom today, or perhaps, to be fair, I should put it the other way round: among the greatest foes of freedom today, are many of the educated. They are the anointed whose vision must prevail, and mirror-image truth serves that end.

One word of caution: time is short, but ample enough for further betrayal.

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