1. A psychology of Brexit

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This book is for winners and losers – past, present and future. Brexit is not just a decision to be rejoiced, regretted or recriminated, but about the adjustments to working lives which it demands. It is about – and not in any particular order – planning and panicking, resistance and acquiescence, coping and powering on. This chapter examines the psychological side of the Brexit referendum decision.

HOW THE VOTE WAS WON – THE POLITICS OF EMOTION

It was always about control.

As so many issues are, the debate about whether the United Kingdom should join the European Common Market in 1973 right up to its date of leaving in 2020, was about ‘Who runs things here?’. The key ingredient of control in the psychological cocktail of our political lives provides a potent force in the whole ‘Who runs things?’ question. This is just the kind of force to stir up and unleash human emotion, and so the Brexit phenomenon has proved. The coronavirus pandemic has further underlined these psychological issues as well as serving to question the efficacy of government.

For supporters of the Leave campaign (also known jauntily as ‘Brexiters’), there was anger historically about the role of the European Union in UK daily life, which had variously prohibited the weighing of fruit and vegetables in old ‘imperial’ measures of pounds and ounces and forbidden the sale of less energy efficient lightbulbs. There were anxieties about the identity of communities and what free movement and settlement of non-UK Europeans might mean for them, particularly after governments had underestimated the large numbers arriving legitimately to work and contribute to UK life. For a proportion of Leavers there was fear and loathing manifest in prejudice. Whatever the motivations of Brexiters, their emotions accompanying the Referendum result were clear: happiness and joy. They had ‘taken back control’ from an increasingly federal European Union, just as their campaign slogan had announced. There was glee in the faces of those who voted Leave.

For supporters of the Remain campaign (for whom ‘Remainers’ became the unflatteringly tame epithet), there was a palpable sense of sadness borne out of impending loss of what had been gained in 46 years of close economic cooperation and what might be forfeited in terms of the successes of the modern European age, not least lasting peace across most of the continent since the end of World War II. There was disgust at those opponents who propounded the emotions of prejudice. There is little doubt the Referendum result came as a shock or surprise to those who supported the UK remaining in the European Union. The following day, a visitor to the House of Commons witnessed people ‘walking around in a daze’, while Remain supporters attested to feelings of emptiness and a same sense of bereavement typifying their experience.

The missing piece of this emotional jigsaw is the piece which makes an emotional outlet difficult to find: confusion. What was the reality? How much had fact or fiction played a part in what happened? During the 2016 Referendum campaign, the reliability of information provided by both sides of the Leave/Remain divide was open to question. Most famously in the UK, the battle-bus used by prominent Brexiteers to tour the country had emblazoned on its side the sum of money which the UK would re-appropriate if people voted Leave. They claimed this would rejuvenate the National Health Service, the treasured institution where public funding crises are all too frequent. It was argued that this simplified the arguments for many – and that it was not true. By rejoinder the Leave campaigners highlighted the negative impact of what prominent Brexit campaigner and then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson termed ‘Project fear’ – the prediction of disaster if the UK did not vote to Remain.

WHO COULD HAVE PREDICTED THIS?

In time, uncertainty became the hallmark of the result and its aftermath. For many, anxiety became the key emotion, whether manifest in pronouncements from business leaders and organisations, or in the increasing sense of blame among the electorate that politicians seemed unable to work out the detail of how to ‘Leave’. However, with these emotions, there also came increased certainty of what people did not want. They did not want the uncertainty to continue.

Efforts to exert control over this uncertainty were manifest in many guises. From public large rallies calling for scenarios that might bring reassurance, to small gatherings held to consider ‘what next?’. In the Westminster room where the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats had failed to negotiate a coalition deal in 2010, there were discussions about what might be done to give voice to growing support for a re-run of the Referendum. Evidence of this groundswell was subsequently provided by demonstrations of popular and politicians’ support and not surprisingly there were counter-demonstrations too. But what

of those who did not demonstrate? For some there was a change of heart. They had been surprised by the difficulties of reaching a workable political deal; there was lack of knowledge about the far-reaching consequences of the UK leaving the EU, not least the challenges this might raise for Northern Ireland, whose 'Troubles' had preoccupied more than one generation before the securing of peace. Perhaps it was not such a good idea to leave the EU after all?

