

## Political Thinking Meeting Report No 32

### Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 32 Monday 18th March 2019

#### **Topic; Brexit. How have we reached here and where are we going?**

##### **Summary**

The discussion centred on the conflict between two democratic processes, an elected Parliament and a referendum and the absence of reconciliation between the two as the cause of the current impasse.

As to direction there was strong support for both Leaving and Remain, and little support for the May deal. Future direction remains unclear.

##### **Discussion**

The discussion was stimulated by an opinion piece from a previous Lord Chief Justice, (Igor Judge, "Referendums versus Parliament: when votes collide" Prospect Magazine, March 2019) describing our present Brexit problems as originating from a head-on collision between two democratic ideals. Unless the constitution spells out the precise processes and how the two relate together, then the risk of accident is obvious.

The normal political process of compromise towards some central position, with neither side getting everything and both getting something, which is essentially the May position, is ineffective as both sides are unsatisfied, possibly because the nature of the issue is such that there is no halfway position between In and Out of the EU.

Referendums might be used to determine major constitutional change; in fact in UK so far they nearly all have been used for political purposes by the party of government to eliminate or quash some political opposition within or close to the ruling group. In this case there may have been a misjudgement about what the electorate would decide.

There was discussion about the nature of referendums, whether the decision should require an enhanced majority (60% instead of 50%); also that major decisions generally are preceded by a investigation and impartial evaluation of alternatives eg HS2 or London Airports, so that the decision is informed; in this case there was the evaluation of alternatives was perfunctory and possibly misleading. Consequently both sides could claim the result was not based on adequate information.

As to the future direction, within the group opinions were far apart and becoming more divergent.

The principal arguments for the Leave side were essentially that the UK can manage its own future very well, without a political association with Europe, controlling its own laws, money and immigration. Further the EU is likely to fall apart within the next few years and the UK would be better off with no involvement in this eventual break-up. Opportunities for global trade were stressed, though it was not clear how these would arise.

The Remain view articulated forcefully was part economic and part political; that modern business is transnational and that UK national barriers to trade, capital flows and people flows would leave UK in a backwater from which business would migrate elsewhere, taking with it the new investment leading to important employment opportunities and leaving the UK economy struggling with balance of payments difficulties as exports stagnate. Politically the consequences predicted were declining influence in the world, eg loss of Security Council representation and loss of influence in other supra-national bodies.

Other views were that the UK had never really joined Europe in the first place; the history of membership has been opposition to European objectives. The UK has never aspired to be a leading member of Europe, despite an open invitation from others to play a more positive role. Unless this national view were to change there seems little point in remaining in a club whose game we do not wish to play.

The point was made that many of the current difficulties in the UK would not be resolved by leaving the EU, and indeed might be made worse. Productivity lower than elsewhere, labour shortages in some parts of the workforce, housing, social care, inadequate infrastructure were some of the problem areas cited.

As to the Prime Minister, she had correctly identified these latter as important at the time of taking office and had made no progress. In relation to Brexit support for the "May deal" among the group was negligible.

Within the Political Thinking Group opinions seem to have polarised in the recent months. Perhaps our group, like Parliament reflect the national division. No one could see a path forward.