Political Thinking Meeting Report No 22

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 22 Monday 18th June 2018

Topic 1 "In the light of Brexit can a referendum become an integrated part of the UK political system."

Topic 2 "How can a political choice be made between the alternatives of staying in and leaving Europe?"

Topic 1 Summary

There was broad agreement that the Brexit referendum had not proved to be a device that successfully resolved the current major issue in British politics.

The political debate leading up to the referendum itself was not well conducted and was not successful in putting the issues to the electorate in a clear manner.

The status of the referendum stated at the time was advisory only and not binding. However its subsequent interpretation by all political parties as an expression of the will of the people in some sense has led to constitutional difficulties in reconciling with law-making procedures.

Should a referendum be used again on any topic the question should be posed in such a way as to offer a clear distinction between the alternatives and the politicians involved should explain the choice. On the basis of Brexit a referendum was not proved to be a successful additional political device.

Discussion

Several major points emerged during discussion.

As to the information about the alternatives prior to the referendum it was felt that neither side had put forward a clear exposition of the choice.

As the status of the result, some felt that MPs were correct to accept that the result took precedence over their personal views, others felt that MP's were elected to follow their own

conscience in decisions of this kind. All felt that it was a mistake to set up a referendum in such a way that the status of the result was unclear.

The continuing political uncertainties, and indeed the obvious fact that as of Summer 2018 the debate is not concluded, either in Cabinet, in Government, in Parliament or in the country suggests that the referendum as a political device has not been successful. The dissonance between the opinions held among the electorate and the opinions of its Parliamentarians seems never to have been wider.

As to the reasons for holding the referendum; the apparent purpose was to suppress dissent in the Conservative Party; that senior politicians could make such a colossal misjudgement of the opinion of the electorate on such a major issue is worrying for the political system.

As to the interpretation of the result, there were several views; it was more about getting rid of two posh boys than getting out of Europe; it was a vote of no confidence in the political system generally; it was a vote of the North against the South; it was a vote against austerity, a vote against globalisation, a vote against immigration; it was a vote for some distant half remembered past….

As to whether a referendum should be used more substantially, eg the Californian example with some use at each election or the Swiss model with extensive use quite frequently between elections, there was no enthusiasm for this extended mode.

Topic 2 Summary

The topic was rephrased to emphasise that the choice was to stay in or leave the European Union, a political entity; Europe is a geographical term, and leaving would require major earthquakes, seismic shifts and similar, which were beyond the scope of political decision making.

An attempt was made to to list the consequences of the alternatives; using the repeated slogan taking back control, under the headings of our borders, of our laws, of our money.

Control of borders refers to immigration and was considered difficult, and there was no consensus as to what this should mean in practice.

Control of laws was interpreted widely and regarded as impractical; product standards, commercial regulation, many practical aspects of life, all have to be coordinated internationally in our modern world.

Control of money was a something of an illusion, exchange rates we do not control, the Brexit dividend was considered to be illusory as the independent provision of services similar to those provided through the European Union was likely to be considerably more costly and less efficient.

Discussion

The discussion focussed on immigration, its effects and why it provoked so much opposition.

Economic benefits to the host community were recognised in the face of an aging population.

The reluctance of developed country residents to undertake certain tasks was clearly a factor in recruiting low cost immigrant unskilled labour, perhaps allowing the relatively rich to obtain the services of low skill labour relatively cheaply.

Skill shortages in certain more skilled occupations, for example health were seen more as a failure of UK public sector health planning to plan properly rather than a deliberate attempt to save money by importing cheap labour.

The adverse impact of skilled recruitment on the countries of origin was noted, not only in terms of immigration to the UK but also in terms of emigration from the UK for example of highly trained and specialised medical personnel.

That immigration in low skilled occupations was a factor in keeping UK wages lower was accepted broadly. To some extent the national minimum wage is becoming the effective maximum wage as it seems always possible to recruit from overseas at the minimum wage.

Whether immigration was really a strong factor in causing shortage of housing or services such as education or medical was doubted.

Cultural benefits were noted in terms of the range of experiences, culinary, musical, apparel, family traditions, beliefs etc were all considered as positive and enriching to the host community.

Toleration of immigrants was considered the civilised norm, except when immigrants attempted to impose their alternative values on the host community. Integration was seen as acceptance of cultural differences.

Full cultural integration was seen as inevitably taking several generations, and the difficulties were seen as essentially transitional.

It was noted that broadly those more affected by immigration appeared to be less opposed to it, and conversely those less affected by it were more opposed to it.

It was considered worrying that in some areas distinct communities had developed with high local concentrations of immigrants in limited areas; these concentrations were considered undesirable, but there was no solution offered other than the passage of time

Due to running out of time, there was little discussion of the control of laws, or of money or of other aspects; so the topic of Brexit was far from exhausted and should be continued at the next meeting.