For those with a high need for control and who had a stake in the Brexit arrangements, the motivation to support a particular position was influenced by their role as well as their disposition. This was most obviously the case for Theresa May who had become the UK Prime Minister the day after the referendum result on which her predecessor David Cameron resigned. Although a Remain supporter, the then Home Secretary had taken a back seat during the referendum campaign, as though primed to be Plan B if Cameron's Plan A came unstuck.

During the two-year period originally set aside to negotiate the UK withdrawal from the EU following the decision to leave – which originally was agreed would end on 29 March 2019 – the Prime Minister had produced no agreement on the details of a departure which could be supported by more than one-third of the House of Commons. There had been clear signs that Theresa May struggled to involve a wider circle of political views in her plans, evidenced by the very small group of advisers with whom she worked in contriving to lose her party's parliamentary majority at the 2017 General Election. Only the rejection of what had become known as the Prime Minister's Brexit deal in January 2019, by the largest vote in UK parliamentary history, appeared to persuade her to announce, 'the time has come to begin talks with other parties'. En route to this parliamentary disaster was a vote of no confidence in her leadership of the party and the dispatch of two Brexit ministers who appeared to have been left out of the loop over decisions Theresa May made about leaving the EU. 'Everything comes through Number 10', said one former Conservative MP and so it seemed, until Parliament sought to wrestle control from her, with two months to go before the March Leave date.

There was no surprise on MPs' faces following the rejection of the Prime Minister's Brexit deal – in fact, she had postponed the vote from before the Christmas holidays in hopes that impending defeat could be averted. The country had been briefed by the media – who had been briefed by MPs – that the deal would be defeated in Parliament. This could not have come as a surprise to the Prime Minister.

For some there was sadness that the only Brexit deal to emerge had been one engineered by a Prime Minister who seemed unwilling to share control and whose course they feared steered directly at the destruction of too many of their ideals. Even the pioneer of one of the Leave campaigns, Nigel Farage, declared his reservations about Brexit in the face of Theresa May's deal.

Meanwhile there were fears that a re-run of the vote – a People’s Vote – would not only signal a rejection of the democratic process and of the will of the people, but might further entrench divisions in UK society. Therefore the issue became a straightforward decision – whether one agreed or disagreed with the 2016 Referendum result – as the (slim) majority had voted for the UK to Leave the EU and that was that.

By the end of January 2019 and with 66 days before a 29 March deadline, one question persisted. Who was in control?

HOW DID IT GET TO THIS?

What is it about the United Kingdom? Is it because the inhabitants live on islands which are physically detached from the main European continent, or is it the legacy of a worldwide empire facilitated by its proximity to the sea and historical successes and excesses or instead a long history of opposition to hegemony by European neighbours? Each of these has been claimed as a reason for the ‘British’ approach to the rest of Europe and ultimately to the decision to remain in or leave the European Union and its federal system of rule-making.

However, there are many reasons why each of these ideas has limited claim to be such a cause. The difference in Brexit voting patterns between nations within the United Kingdom shows how there is no single ‘island’ mentality. From a majority perspective, Scotland and Northern Ireland opted to remain in the EU, while Wales and England voted to leave. Taking this a step further, it was clear on the night of the Brexit result that the overall vote was particularly close (51.9% v 48.1% in favour of leaving the EU) and illustrated further splits in regional as well as national preferences. For example the county of Denbighshire in North Wales voted to leave (by 54% v 46%), but neighbouring Gwynedd voted to remain (by 58% v 42%).

The perception that areas of the UK were ‘left behind’ following the collapse of traditional industries and that there had also been a failure to reinvest in these communities compared to the economic advantages of others, gained some credence. Perhaps it is not surprising that the belated offer of financial aid to such areas by the Prime Minister in the month before the March Brexit deadline was seen as recognition of this ‘disconnect’ with UK society, as much as a political means to gain support for her Brexit deal from MPs representing these constituencies. The views of outsiders were instructive in this regard. Some American political commentators were keen to draw parallels between the ‘rust belt’ of the United States and the former industrial powerhouses of the North of England and the Midlands.

