

Fear and abuse won't change Brexit minds

Hugh Muir

If there is a strong and positive case to be made to those who voted against despair, surely it's best made now

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'There is a cold wind of reality blowing through leave and remainder territory alike. When does the fair-minded leaver grab a coat?' Stoke-on-Trent, which voted to leave. Photograph: Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg/Getty Images

A question for the economists: what is the elasticity of Brexit? To be more precise, at what point is it likely that those who voted - amid the flurry of lies and distortions - to leave the European Union will review that decision and begin to rue it? Is it like one of those addictive products - alcohol perhaps, or cigarettes - that people cling to despite the evidence that they are costly and harmful? Or is it something that, with the right approach and in the right circumstances, people might be willing to critically reassess? How much is pragmatic; how much political?

Even the rookie economist knows the quote often misattributed to Keynes: when the facts change, I change my mind. But how many facts must change before the tipping point? The issue surely becomes more pressing as each day sees the unravelling of the strong and stable Brexit blueprint. Bullish remainers will say few facts have changed. They said at the outset that the Farage/Gove/Johnson promised land was a mirage and saw their warnings rejected as Project Fear. But for the fair-minded non-ideological leaver, of which there were very many, there is no end of new information to take on board.

What do they think now of the belief that immigration will not plummet, as they were assured it would? What do they think, having only sanctioned leaving the EU, of the rightwing mission creep - indulged by too many on the left - that would see us adrift from the single market and the customs union? That's exactly what people voted for, the leave fanatics say. Nigel Farage insisted as much to me himself. I don't remember seeing that on my ballot paper, I told him. You're making it up as you go along. Is the fair-minded leaver content to be strung along in that way? As for control, what does the non-ideological leaver think about our pathetic need, never articulated during the Brexit fanatics' campaign of sophistry, to keep paying millions to Brussels for access to markets during transition and perhaps thereafter, without any right or ability to shape its decisions? There is a cold wind of reality blowing through leave and remainder territory alike. When does the fair-minded leaver grab a coat?

We have come a long way in a short time: from parliament having to fight for a say, from the profoundly undemocratic attempt to rule the post-Brexit world via Henry VIII clauses, to polls that show growing support for the single market and/or alignment so close that Brexit may as well not happen. Last month's Guardian poll quantified how many people believe Brexit will have a negative effect on the UK economy and now want a second referendum once a final departure deal is struck.

Think on this: a 16% margin of support for the idea of a second referendum. Remember how, not so long ago, even those who voted to remain could do nothing but wince at the thought of another campaign, another vote, another national bloodletting. Consider that now even a quarter of the leave voters polled think it necessary to hold a second vote.

Take that Guardian poll and then factor in the Observer survey of Labour voters a week earlier, underlining their growing support for the single market and something way more tangible than the “jobs-first Brexit”, make-do formula offered by Jeremy Corbyn.

So the remainers and the Brexit softies are raising a voice. But what is dispiriting is that in the face of Brexit’s unravelling, few leavers seem willing to reconsider. Brexit appears to have formidable elasticity at this stage - with experts still disbelieved, and the economic damage, chiefly in Brexit- and Labour-voting heartlands, the stuff of doom-laden prediction.

But in one way, that’s no surprise. It is one thing to say, as remainers have made clear, that those who voted to leave chose the wrong solution for their justified grievances, but another, dangerous thing to play down or fail to address those grievances. Jobs, immigration, investment, poor schools, cash-strapped NHS, hollowed-out town centres, housing shortages, a north-south divide: all played their part in creating the spasm of rage that was the referendum verdict. And hasn’t it been the singular failure so far of remain and soft Brexit campaigners to articulate to those leavers how life would be better for them, how their grievances would be addressed by anything other than the Farage/Johnson/Gove hard Brexit? Without that plan, without that promise of a step change for leave areas - some New Deal, or Marshall plan for Brexitland - why would they change their minds or soften their resistance?

They have hope. They won’t give that up for nothing. The best way to eclipse a faulty product is to market a better product. If there is a strong and positive case to be made to those who voted against despair, isn’t it best made now?

● Hugh Muir is associate editor of Guardian Opinion

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