

The U.K. Brexit Debate: Down the Rabbit Hole with Parliament

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What role Parliament? Edmund Burke put forth his known idea before the electors of Bristol on November 3, 1774. An ideal, and therefore refutable notion, was advanced: "Certainly, gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents."[1]

The role of a parliamentarian is not to serve as slave but to serve with opinion and awareness. "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion." The latter is a capitulation to sentiment, grief and emotion: intemperate, wild, impulsive, the views of an electorate can still be given form, and should, but not without criticism.

The debate on whether the UK Parliament would give the green light invoking Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty was last gasp for those wishing to remain in the European Union, the so-called remoaners who were battling conscience, self-interest and understanding the fractious will of the electorate. Politicians wishing that their constituents had done something else; various papers such as The Guardian wishing, even at this point, to reverse what was perceived as madness.

It did not take much to see Parliament being fetishised, the sacred cow, the bulwark against an evil European bureaucracy that had been raining down paper driven dictates for decades. The picture is an incomplete one, but for conservative MP Jacob Mogg-Rees for North East Somerset, the vote had a messiah like quality to it: June 23 had been the moment when revelation met reality, the voice of the people coming together with the sanctity of Parliament.

Parliament, claimed Bill Cash, conservative member for Stone and one of the fathers (or godfathers) of the Brexit movement, was effectively giving effect to a "peaceful revolution". He saw history in the making. Whether it was the Corn Laws; whether it was the matter of appeasement prior to the Second World War; whether it was the issue of institutional reform, it was the grand madam of Parliament who was giving effect to the people's voice.

On that side of the aisle, only Ken Clarke, whose history in parliament, by his own admission, was the history of British involvement in European institutions, remained resolutely opposed to triggering Article 50. Listening to his speech was much like receiving a dash of spice to the historical record, part irony and part whimsy.

He found it amusing that he had been termed "an enemy of the people" by attempting to convince voters and fellow parliamentarians that leaving the EU would be a mistake.

Clarke's point was that the hard core eurosceptics would not have felt bound in the slightest to abandon their position even if the referendum had gone against them. Remember Burke's address to the electors of Bristol, he urged.

Ever the political animal, the veteran was suggesting that parliament is of its own accord a wiser, higher being, a tutor of the people, rather than an empty vessel vibrating with their emotions. He mused that a previous Tory politician, Enoch Powell, known for the anti-immigrant "Rivers of Blood" speech, would "probably find it amazing to believe that his party had become eurosceptic and rather mildly anti-immigrant in a very strange way in 2016. I'm afraid on that I haven't followed them. And I don't intend to do so."

His attack on the Prime Minister was the richest of all, a true display of the Europhile in action. His comments were those of the hectoring didactic, giving a history lesson about why Britain, Europe's sickly member after Suez in 1956, had decided to dive deep into Europe. What May was hoping to do was defy history, and see Britain as a beast of singular value, inimitable and to be treated as such:

"Apparently you follow the rabbit down the hole and emerge in a Wonderland where suddenly countries throughout the world are queuing up to give us trading advantages and access to their markets that previously we've never been able to achieve. Nice men like President Trump and President Erdogan are just impatient to abandon their normal protectionism and give us access... No doubt somewhere there's a hatter holding a tea party with a dormouse."

Ed Vaizey, formerly a minister in the conservative Cameron government, expressed his message with less rueful reflection, venting and railing against his own party (much in the way of parental and fraternal angst), scolding the May government for sneaking an announcement that Britain would withdraw from the European nuclear research agency Euratom. As with Clarke, broad brush questions about his patriotism were absurd. Everyone in the chamber was a patriot, wishing to see Britannia on the right path.

David Lammy, MP for Tottenham and another termed remoaner, took the critique in another way: this was a chance for the Tories to envisage a departing Britain as a glorious tax haven, much like Singapore. "But the poorest will be the ones to suffer and many of them are in my constituency." [2]

Many of the members who voted against the Article 50 bill did so along constituency lines. Where the referendum vote was overwhelmingly in favour of remaining, the member complied with those wishes. They pointed out that not all had spoken with focused indignation in June; and not all had actually directed their venom at the EU per se. A mere 27 percent had voted to leave. Thirteen million did not vote. Only two of the nations making up the UK wished for an exit.

British Labour, another party in a deep psychic crisis over Europe, was visibly fracturing before attempts by leader Jeremy Corbyn to keep on the Brexit message. A three line whip had been gathered to ensure compliance, but former culture secretary Ben Bradshaw, along with others, promised an angry defiance.

A gaggle of party members, even at this point in time, were circulating ideas for a second referendum. The Liberal Democrats were also hoping to change the tide. But the resistance seemed to die in the chamber. Clarke was the only Tory to defy his party; Corbyn faced a

more challenging number of 47 who voted against the line.

A funeral, a revolution of peace, an act of implosion, but most certainly, and above all, an act of assertive sovereignty. Parliament, in Burke's words, as "a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole".

But what was being witnessed on the last day of January, and first day of February was not one nation but several. Whether this does spell folly for the UK, doom the EU, or signal a revolution beyond borders that breeds order from chaos remains the stuff of dreams or nightmares. With a historian's goggles we watch to see how this movement evolves, with its steps into a new world darkly.

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Notes

[1] <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch13s7.html>

[2]

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/live/2017/jan/31/article-50-debate-brex-it-government-lyin-g-about-how-easy-brex-it-will-be-says-owen-smith-politics-live>

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