Others were keen to perceive the vote as the opportunity to claim back a heritage of something distinctively British in its culture. This was laden with controversy for its undertones of nationalism and potential for real

prejudice. However, we know from social psychology that the issue of identity is a legitimate concern for all who feel the need for a sense of belonging – which according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, means all of us. Meanwhile the Brexit process showed little concern for the questions raised for EU nationals living in the UK. Only in 2019 did the Government announce plans to drop financial charges for EU nationals applying to remain. This lack of sensitivity and finesse is perhaps not surprising given the clumsiness and lack of ethical practice demonstrated by the UK Home Office in addressing the situation of the Windrush generation, many of whose lives have been severely adversely impacted by inadequate and inappropriate administration of immigration and migration procedures.

The UK’s main political parties appeared to back-pedal on the issue of migration to the UK when it became apparent in the 2015 General Election that many of their traditional supporters questioned the impact of a rapid influx of EU nationals. As a country which has traditionally welcomed immigrants – whether in times of dire need or as a result of economic growth – the rise of a hitherto small political party, given little credence by its larger established rivals stunned the sensitivities of many by its blatant focus on matters of immigration. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) seemed to coalesce much that made most people angry in some way – either for or against them.

‘BLOWING THE DOORS OFF’

The presence of emotion in the whole debate – for citizens and political decision makers – was evident before the referendum, when flotillas of rival campaign boats jostled on the River Thames outside the UK Parliament, with well-known celebrities shouting at each other from their respective craft.

Walking down a high street in Devon on market day, I witnessed exchanges between campaigners for a second referendum and vehement opposers of re-running the whole thing. ‘We’ve voted and we’re bloody well leaving, whether you like it or not’, leant in one angry passer-by, while a lady who had voted ‘remain’ politely enquired why it was necessary to use swear-words in campaign literature, such as ‘Bollocks to Brexit’. Amidst the heated conversations and monologues, a man stood motionless carrying ten-foot high flagpoles with both EU and UK flags, using a military style holster to keep them aloft. It was clear that if this was a small sample of the ongoing debate about the referendum results, nothing had been finally resolved and the seeds for ongoing discontent had clearly been sown.

In the virtual world of social media, emotions were no less colourfully expressed. This is perhaps less surprising given the increasing criticism of online platforms for failing to clamp down on anti-social and incendiary communications, where they have been increasingly renowned for facilitating

cyberbullying and taking a negative toll on the mental health of targeted users. However, Brexit has produced its own form of online political mud-slinging and name calling, in which one group or another has asserted its right to address opponents in a particular manner. It was observed that ‘Brexiters’ exercised their bragging rights by labelling dissatisfied losers of the referendum ‘Remoaners’ (Meredith and Richardson, 2019). Assigning labels came no less easily to elected representatives in Parliament. Breaking out of their political parties in the month before the scheduled Brexit, MPs from Labour and Conservative benches complained of the inadequacies in their erstwhile allies which had brought them to the point of leaving the two major political parties. The responses from former party colleagues were predictably savage: ‘traitors’ came one riposte.

Giving voice to such emotion was not confined to the UK. For those in the EU who appeared to respect the decision of the UK to leave, there had been months of negotiation and endeavours to support the person in this process with whom they had had regular dealings: the Prime Minister Theresa May. Similarly there was awareness among EU negotiators of the difficulties facing a UK Prime Minister who was under pressure from many sides to deliver a workable deal. Such awareness included sympathy among European leaders who recognised the pressures from their own time in office. When the UK Parliament rejected the deal agreed by Theresa May with the EU and those in the European Research Group on the right of the Conservative Party seemed to be pushing the Prime Minister towards a ‘no deal’ outcome, Donald Tusk – European Council President – seemed unable to hold back his frustration. In a press conference address in Brussels he announced, ‘By the way, I’ve been wondering what the special place in hell looks like for those who promoted Brexit without even a sketch of a plan of how to carry it [out] safely’. He repeated his words on Twitter. When asked about this apparent break with polite protocol, the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, tried to choose his words carefully in observing ‘Don’t judge, [because] others will judge you’.

DEAL OR NO DEAL?

