

## The European elite forgot that democracy is the one thing Britain holds most dear



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This referendum has been the most moving thing I have seen in 40 years of politics  
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A friend in Oxford was puzzled to receive a last-minute leaflet which said: “Don’t let someone else decide your future: Vote Remain.” He obeyed the first demand, and not the second, since it flatly contradicted the first. He voted Leave.

If, like me, you feel a bit numb this morning, it is because we British actually have decided our own future. We have not been allowed to do this since 1975. It is a slightly frightening, wonderful feeling – that the people can, through the ballot box, set their country free.

More people – 17,410,742 – voted Leave on Thursday than have ever voted for anything in British history. [As David Cameron wisely and firmly acknowledged in his resignation](#)

[speech yesterday](#), the result, with its very high turnout, is decisive: our decision must be enacted.

The Leave campaign was assailed for scorning the advice of experts. Experts should, of course, be respected for their expertise. But no one is an expert where democracy is concerned. Each of us is worth only one vote. It took enormous courage for the majority to refuse to be cowed by bankers and archbishops, prime ministers and presidents, scientists and economists, the BBC and the CBI, [Richard Branson, Peter Mandelson and David Beckham](#), but it was not rash to do so. It was the mass assertion of a right which, over the years, we had been losing.

Democratic self-government – parliamentary democracy – is what the modern British nation is founded on. [As Boris Johnson put it yesterday, in his restrained and generous speech](#), it is also “the most precious thing” we offer to the world. It was slipping away from us. Now we have reclaimed it. The Vote Leave campaign began and ended with the slogan “Take Back Control”. This – not “the economy versus immigration” – is what our decision is about.

I can testify how hard it is to assert our right against those in power. In most of my work as an editor and commentator, I am usually content to engage in the arguments of the moment, say what one thinks needs saying at the time, and then move on. But in the case of Europe, more than 30 years ago I decided (having voted Yes in 1975, aged 18) that the need for self-government overrode all other issues and that Britain could not be a harmonious or free country so long as this was denied. So ever since I have done everything I could think of to explain why. I quickly discovered how instinctively most powerful people felt the opposite, and how skilfully they marginalised all discussion of the subject. Parliamentary government mattered less to them than our “seat at the top table”. If you used the word “sovereignty”, you were regarded as a sort of crank. If you aspired to political office, let alone government service, you soon learnt that being pro-EU was a career requirement. The only leader who seriously challenged this was Margaret Thatcher, and look how her career ended.

From the Nineties, the evidence of events – our blessed falling-out of the ERM, the sequence of treaties taking ever more legal rights away from us, and more recently the continuing job-destroying catastrophe of the euro – at last made people take notice. But even in the face of these shocks, successive leaders – John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron – tried never to confront the issue but to slide round it. Only the combination of the credit crunch (which crunched the euro) and the migration crisis made it unavoidable. And only Mr Cameron’s tight corner with his own party before the last election forced him to give us the referendum.



Former British prime ministers John Major (L) and Tony Blair share a platform for the Remain campaign event at Ulster University in Londonderry, Northern Ireland CREDIT:JEFF J MITCHELL/REUTERS

When we voted, it turned out – as I had always believed it would – that if only the matter could be properly put to the voters, they would understand what it was really about. Seen from the pro-EU point of view, the EU elites have been proved right in their belief that the people should never be consulted. In this sense, Mr Cameron is the leader whom they will now resent above all others. It is because of his reluctant capitulation to democracy that the whole edifice has come tumbling down.

So the result exposes a huge gap between the powerful and the rest. Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron – all have seen themselves as embracers of modernity. A badge of that modernity, they have believed, has been the EU. Now voters have recognised that the EU rejects modernity, because it denies the rights of the people and confirms the sense of powerlessness which we have felt since the banking crisis. The leaders all seem, like the EU itself, very 20th century. Imagine how Mr Cameron could have dominated the modernisation of British politics if he had led his country to vote Leave. Instead, he has to be content with little more than gay marriage as his legacy.

One image I keep in my mind from the referendum campaign is the strange sight of our Chancellor of the Exchequer standing on a platform in Bournemouth with an American titan of the great 2008 crash, Jamie Dimon. Both were trying to frighten Mr Dimon's captive bank workers into voting Remain. Such scenes will soon look as remote and incomprehensibly hierarchical as jerky old films of the Delhi Durbar in 1911 (but a lot less romantic).

It is understandable to feel a bit shocked by what we have done. People such as Mr Osborne, who surely cannot stay much longer in his job, conjured up such terrible visions that markets naturally get the jitters. So did his man at the Bank of England, Mark Carney. Is there a steady hand on the economic tiller?

Membership of the EU (originally known as the Common Market) has also been one of the foundations of British foreign policy for nearly 60 years, not just from when we actually joined. Now, what foreign policy do we have?

Such questions cannot be fully answered today, but at least we now know the basis on which to start answering them. British politicians were right to seek harmonious relations and freer markets in post-war Europe. Their fatal error was to ignore the construction of the superstate in return for transient advantages of trade or diplomacy. Because they could not admit this error, they dealt with their own people in bad faith for half a century. Yesterday, Boris, Michael Gove and the brave Gisela Stuart laid a better foundation – a role in the world that is shaped by our democratic institutions, our capacity to make our own laws and our economic and cultural openness to the world.

If one wants proof of the hopefulness of it all, one need look no further than how people behaved as Thursday night (Downing Street privately briefing a 57 per cent Remain vote) turned into Friday morning. Almost no politician on either side questioned the result, denounced his opponents or threatened rebellion. The talk was chiefly of reaching out to anyone who felt left out. By the deep cultural instinct of a free people, this amazing, unprecedented restoration was accepted without riots, or police, or revolution. It is the most momentous thing I have seen in nearly 40 years covering British politics, and the most moving.