

Brexit: he who lives by direct democracy dies by direct democracy

by Theodore Dalrymple

As soon as it was clear that, like bad students in a multiple-choice exam, the British population had got the answer wrong in the referendum about Brexit, it was only too predictable that efforts would be made to nullify the results.

For the fact is that plebiscites in modern European democracy are intended to be no different from what they were in Napoleon III's time: they are not attempts at canvassing public opinion but at consecrating a decision already taken or an opinion already held by the elite and its acolytes. A petition to have a second referendum took five days to obtain three million signatories (including from 39,000 alleged residents from the Vatican City, which has a population of 800 people).

Members of parliament, 60 per cent of whom are in favour of Britain remaining in the EU, have threatened to block the Brexit.

The leader of the Scots nationalists, Nicola Sturgeon, who found it democratically unacceptable that Britain should leave the union on the basis of a 52 per cent vote, predominantly in England, to do so found it democratically acceptable that 4 or 5 per cent of the votes cast in Scotland should outweigh all the votes cast in favour of exit, for she said that Scotland had the right to prevent the Brexit.

There are intrinsic difficulties with plebiscitary democracy, of course, especially where, as in Britain but unlike

Australia, there is no legal obligation for citizens to vote.

It is surely unwise, to put it no higher, for major political or constitutional decisions to be taken on the basis of 50 per cent of the votes cast plus one, which may constitute a small minority of the adult population. In this case, only three-eighths of the British adult population (or adult and adolescent population, given the voting age) voted for the Brexit. And it is true there is no constitutional obligation on MPs to obey the results of the referendum.

But no such objection was raised before the referendum, which was thus accepted on all sides as a legitimate way of going about things. Indeed, Scots nationalists had to accept it as legitimate, for such a method is their only hope of achieving independence.

The honourable and perspicacious thing to have done would have been to argue forcefully against a referendum as a method of deciding the question and therefore to call for massive or overwhelming abstention.

Had anyone done this, this objection post facto to the results would have been honest and consistent, and not just a matter of pique. But expecting probity from a modern politician is like trying to get milk from a bull.

Those who argue for another referendum claim that those who voted for the Brexit did not really know what they voted for, regret the financial turmoil they have caused and would vote differently tomorrow (there will be no day-after-tomorrow if they get the answer right).

But no one could have missed the warnings of financial turmoil in the event of a vote for exit: they voted for an exit despite the warnings, possibly because they apprehended that the so-called European project is a recipe for unreformable bureaucratic dictatorship.

Former Labour prime minister Tony Blair has said that now that the consequences of the vote are clear, there should be another referendum immediately. For this flea-brained man, four days is an historical epoch.

What we have now got is the worst of all possible worlds, a mad and intemperate quasi-democratic way of deciding a question of profound importance with a strong temptation by an elite persuaded of its own ineffable wisdom and transcendent right to rule the country to annul the result because it doesn't like it.

All votes are equal, but some votes are more equal than others. If the results are annulled, however, as they very well may be, many of those who voted for exit will feel even more despised and sidelined than they do already. Many no doubt will decline into apathy, but some may resort to direct action, meaning violence: for it is true that some of those who voted for the Brexit were motivated by the crudest resentments. Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.

The opposition Labour Party now has its own problems with direct democracy. Rather than letting the parliamentary party elect a leader, it changed its method of election to direct voting by the party membership and those who avowed online a sympathy for its general principles or goals (and paid \$6).

What the party got, not surprisingly, was a fly-in-amber student radical circa 1970 who has turned out, not surprisingly, to be a disaster as leader. But if the same methods are used to elect another leader, it is likely that he will be re-elected, or someone very like him will be elected.

The referendum, and the mess it has caused, is the consequence of the disregard of and disrespect for the delicate mechanism of the British constitution by a generation of politicians who thought they knew better. But he who lives by direct democracy dies by direct democracy; and a stable country has been

utterly destabilised.

It is interesting to contrast the conduct of the Remain camp with that of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet after he lost a plebiscite on whether his term as president would be extended. The main difference is that the latter abided by the unwanted result.

First published in