Game Theory has become a popular approach to understanding human behaviour. Cited by economists, behavioural commentators, political scientists and psychologists, Game Theory highlights how we are inclined towards what we feel is the best deal in life, whether it involves buying a house or deciding how best to position ourselves in a social situation. Specifically this means considering the impact our own choices will have on others in taking a decision about how to get the best deal. For example, Brexit campaigners anticipated that promoting the idea of huge financial gains if the UK left the EU would clearly

impact on the thinking of many voters. However well, or not, this particular tactic worked, what remained was the question of why the issue of resources should evoke such passion in those faced with ‘real’ or ‘fake’ facts?

The answer to this may lie in a psychological approach which considers how we respond to assessments of the resources we need for daily life. Ultimately this stems from our own drive for survival. Conservation of Resources Theory considers the importance of an individual’s ‘resource pool [...] [that] serves both to shelter [us] from future losses and contributes to enhanced status’ (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 520). In other words, in conducting our own assessments of what is needed for survival, we anticipate what is available to us and just as importantly, we assess the likelihood that no other party or expected demands will take these vital resources from us. The Conservation of Resources approach advances understanding of how we are likely to feel in the face of threats to those resources, whether anticipated or real. Indeed studies of the workplace have shown that where losses of resources are possible, negative outcomes for psychological health are likely (Weinberg, 2016; Westman et al., 2005). In the case of the red Brexit campaign bus emblazoned with the words, ‘We send the EU £350 million per week – let’s fund our NHS instead’, it is not hard to see the use of an approach which borrows from Conservation of Resources. The reference to the National Health Service – which saves lives and is considered a national treasure – explicitly focuses the attention of an audience on matters of survival, and purportedly links this to ‘lost’ resources. In other words, this is a resource ‘we’ have and are freely giving up. The invocation of a real threat to resources necessary for survival could not be clearer. The potential reactions of those considering such a message are either, ‘this is terrible’ or ‘this is fake news’. Both sets of reactions are polarised and therefore conducive to heightened emotional states.

Similarly the threats perceived by Remain campaigners echoed a Conservation of Resources approach. After peace in most of Europe since 1945, would the future of a less than united Europe become one in which ultimately war – and uncertainty about our own survival – are more likely? Even if this was not stated in the campaign literature, the prospect of ‘leaving’ the EU clearly signalled a sense of impending loss. In other words, thought processes associated with a form of bereavement were being inculcated. Although the Brexit campaigners called this ‘Project Fear’, each side of the debate was utilising its own brand of manipulation of perceptions of the future to mobilise voters’ emotions.

Populism and emotions are kindred spirits. The use of emotions for political ends characterises what is often termed a populist approach, in which politicians use messages that play well with potential voters who may be swept up ‘in the moment’ as the issues at hand are so provocatively posed. Historically this technique has been utilised by extremes of the political spectrum, with

inherent dangers echoed in recent and not so recent times, with consequences for the survival of all. In recent decades, the economic and social deprivation brought about by rapid changes in (formerly) industrialised regions across Western Europe has taken a toll on swathes of the population. To a lesser or greater degree, governments have endeavoured to support regeneration of the cities and semi-urban areas negatively impacted by swift declines in fortune. However, progress has been slow and generational in its evolution in some parts of the UK. This situation has created opportunities for exploitation by political populists (Bryant and Wahman, 2017). Arguably UKIP was successful in pressing home its own agenda to considerable electoral advantage in the run-up to the EU referendum, but once it had passed, their star dimmed rather rapidly.

Although UKIP was one supporter of Brexit, there was more than one campaign supporting the idea of the UK leaving the EU. This was a coalition of politicians from across the political spectrum, including both Conservative and Labour Party MPs, who were able to utilise a message which was populist in its style and impact: 'Let's take back control'. The appeal of this message was its use of an immediately emotive concept that rallied round the psychologically powerful idea of protecting resources and sought to own this idea on behalf of 'the nation'. Having successfully won the vote, the arguments about how this control should be taken back raised much larger questions. If control was to be had, people began to question whether it was real or instead an illusion, which in turn led to the much larger question: is anyone in control?

THE END OF THE BEGINNING OR THE BEGINNING OF THE END?

