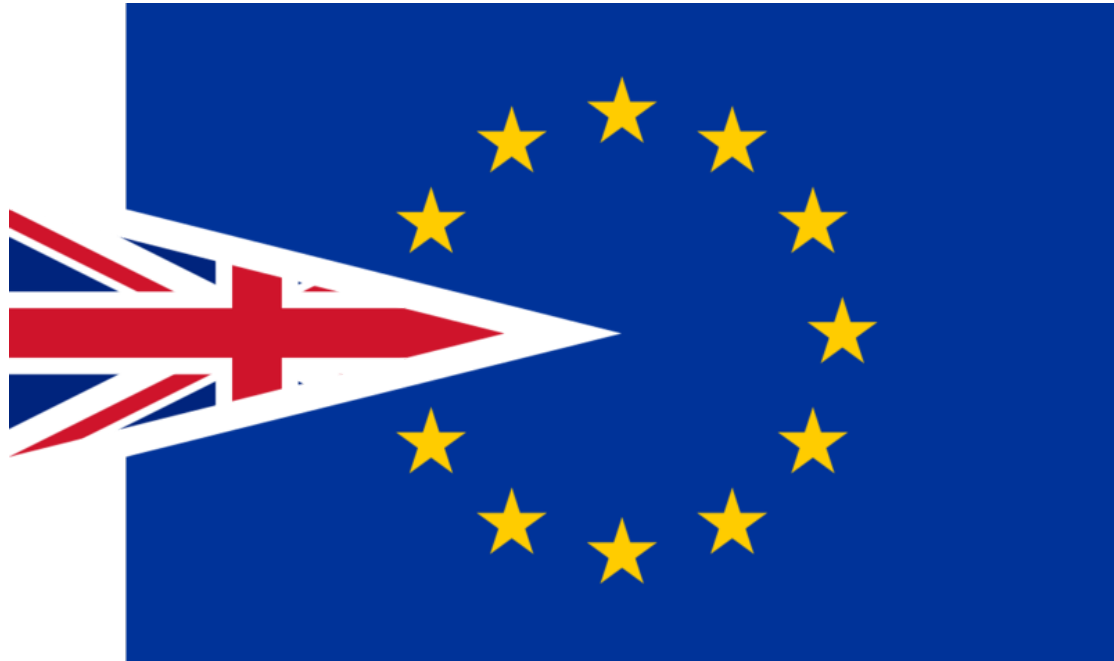


Brexit – the view from Cornwall



By CDRE Patrick J. Tyrrell OBE RN (Ret'd), Chairperson of the SIA Advisory Board

Friday, 24 June 2016, is not a date that will fade from my memory. The UK awoke to find that we had voted to leave the European Union despite all the warnings of disaster and mayhem that would, or might, follow such a decision.

The effects of the vote were immediate and far reaching, especially for the politicians. Within days the Prime Minister, David Cameron, had resigned and the former Home Secretary, Theresa May, emerged in his stead; the Labour Party, as HM Official Opposition, went into further free-fall which, writing in October, has still to be resolved. On taking office, the new Prime Minister announced “Brexit means Brexit” and proceeded to appoint her new ministerial team – including the three politicians most involved in supporting Brexit as the Ministers with responsibility to bring it about. The European leaders expressed outrage at the British decision and demanded that the exit should be swift and brutal.

Everyone then went on holiday!

As the autumn term begins, politicians and civil servants are returning to work and trying to work out how to resolve this series of Gordian knots. The “Three Brexiteers” – the politicians charged by the British Prime Minister to manage Brexit: Boris Johnson as Foreign Secretary, David Davis as the Secretary of State for Brexit and Dr Liam Fox as the Secretary of State for International Trade, have the responsibility, collectively, to bring a coherent Brexit package to the British Cabinet before HM

Government starts the formal withdrawal process by triggering the Article 50 provision of the EU treaties. Their individual views as to what Brexit involves may be very different than those of other politicians, whether in government or in Parliament. The key issue, at the heart of the referendum campaign, was that of immigration. The perception that the public has is that inward migration has changed the face of Britain in a very negative manner: jobs are no longer available to “native” Britons, social infrastructure is highly stressed, the National Health Service (NHS) is crumbling and people look back longingly on a life that was simpler, easier and softer. In reality, of course, things are different. The “soft lit” nostalgic view was never, ever there. Today’s population live longer, enjoy better health and have less poverty than their grandparents but their perceptions are that their lives are imperfect and unfulfilled because of Europe. Politicians of all colours have used “Europe” as an excuse for many of our current concerns; from over-weaning health and safety requirements to “straight” bananas, from failure of old manufacturing industries to the freedom of movement to EU members.

Europe does have a number of failings: it could be accused of over rapid expansion in the early years of the millennium allowing the free flow of people from the shores of the Atlantic to those of the Black Sea. The Euro project has not been entirely successful, particularly from the perspective of the Greek, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian economies and a commensurate enrichment of their Northern neighbours, particularly Germany.

Divorces have a tendency to become rancorous and divisive: the divorce between the UK and the EU will be no different. The EU needs to be able to demonstrate that a vote to leave is not a path to prosperity for other would be “exiteers”. At the same time, there is a view in Europe that Britain has always been lukewarm to the European project and they will be reluctant to see her benefit overall from her abrupt departure. The timing of the UK exit is in the hands of the UK government; they have to issue a notice to the 27 other governments in the EU of our intention to exercise Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. This then starts a 2-year process for the negotiation of terms and the departure of the UK from the EU. By delaying this until the start of 2017, the UK government hopes to take the sting out of the Brexit negotiations so that all parties act in their mutual best interests. The key areas will be the free flow of EU peoples and the Common Market and the European Commission’s view that you cannot have one without the other. The PM has announced that Article 50 will be triggered by the end of March 2017.

The delay in kicking off negotiations should allow the UK government to work out what it’s opening negotiating position will be – there are few professional trade negotiators left in the UK as most of these negotiations were conducted through Brussels. There is much discussion over “hard” or “soft” Brexit and how much interaction with the EU will remain once the UK leaves. The City of London, for example, wants to continue to enjoy the “passporting” rights to act within, and on

behalf of European partners. In reality, the claims of both Paris and Frankfurt will further complicate the negotiations.

As an additional factor there is the role of Parliament in the Brexit process: most MPs are solidly in favour of maintaining our EU links even in the face of the referendum result. When the UK government has a final agreement, it will need to be passed by the UK Parliament as well as the 27 other States that make up the EU. If any one of them decides not to approve the terms, and, particularly the UK, we will be entering into uncharted waters. Some UK politicians want a second referendum to approve the terms – further uncertainty and doubt about the UK's determination.

It is this uncertainty that has the potential to do most damage; I have little doubt that given a clear vision, the United Kingdom will rise to the challenge and become a champion of free trade globally. We need a latter-day Winston Churchill to lead us through the difficult period that will be the divorce but, in this globally connected world, everyone is an expert and those who shout loudest may, or may not, be those with the wisest course of action.

Time will tell.

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