

Brexit's Aftermath

Complicated

by Theodore Dalrymple

For a long time, Britons who wanted their country to leave the European Union were regarded almost as mentally ill by those who wanted it to stay. The leavers didn't have an opinion; they had a pathology. Since one doesn't argue with pathology, it wasn't necessary for the remainers to answer the leavers with more than sneers and derision.

Even after the vote, the attitude persists. Those who voted to leave are described as, *ipso facto*, small-minded, xenophobic, and fearful of the future. Those who voted to stay are described as, *ipso facto*, open-minded, cosmopolitan, and forward-looking. The BBC itself suggested as much on its website. In short, the desire to leave was a return to the insularity that resulted in the famous—though apocryphal—newspaper headline: fog in the channel: continent cut off.

If insularity is indeed on the rise, it is affecting increasing numbers of Europeans. According to the latest polls, nearly a half of the Italians and Dutch want their countries to leave. Discontent with the Union is also widespread in other countries. The French have a poorer opinion of the European Union than do the British, but because the French believe it to be reformable, fewer want to leave. Before the vote, the danger of Brexit to the integrity of the European Union was described in the French media in pathological terms, as a possible “contagion,” rather than merely an example to be followed—or not, as the case might be. And now the Union is faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, it will not want to make Brexit too painless for Britain, in case other countries, such as Sweden, follow suit; but on the

other, it will not want to disturb trade relationships with one of Europe's largest economies. Britain's trade with Europe is largely in Europe's favor, but it's easier for Britain to find alternative sources of imports than for Europe to find alternative export markets.

There is now a race between the breakup of the European Union and the United Kingdom itself—for the Scottish leader has threatened another referendum on independence. This breakup would be even more difficult, especially for Scotland; Germany has already said that it would welcome Scotland into the Union, but if Scotland thinks that it would then be able to escape George Osborne's policy of so-called austerity—which is to say, his feeble attempts to balance the budget—it might get a nasty shock when dealing with German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble. And, if Scotland were to sign up to the Schengen Agreement, a ridiculous but real and damaging land border between England and Scotland would suddenly become a reality. This is something not seen for hundreds of years.

The vote might also lead to a unification of Ireland, for the Northern Irish also voted to remain in Europe. Sinn Fein has already called for a referendum on unification. Such unification would be a great blessing for England, but not necessarily for Ireland.

One possible reason for the success of the Brexit campaign was President Obama's ill-conceived intervention, when he threatened that if Britain voted to leave the Union, it would have to go to the "back of the queue" as far as any trade agreements are concerned. This sounded like bullying, and was not well-received by much of the British population, which had already been subjected to quite a lot of such bullying from others. If I were an American, I shouldn't have been pleased with it either, for Obama spoke not as a president with a few months left in office, but as a president-for-life, or at least one with the right to decide his successor's policy.

Among the many subjects not properly discussed during the campaign was whether large and fundamental political changes should be made based on 50 percent-plus-one of the votes cast in a single plebiscite. The House of Commons is not constitutionally bound by the results, and most members of Parliament support remaining in the European Union. They could argue, not without plausibility, that a vote representing no more than three-eighths of the total electorate isn't quite the groundswell of opinion that should be required for fundamental change. If they acted on this argument, however, violence might erupt.

First published in