For many, the result of the UK referendum on membership of the EU was too much to take. After all, the vote had been close and the array of emotions described earlier in this chapter were still palpable. A successful campaign by investment manager and activist Gina Miller led to a Supreme Court ruling in early 2017 that only Parliament could authorise the triggering of Article 50 and thereby the process by which the UK could leave the EU. Her stand attracted particularly negative emotions both online and in the national media: 'I was aware there would be nastiness because anything to do with the word Brexit, people lose their minds and it's all about heart. Actually it is about your head and your heart'. Gina Miller was clear that her role was to help the democratic process and not to stand in its way – she acknowledged that after the referendum, the whole country was effectively in favour of Brexit in the eyes of the law. The Supreme Court ruling not only brought some clarity to where the process of Brexit would be progressed, but also re-established the primacy of Parliament in dealing with this hugely important national matter.

It also seemed to signal to many that campaigning, for whichever side of the Brexit debate, was a useful tool in the armoury of well-organised and committed activists.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the launch of renewed campaigns by Remainers and Leavers was in full swing by the autumn of 2018, against the backdrop of political turmoil in Parliament and at the level of the negotiators themselves. On 17 October 2018, the EU agreed with UK Prime Minister Theresa May to postpone a summit previously arranged for November that would have announced ‘the Deal’ that would shape UK departure.

Various stakeholders in business, politics and beyond were already preparing for a ‘No Deal’ scenario, with its implications of being ‘bad for business’. Uncertainty in the marketplace not only risked detracting from economic prosperity, but from the chances of ‘bouncing back’ after a seismic shift in economic and political functioning. With little hint of coincidence, the head of the World Trade Organisation, Roberto Azevêdo, addressing UK business leaders in London on 17 October 2018, highlighted the actual and projected toll of global trade wars threatening to destabilise the world economy in the years ahead. He cited ongoing problems involving China and the United States, and while his comments clearly pointed to a far bigger stage than Europe, he was referring to the potential disadvantages of breaking apart ‘working’ relationships. The Brexit vote was not intended as a declaration of trade war, but one fear of those voting Remain was the potential for future real conflict by the UK leaving this larger family of nations – financially and politically.

There were concerns that the UK’s health was also at stake. *The Lancet* – a recognised global authority on medical matters – published two analyses examining how much Brexit might impact on the health of the UK population and also how different types of Brexit might impact on the National Health Service of the country. These authoritative commentaries concluded that not only was Brexit ‘bad for health’ but that ‘a No-Deal Brexit is substantially worse for the NHS than a future involving the Withdrawal Agreement’ (Fahy et al., 2019). In light of the coronavirus pandemic, the earlier diversion of attention and resources in preparing for ‘No Deal’ is likely to be the focus of scrutiny for some time to come.

It was on 14 November 2018, the 70th birthday of Charles, Prince of Wales, that Theresa May published her 585-page Withdrawal Agreement document (otherwise known as her Brexit deal). Later that day, Prince Charles hosted a birthday drinks party attended by the Prime Minister after she had chaired a five and a quarter hour Cabinet meeting which heralded the release of the document. Two hours later than expected, Theresa May had emerged from 10 Downing Street and announced she was convinced ‘in my head and with my heart that this is the best deal for Britain’ – television cameras lit up the street and viewers could hear the projected voices of protesters shouting

their opposition from the adjacent street outside Whitehall. Despite all the wrangling, there in the calm evening air, it seemed the Cabinet had rallied and agreed a consensus which meant that the Prime Minister was able to claim the support of her Government.

By the morning, the situation was reversed. There were seven ministerial resignations which featured most prominently the Brexit Secretary, Dominic Raab. The statement which the Prime Minister gave to an initially packed House of Commons ended some time later, witnessed by a much-depleted assembly. As former Labour minister Hilary Benn observed later that evening, ‘You could feel the support for her being sucked out of the chamber’, as MPs from every party criticised the deal over which she had presided. The evening news pundits recorded most unusually how ‘exhausted’ the Prime Minister appeared.

Her reference to hearts and minds underlined words used by the activist Gina Miller and perhaps reflected the challenges of leadership they had both faced. From an objective standpoint, the goals of both had been clear: one in advancing a specific cause in the name of parliamentary legitimacy and the other in seeking to bring about the will of the majority of the voting public. The shackles of party political leadership and the differential support demonstrated by allies within her party cleared weighed heavily on the Prime Minister. Her response to the pressure of the situation echoed the approach she had taken in other dealings, from her determination as Home Secretary to cut police numbers up to designing the 2017 General Election campaign. Namely, Theresa May adhered to the advice of a trusted few and seemed unwilling to listen to the views of others beyond an inner circle. As an activist, Gina Miller appeared to embrace the views of those who willingly supported her and arguably her role as leader of a campaign afforded this luxury. However distinctive the psychology of activism from the psychology of government, it became clear their respective ability to listen predicted their experiences of success or failure.

