

Brexit! A Moment of Sadness?

Shôn Ellerton, February 24, 2020

My straightforward view and feeling on Brexit which I swore I wouldn't write about, but eventually did anyway!



I swore I'd never write anything about Brexit, but since the 'momentous' occasion on Friday night on Jan 31st, 2020 at 2300 hours GMT of Britain leaving the EU, I felt compelled to write something of how I feel about it.

I lived and worked in the UK from 1987 to 2008, more than 20 years, before making the move to Australia. During those years, I remember the times of Margaret Thatcher, the fated Poll Tax riots, John 'boring and grey' Major, Tony 'Blur', and Gordon Brown who used to, for some reason or another, remind me of Mr. Greedy from the children's Mr Men series due to his portly image and financial initiatives.

However, another topic which raised its head so frequently in the news was, of course, the European Union along with its labyrinth of paperwork, ridiculous complexity and utter boringness. The film that *instantly* springs to mind when I think of the EU is Terry Gilliam's [Brazil](#), one of those dystopian but funny sci-fi movies with a sort of George Orwell *1984* theme mixed up with endless filling in of official forms, a love of duct pipes and an accident involving someone accidentally clicking in the wrong pipe into his biohazard suit resulting in it being filled in with a stream of excrement. Bureaucracy and zaniness at its finest!

Even as a young lad, I had enough knowledge about the [European Exchange Rate Mechanism \(ERM\)](#) and the [Schengen Agreement](#) to have a little understanding how goods are exchanged throughout Europe and how

communities can work across international borders with little hindrance from visa restrictions. It seemed to be going swimmingly well from my little understanding of it all.

The ERM was a precursor to things to come. It was all to change in preparation of the one-stop-shop single Euro currency along with a vast mountain of rules and restrictions to govern what EU states can or cannot do. I remember back then how complex this was all going to be. Endless news stories debating whether Britain should adopt the Euro, whether joining the EU will open a Pandora's Box by flooding the market with cheap overseas labour (remember all the coverage about the paranoia of Polish labourers working in the UK sending money back to Poland?), and of course, will everything become more expensive.

And my goodness, everything *did* seem to be more expensive, especially in Germany, a country I frequently visited on account of my ageing grandparents. In Germany, the Euro was simply called the '*Teuro*', which is fitting considering the word for 'expensive' in German is 'teuer'. Many prices on restaurant menus weren't even changed except for replacing the DM currency symbol with the Euro one. Nice little earner there!

During the time I was there in the UK, I never had *any* interest in what goes on in Brussels because the whole damn thing was so incredibly dull and boring.

Dull, dull, dull and dull! (Actually, I wanted to be a lion tamer!)

Watching the proceedings in Brussels made live coverage of the House of Lords look like watching the latest Star Wars release. At least we all had a bit of chuckle when one of the dopey old lords slumped away in a semi-coma during a session in the House.

And, by Christ, the reams and reams of Euro legislation and documentation! I'd put hard money down as a bet that *no one*, holistically, knew how the whole Euro-sphere worked. It's akin to a big massive piece of machinery put together by the military, where no one really had any idea what the hell they've been building. A bit like that great sci-sci movie, [Cube](#), a contraption, probably built by the military, that held people prisoner (and killing them one by one) but no one knew how or why it worked!

One must ask the question. How many Brits knew who their local [MEP](#) (Member of European Parliament) was? How many Brits even cared? I

certainly didn't care when I was living there. I tried, in earnest, to read the occasional snippet in [*The Economist*](#), hoping to raise any motivation in showing any interest, but, I fear, I could not. I certainly knew that MEPs had a nice little salary package and plenty of overseas trips to Brussels!

During much of this time, we had a family business in the tourist steam railway industry which involved running workshops to build and maintain locomotives, run souvenir shops and ticketing services, operate train services, maintaining the track, buildings and other infrastructure, and, of course, promoting the business through marketing. It was during that time when everything was going Euro-centric. We had silly little discussions amongst the staff covering everything from bananas not meeting EU requirements because they weren't straight enough, French baguettes (bread sticks) which did not meet EU requirements because there were too many holes in it, which, of course, is why French baguettes are so damned good. Light and airy inside and crispy on the outside. British sausages, weak vacuum cleaners, balloons, safety rules, plugs, fittings, light bulbs, building standards and condoms (I kid you not).

