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Britain needs a 'can-do' attitude revolution, with solutions rather than whining



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Theresa May holds her first cabinet meeting

There are two nations in Britain today, but they are not quite the ones that Benjamin Disraeli had in mind. On the one hand we have the optimists, Brexiteers as well as ex-Remainers, who are gradually coming together in their embrace of our new future, reuniting in their determination to make the most of the next few years to reform and improve our country. On the other, we have the pessimists, a shrinking but still extraordinarily vocal group: to them, the outlook is so unbearably gloomy that they cannot bring themselves to think constructively about a country they no longer recognise.

The good news is that, after a few difficult weeks, the optimists are finally in the ascendant. Theresa May is now their official leader, as well as our Prime Minister: she didn't back Brexit but is going to implement it with gusto. Her strong leadership is exactly what was needed: it is no surprise that it is proving infectious.

Support for the now officially pro-Brexit Tories has jumped to 40 per cent, according to YouGov; consumer spending is holding up, according to the Bank of England's regular regional survey; and a growing number of institutions are starting to propose helpful, constructive ideas to make the most of Brexit.

Take the President of the Royal College of Surgeons: she has urged the NHS to "seize the moment" and use Brexit to tear up red tape that damages patient safety, including rules that prevent hospitals from demanding a proper mastery of English and working-time laws that mean surgeons don't undergo enough training. One leading regulator has told me privately that leaving the EU would allow a much more robust pro-competition policy; Siemens, a pro-Remain company, now insists that it is fully committed to Britain and that it would build a "huge manufacturing place... in a heartbeat" if it receives enough orders for its train carriages.

The list is growing visibly longer by the day. Ineos, the giant chemicals maker, is relocating its headquarters and senior management back to the UK from Switzerland; SoftBank, one of Japan's biggest companies, [is making the largest-ever Asian investment in the UK](#), arguing explicitly that it believes in a post-Brexit Britain. A number of companies have also agreed to rent or commission new offices in the City since the referendum.

The optimists are not deluded: they know the going will be tough, that Brexit has crystallised long-standing structural weaknesses in the economy, that many big companies are scared, and that it will take hard work to sign trade deals and negotiate the right exit from the EU. There will be costs as well as benefits from Brexit. But they relish the challenge and are convinced that we now have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change our country and economy for the better, or simply to continue making money in one of the largest, most prosperous economies in the world.

Then there are the pessimists. Some are Remainers who still believe Brexit to be an epoch-defining catastrophe, who continue to plot and scheme to overturn the result, who cling to the deranged, insulting notion that those of us who voted Leave are either stupid, racist or evil, who scour the news for every negative data point and who, in a few isolated and extreme cases, would actually like a recession "to prove them right".

You also have some Leavers in this pessimistic camp who believe that nothing will ever change, either because we won't actually leave the EU or because they feel that the political classes will return to business as usual. This latter group often hail from deprived communities; they voted Brexit in part to give the London establishment a kicking but fear that they will continue to be ignored.

The challenge for the optimists is to reunite the two Britains. They need to inspire and assuage the angry Remainers, showing all but the most die-hard that the future can be rosy; and they must reach out to those Leavers who feel that they haven't benefited enough from globalisation.

All groups in society have a responsibility to take part in this project to rebuild Britain for a post-Brexit 21st century. Entrepreneurs and firms need to propose the reforms they believe are required to allow our economy to prosper outside of the EU: we need to hear solutions, not whining, from business. The same is true of other professionals, from university administrators to architects to the police forces, as well as from the charitable sector. Britain needs a "can-do" revolution, with as many positive ideas as possible from all quarters and perspectives. The question is no longer whether or not to Brexit – it's how to make it work as well as possible for the whole country.

The Government, for its part, needs to unveil a three-fold programme to woo the sceptics. The first pledge should be to turn Britain into the nation that is the most open to trade of any Western economy in five years' time. To reach this target, the Government would seek

to limit the reimposition of tariff or non-tariff barriers with the EU, while urgently pursuing as many free-trade deals as possible with faster-growing economies worldwide.

The second pledge should be to make the UK the most entrepreneur-friendly country in the West by 2020. This would include tearing up red tape, cutting tax, making it easy for tech firms to continue to hire skilled migrant talent, and encouraging universities to become incubators for start-ups.

Last but not least, the Government should make an explicit promise to Britain's poorer groups and regions that their opportunities will drastically improve. The free school programme should be turbo-charged by allowing for-profit companies to open new ones, starting in the north of England and Wales before being rolled out nationally; new selective schools should be opened, as part of an extension of parent choice; much more land should be made available for building in the south of England; and expensive green energy rules should be ditched. Britain is also in desperate need of several low-tax, low-regulation new enterprise zones near universities in poor parts of the North and Wales, with a vision and management structure similar to London's Canary Wharf.

It's been almost a month since the referendum and the optimists, thanks in large part to May's steadying hand, are finally on the rise again. They must now begin the long, slow process of reuniting the country. That is the mission on which they will ultimately be judged.