POLITICAL FALLOUT

On 15 January 2019, Prime Minister Theresa May gained the dubious distinction of leading the largest Government defeat in UK parliamentary history. Delayed from the previous month amid fears of defeat, the Government lost the vote on its Brexit Deal by 432 votes to 202.

Following this, a series of votes was held in the House of Commons on proposed amendments to the Brexit Bill, leading to both victories and defeats for the Government. Principally the proposal to ‘take No Deal off the table’ and avoid the prospect of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement ratified by Parliament became the focus of opposition to the Prime Minister. Most

significant in this debate was the status of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which without agreement would de facto become a hard border and with it fears of a return to the violence and open sectarian divisions which had plagued the communities for decades.

The Northern Ireland ‘backstop’ – intended to maintain ‘business as usual’ while a more permanent agreement about the border could be reached – became the Government’s ‘get out of jail’ card, yet it would only apply if a UK–EU deal was reached. Nevertheless Theresa May claimed it was important to keep open a ‘no deal’ Brexit option for the sake of negotiation. Unsurprisingly the majority of her colleagues disagreed. Leader of the Opposition Jeremy Corbyn called on her to drop the ‘no deal’ option and refused to meet with the Prime Minister for discussions unless she did so. Faced with defeat, Theresa May offered to meet representatives of all parties to reach a consensus view. Her detractors, who already included members of her own and other parties, were bemused she had waited almost two years until a few weeks short of the leaving date to make such an offer. Jeremy Corbyn subsequently met with the Prime Minister after the majority of MPs rejected the ‘no deal’ option. The Northern Ireland ‘backstop’ and guarantees for the rights of UK workers post-Brexit were high on his agenda.

Perhaps symptomatic of the fomenting dissatisfaction with the entire process and criticisms of their leadership, Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn became the focus of broader political discontent. On 18 February 2019, seven Labour MPs announced they were leaving the Party after the approach taken by Mr Corbyn to Brexit and in presiding over incidents of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. Within the week, they had been joined by three Conservative MPs similarly disenchanted by their Prime Minister and steps towards the right-wing of politics taken by their former party. This apparently coordinated series of resignations led to formation of a new Independent Group within the House of Commons and for a few days more MPs left to join them, or simply left their political parties to sit as independent MPs.

Over the weekend of 23 February, three Government Ministers wrote an open letter published in the *Daily Mail* national newspaper warning the European Research Group – and de facto the Prime Minister – that the majority of Parliament would unite against a ‘no deal’ Brexit. The pressure on Theresa May to change tack continued to mount as she returned to the EU to attempt to re-open negotiations as commanded by Parliament. As time passed and there was talk of delaying parliamentary votes on Brexit as well as setting up a contingency fund for those adversely affected by a no-deal Brexit, EU leaders issued their own warnings. These included EU Council President Donald Tusk’s comments, which ranged from, ‘The deal is done and will not be re-opened’ to ‘Time is running out – a delay is the next logical step’.

THE LAST DAYS BEFORE BREXIT?

Uncertainty became a key consideration by early 2019 as the impact of Brexit seemed unclear, yet potentially far-reaching. The Governor of the Bank of England announced the worst economic growth figures since the financial collapse of 2008, attributing this at least in part to the prospect of Brexit. Against a backdrop of difficulties for smaller airline companies, popular British airline British Midland (BMI) suddenly ceased trading and overnight thousands of half-term holiday-makers were left stranded around Europe. BMI cited uncertainty over Brexit for its predicament.

Uncertainties – whether directly because of Brexit or not – were further heightened by a series of industry announcements. Renowned UK inventor and manufacturer Dyson chose to move its operations to Asia, but made it clear that this was to do with proximity to its Far Eastern markets and not because of Brexit. Car manufacturer Honda said it was to close its only UK manufacturing plant in 2022 and Airbus announced it would cease to produce its flagship A380 aircraft.

