

Brexit: The sensational outcome is a slap in the face of liberals

Synopsis

Influx of job stealing migrants from eastern and southern Europe and the portrayal of Britain as a victim of the Brussels-based, power-hungry EU bureaucracy touched raw nerves.



The sensational outcome in [Britain](#)'s historic referendum in favour of quitting the [EU](#) is a political earthquake of epic proportions. The victory of the “Leave” camp over the “Remain” by a margin of 4 percentage points will go down as a watershed moment not just for the [UK](#) and [Europe](#) but also for fundamental institutions and processes of liberalism, democracy and [regional](#) integration.

The “Out” campaign’s success offers lessons on how pandering to base instincts, hatred and fear can trump rational, logical and pragmatic considerations if the timing is conducive. All the mainstream political [parties](#) in the UK — the majority faction in the ruling Conservatives under [David Cameron](#), the [Labour](#) and the Scottish [National Party](#) — had cast their lot with staying within the EU.

Despite their combined mobilisational advantages and institutional domination of the British polity, the voters succumbed to anti-immigration phobias and atavistic nationalism. The ultra-right wing’s whipping up of alarmist scenarios of an influx of job stealing migrants from eastern and southern Europe and the portrayal of Britain as a victim of the Brussels-based, power-hungry EU bureaucracy touched raw nerves and harked back to a longlost imperial pride in the minds of the working class and older voters.

At a time when the UK is in relative decline in global standings and just about climbing out of a terrible economic crisis, brazen exploitation of passions paid off. Apart from tapping into racism and populist rage, the “Leave” side also brilliantly presented the referendum as a chance for [Joe Bloggs](#), the ordinary [people](#) of [England](#), to avenge the EU’s elitist “conspiracy” against them.

Metaphors of [Brexit](#) as a “peasant revolt” against an “invincible”, “arrogant” and faceless EU machine, and an “independence struggle” to take back the UK’s sovereignty worked well. They resonated with uniquely British pent-up feelings of separateness from continental Europe and revealed how hollow the democratic legitimacy of the EU has become of late. The disjuncture between the overwhelming support in the [British Parliament](#) to “Remain” and the sullen mood of the electorate underscores the dilemmas posed to liberal projects like the EU from illiberal democratic backlash.

The assumption that one must cede some aspects of individual sovereignty and merge into a community of nations in order to generate shared benefits for all is at the heart of the EU’s remarkable supranational experiment. It is a seductive

idea floated by the elites in [France](#) and [Germany](#) since the 1950s which gradually won adherents, including in Britain, which joined the EU's predecessor in the 1970s through a referendum.

The Big Disconnect

But a lot of water has flown under the bridge since then. The scaremongering tactics of the 'Leave' camp won because there is a disconnect between the high liberalism of EU institutions and the grassroots conservatism throughout Europe.

Brussels and [Berlin](#), which call the shots in the EU establishment, failed to stem the negative perceptions by imposing harsh austerity measures during eurozone crises and by insisting on a top-down approach to regional integration.

The UK is going to be a net loser from exiting the EU. But an even bigger casualty is the concept of Europe as a single, merged entity where cosmopolitan identities override narrow ones. Brexit is an ultimate slap in the face that good liberal ideas like economic integration and multiculturalism cannot be defended merely through intellectual persuasion or argument.

To stall further abandonments, the EU's minders have to re-examine their colossal mistakes, step down from the detached moral pedestal and start working with the myriad discontented communities on the ground who are seething with resentments.

(The writer is a dean at the [Jindal School of International Affairs](#))



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