I'm sure that most of what we discussed is tabloid fodder being based on myths. After all, most of our staff read *The Sun* while sipping hot tea from chipped discoloured mugs in the workshop mess! But here's the thing. I'm struggling really hard here to remember if joining the EU had any real benefit to our daily lives. But then again, I was only 18 and didn't take a great interest in the world of international trade and finance. If anything, it scuppered my regular 'booze cruise' from Folkestone to Boulogne, making it not as worthwhile to stock up on cheap beer and wine due to the change in duty tariffs.

My memory of Britain joining the EU was not of great ebullience and certainly not something any Brit would say, 'Hey! Fantastic! We're now part of Europe! Isn't that just grand?' Quite the opposite. The next focus of discussion at the time was whether the British Pound would be abandoned in favour of the Euro. The dreaded and decidedly boring ... Euro. I should have been excited, as a civil engineer, that each Euro note would proudly display some famous bridge or another!

Many Brits became upset that anyone within the EU can simply ruck up on British shores and start working, taking the jobs of British citizens. Well, I do remember some of these discussions and it was on the lines that many of these jobs were jobs that most Brits refused to do! Many of those coming in to work

from other EU states may have lifted up what was left of the production economy of the UK, much of it being dismantled year after year ending up with London being the hub of a financial service industry pushing bits of paper around, speculating on stock options and gilding the pockets of those high up in the financial service industries. Those who are pro-Brexit who push the idea that the EU damaged their production industries tend to forget that Britain lost it many years before the EU was born.

There was something of an advantage of being part of the EU, the ability for Brits to live and work anywhere in Europe. That, by itself, made the UK passport quite a valuable commodity from an international standpoint. Now that the UK is out of the EU, what will happen for those who take advantage of living or working anywhere in the EU? Realistically, how many people will it affect? Probably not a great percentage to be honest.

It's not like the EU put a stop to corruption, scams and 'under-the-blanket-of-night' initiatives which I remember reading about in the news. For example, remember the news about the homes owned by British expats in Spain that were flattened down due because they were illegally built? What about the overnight deportation of entire populations of 'undesirables' who illegally immigrated from north Africa into France? Quite against EU rulings of human rights, France unleashed its [CRS police force](#) in the darkness of night to do a little 'cleansing'. Not unlike removing old churches stone by stone and relocating them somewhere else to build SNCF high-speed rail networks, when France wants to get something done, it usually does! Despite the rulings set out by the EU, it would be naïve to believe that the politics within the EU states held fast to them.

It's interesting to cast our minds back to the European debt crisis which affected some of the member states. I remember first hearing about Portugal defaulting on the level of debt in relation to GDP and there were soon others to follow including Greece, Portugal, Spain and Ireland. Not remembering all the details, I certainly remember the various bailouts and exemptions.

'Ooooooh! Portugal! You've been a very naughty boy! You've exceeded your debt to GDP ratio, but, it's ok. Your big brother, Germany, can help you out!'

I remember all the talk of various proposals to split the EU into north and south, the north representing the industrious and prosperous, and the south, representing the laziest, enjoying sunshine and siestas. Yeah, it got quite heated

and many, especially from the south, got quite offended with many of the comments. But, so what. Who cares who I offend, eh?

And here we are. Today, with the UK out of the EU. Sorry to say this, folks, in such plain-speak, but Britain *voted* to get out, and now, it's out. I feel no emotion. My father, an avid creator of conspiracy theories, believes this opens out an opportunity for the US to create its 51st state. Others believe that Brexit will signal the collapse of the UK economy. I don't subscribe to such theories. Ultimately, societies learn to adapt and survive change and Britain will probably do just that as it always has.

When someone asks me, if Brexit is a good thing or not, I *honestly* do not know. I do not, and never understood, a fraction of its complexity. From a purely selfish point-of-view, I like the idea of having a powerful EU passport, but it is also possible that Britain could rebuild its economy and become strong enough for its citizens to proclaim, 'I'm proud to be British!'