Whatever the motivations for such decisions, prospects of the re-emergence of a healthy UK manufacturing base had taken a battering. More pervasively, the prospect of Brexit – for which a deal had still not been signed off – was having a demonstrable impact on reality as well as perceptions before it had been implemented. Aside from economic collapse, the psychological factor of uncertainty appeared just as potent a predictor of economic downturn as chaotic bad practice in the banking sector had been a decade before.

Curious-sounding contingency plans by various UK Government departments were one outcome. These ranged from predictions of piles of ‘putrefying stockpiles’ of rubbish by the Environment Agency to establishing a hub in Belgium for purchasing urgent medical supplies. It was publicised that the head of MI6 would remain in post after his scheduled retirement, in order to ensure continuity. Fears were expressed in Parliament for the tens of thousands of workers involved in the UK sheep farming industry, as well as for the implications for flocks if EU markets became inaccessible to them. Tens of millions of pounds were spent by the Government on business consulting firms to advise on contingency planning for Brexit (National Audit Office, 2019). This was presented as standard financial outlay by the Government’s Cabinet Office, but seemed likely to stick in the craw of those who believed leaving the EU would channel more public funds into expenditure on UK citizens. By January 2020, the National Audit Office calculated £4.4 billion had been spent by government departments in preparation for exiting the EU, with a further £1.9 billion set aside (National Audit Office, 2020).

Eventually, the inevitable happened and the Prime Minister was obliged to request an extension to Article 50 and delay Brexit. It was agreed that the new date for the UK leaving the EU would be 31 October – commonly known as Halloween, the date commemorated annually on which spirits are celebrated rising up from the underworld to play tricks on those in the land of the living. Whether the potential irony of this dawned on those deciding on this date is not known, but the impact on Theresa May's political career was clear. Graham Brady, Chair of the 1922 Backbench Committee, duly requested a meeting with the Prime Minister to arrange a timetable for her to stand aside and give the Conservative Party an opportunity to find a new leader. She was no longer in control – although events may have made this feel like the case for some time.

DEMOCRACY MEANS DEMOCRACY

The postponement naturally prolonged the process even further than many had anticipated. This had some direct psychological effects on the population, although the consequences for UK politics meant that media coverage of Brexit was unstinting. The people of the UK had become observers in a story in which they were also playing many of the parts. Emotions continued to pour out and supporters' marches continued to reflect the range of moods on both sides. The largest crowd, suggested to consist of one million marchers, featured those who wished to Remain, and the constant vigil outside Parliament by protesters from both sides ensured that any media coverage or news report was overlaid with lingering calls in the background, such as 'Stooooorp Brexit!', serving to remind viewers of the ongoing debate during many newscasts.

However, the effect on many was that the whole affair had dragged on too long and the fault lay with UK politicians, the whole Parliament or EU negotiators, or all indeed all three – and perhaps those supporting the other side of the debate, whichever that was! For some, disillusionment with the existing order of politics was more palpable than ever, while for others the need to 'do something' rose to the top of the agenda. The potential comfort drawn in taking action of some sort harks back to the need for control we all experience. For many, the learned helplessness of bearing witness to tumultuous political events and the unfolding of history which felt at touching distance yet beyond their grasp, seemed likely to win the day. However, emotions would not so easily be deterred from expression. The sudden unexpected prospect of a European Election in May 2019 – required by law while the UK still remained within the EU – meant new opportunities for those with political ambitions and a democratic axe to grind.

Politicians are often perceived as having control over events in a way which most of us do not. However, it can be surprising to learn that MPs report

lower levels of control than comparable occupational groups (Weinberg et al., 1999) as they come swiftly to realise the constraints of elected power as one representative among 650, trying to adhere to their party lines and relay the concerns of over 70 000 constituents. For MPs whose political parties no longer seemed to ‘fit’ their views about Brexit – or those of their constituents – there were definite attempts to wrest back their political autonomy. At the end of one high profile speech, Nick Boles, a Conservative MP, simply walked away from his party, stating he could no longer remain within it. Some of the newly independent MPs from both Conservative and Labour parties had already left to form their own group, with some joining the Liberal Democrats. Large portions of the electorate had similar ideas of restating their own sense of agency. The European elections provided the opportunity to exert this and the results were jarring for both of the major parties. Nigel Farage once again sought to position himself as the spokesperson for those who felt let down by the failure to implement Brexit, establishing the Brexit Party and recruiting a full complement of candidates including high profile former politicians like Ann Widdecombe of the Conservatives and Annunziata Rees-Mogg, the sister of the leader of the Conservative caucus known as the European Research Group, that had been the thorn in Theresa May’s side.

