

Confused by Brexit? Here's why voting remain is the sensible option... for now



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Among the best arguments made by Brexiteers is that leaving the European Union may be a risk but remaining a member is just as fraught. Faced with two uncertain paths, they say, surely the UK is better off in control of its own destiny.

Why might staying in the EU be risky? Because Brussels has form in trying to extend its influence and increase its budget. This propensity could be catalysed by the eurozone's move towards greater fiscal and political union (to the detriment of those like the UK who don't belong to the currency club), and the EU's relative importance in the world waning. The overall result is that the benefits of being a member could diminish over time as the costs go up.

There's lots to be said for this analysis and there's a reasonable chance of those predictions coming true. But they also raise a question: why don't we wait to find out for sure?



There are eight weeks to go until Britain votes

The most disingenuous argument made by the Leave campaign is not that we would be better off outside the EU; it is that we have to quit now.

The phrases politicians repeat most frequently can often reveal vulnerabilities rather than strengths. Boris Johnson, Leave's rhetorician-in-chief, keeps saying the referendum is a "once in a lifetime opportunity". He does so precisely because it is patently not true.

The Remain camp has colluded with this fiction. It has its own reasons. [David Cameron called the referendum](#) in order to deal with the Conservative Party's toxic rift over Europe. He hopes that [the June vote](#) will surround the issue in steel, encase it in concrete and bury it a mile into the bedrock below the Houses of Parliament. And there's no doubt that a Remain vote would close the matter for a while; we can't very well go around having EU referendums every couple of years.

But no one believes the debate would die. The Westminster geology is unstable. It is highly unlikely Tory Eurosceptics – whose enmity towards Brussels has a half-life measured in millennia – would feel the referendum had settled the UK's relationship with the EU in perpetuity.

It would not be long before the concrete degrades, the Europe question starts oozing towards the surface and the Tory backbenches turn back from green to Day-Glo.

The risks posed by the two options in this summer's referendum are therefore asymmetric. If we leave, we leave. But a vote to remain keeps the country's options open – it is like being allowed to make an each-way bet on a two-horse race.

This is an especially important consideration for undecided voters. To the extent that normal people are paying any attention to the debate whatsoever, they may by now have concluded that [the UK economy is likely to suffer a hit if the country votes to leave the EU](#) (a fact that is conceded by even ardent Brexit supporters). But they will have no idea how extensive or lasting the damage might be.

They have been told that it is better to be [inside the European Union agitating for much-needed reforms](#), but also that there is a lack of democratic accountability in Brussels where Eurocrats turn deaf ears to the UK's pleas.

They have heard that European countries won't be willing to agree favourable trade deals with a post-Brexit UK for fear of giving succour to anti-EU parties within their own borders. But they have also heard that Brits eat too much brie and drive too many Volkswagens for the EU to shut them out.

They may have noticed that a range of foreign politicians, economists, companies and supranational organisations have urged against Brexit, but might have been persuaded that this is a sophisticated propaganda blitz organised by an elite cabal hellbent on safeguarding its own existence.

In short, British voters, who have been bombarded with opinions (often masquerading as facts), will be unsure about who to trust and probably find themselves torn between the two sides of the argument – between pragmatism and patriotism; between head and heart.

Those who should comfort themselves with the knowledge that the choice is not binary. There is absolutely no reason why the UK can't vote to remain a member of the EU

this summer and, if the benefits of that relationship deteriorate (which is certainly not beyond the realms of possibility), hold another referendum in five, 10 or 20 years' time.

It's clear that the timing of this vote is far from ideal. The global economy is not looking so hot right now. The UK is running a peacetime record current account deficit, which can only be funded through foreign investment. And that money may very well start to dry up during the protracted negotiations that will follow a Brexit vote.

Some might describe such caution as cowardly. I think it fits Michael Oakeshott's description of a small "c" conservative, who prefers "the familiar to the unknown ... the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible ... the convenient to the perfect".

It's true that this philosophy benefits the status quo and sometimes things need to be shaken up. But that puts the onus on reformers to lay out a compelling alternative. If the British public is being told to take a running jump, it seems only fair to ask what we'll be landing in. The Leave camp has failed to persuade me that it won't be brown and sticky.

Yes, the UK's membership of the EU may become less beneficial over time; it may reach the point where the decision to quit becomes compelling. But we're not there yet.

Given that, there's only one logical course of action for the undecided come June. It's not stirring but it is sensible: Vote Remain (For Now).