The Brexit Party won nine of the twelve regions of the UK in the EU election, with 31.6% of the popular vote and 29 of the 72 seats, while the Liberal Democrats – who officially adopted a ‘Stop Brexit’ stance under new leader Jo Swinson MP – saw a resurgence in their vote to come second on 20.3% with 16 seats. The turnout of 36.7% was low compared to a General Election, but the shuddering impact on the Conservative and Labour parties was clear, with both losing considerable ground to the Brexit Party, finishing with 4 and 10 seats respectively (BBC, 2019). Their policies seemed to require clarity and re-energising. By the time of the autumn party conferences each had drawn new battle lines, yet the battle for democracy soon became a cold war, in which use and abuse of parliamentary procedure, absence of majority consensus and volatile emotions led to the Supreme Court. There was a new Prime Minister in town and his one aim was, ‘Let’s get Brexit done’.

The concluding chapter of this book picks up the political back-story of the experience of the people, including organisations and their employees. In the meantime, the very real effects of uncertainty, risk-taking, alienation, planning and failure to plan were all felt across the UK. The following chapters explore these experiences from various perspectives through the eyes of psychologists and business experts trained to observe and research the impact of such seismic events. Their awareness of the challenges in such fraught and potentially turbulent times is particularly keen. Their contributions draw on perspectives from outside and within the UK. Whether running a business consultancy from Ireland (Richard Plenty and Terri Morrissey), sharing the challenges of

the migrant Hungarian community living in the UK (Ivett Racz), or observing Brexit from an EU nation (Alexander Antoniou and Nikos Drosos), or from outside Europe (Imad Moosa), the international and domestic political impact is evident. For those shaping policy for the welfare of UK organisations (Christian van Stolk) or witnessing the turmoil in Parliament (Richard Kwiatkowski), the key themes are no less salient. The phrase ‘we’re all in this together’ had been uttered by a previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, but as then, the lived experience of Brexit upheaval is so variable, it demands documentation and analysis. This book seeks to capture the many moods of a nation straining in different directions from itself and from the continent with which its past has been intertwined since recordings of history began.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS BOOK – AN OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

‘Brexit means Brexit’, the former UK Prime Minister Theresa May once said, but to many, the reality resembled chaos. This curious state of affairs is unlikely to end until after the transition period, meaning the issues discussed in the following chapters will continue to resonate within the workplace. What is certain is that trade between the UK and EU countries will become more complex, freedom of movement of workers will be more difficult and that – for good or otherwise – the UK will be outside the future development of the EU.

Drawing on relevant thinking and findings, this book highlights a range of challenges facing workplaces in the UK and EU post-Brexit. Some of these are inevitably linked to change and what this represents to us psychologically and economically, some are instrumental through their focus on the mechanisms and management of workplaces and others are more obviously psychosocial in describing the variable expression and impact of emotions and behaviours in a post-Brexit context. All are likely to impact on us, the public.

Amid the disorganisation and obvious uncertainty, it has been possible to highlight important real-world considerations. For example, migration for work purposes will be viewed differently than previously, which has consequences for attitudes in the workplace held by and towards EU citizens working in the UK. Additionally the impact of uncertainty, as highlighted, presents organisations with challenges for their success, not least linked to their functioning and well-being. The psychological impact of a split between nations, on which weighty expectations and experiences are predicated, is another key focus. In a *Newsnight* television interview in May 2019, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks called for the need to respect and care for our opponents and noted how as a people we seem to have forgotten the concept of ‘dining with our enemies’. He reminded the public of the importance of remembering to work with those who want to reach a compromise, noting that this is how the

Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland was reached. In considering the psychological factors of Brexit likely to impact on our workplaces, it is hoped this book will promote understanding in an era racked with divisions.

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