

Cards on the table: I voted Remain in 2016. Indeed, I campaigned for Remain. What follows should be read in this light.

Extraordinary how potent cheap music can be, said Noël Coward. On two occasions this week I had reason to visit W H Smith in Guildford High Street and each time the background music was the Beatles, from the far-off winter of 1965 but strangely relevant to our Brexit predicament.

Life is very short, and there's no time for fussing and fighting, my friend
I have always thought that it's a crime, so I will ask you once again.
Try to see it my way. Only time will tell if I am right or I am wrong
While you see it your way there's a chance that we may fall apart before too long.
We can work it out; we can work it out.

Well, of course we can. Can't we? Well, no, it seems not. Why not ?

For me, my decision in 2016 was a question of realpolitik. I believed that it was in Britain's interest to be a member of the EU but that view was based on a balance of pro and con. I still believe on balance that the UK should be an EU member and would probably vote Remain again. However, I nearly voted Leave and might in the future if I felt the balance of arguments had shifted. In other words, I am not a true believer either way; my decision was and is based on what I think, on balance, is the best way forward. I would like to think that is how everyone votes, but it would appear not. Many, it would seem, hear only arguments that reinforce their own preconceived opinion and are deaf to alternatives and blind to changing conditions.

At the extremes, Leavers and Remainers differ, it seems fundamentally, on the Brexit issue, but they are united on one thing: they know they are 100% right and the other lot are 100% wrong. They are one-eyed fundamentalists who do not talk to or even know people who think differently; they have no curiosity about alternative viewpoints and prefer instead to shelter behind rhetoric and dogma. When faced with another take on Brexit, they seem genuinely to struggle with the idea that there could be some other way. This is a disease that affects Leavers and Remainers alike, and makes an attempt to square the circle (as Theresa May has attempted, valiantly but ineptly) fiendishly difficult.

We do not behave like this on other issues. After all, membership or non-membership of the EU is just another piece of foreign policy, an important one, no doubt, but in essence no different from, for example, whether or not the UK should be a member of NATO or meet international targets for carbon emissions or development aid. They are matters for rational decision-making, based on a weighing of the alternatives, and most seem comfortable with this.

But when we come to Brexit. we all seem to have turned what should be a similar rational process into some kind of secular religion complete with saints, heretics and hell.

On Brexit, I am agnostic. I really do not care how difficult or easy it is for Bulgarians to come to the UK or vice versa. What I care about is the way we have trashed our parliamentary system, of which we used to be proud, and destroyed our national consensus, all for the shibboleth of membership/non-membership of a grouping that has lasted for less than a lifetime and could easily become a footnote in history in the coming years. Either way, Leave or Remain, it just does not seem worth the price we are paying.

It is always a mistake to think that the electorate has made an error. So, although, I was disappointed by the 2016 referendum result, I tried to engage with people on both sides of the Brexit argument. I still do this and I must say I come across some pretty angry folk. There is much fog and confusion but one thing is clear to me. Remainers and Leavers have behaved and continue to behave appallingly to

each other. They will, of course, agree that there is much bad behaviour and intolerance, but will not accept that their side is guilty of it. It is all the fault of the other lot. For Christians, the mote and beam parable is inescapable.

During the 2016 campaign, for handing out leaflets for Remain, I was called a traitor to my face in Godalming High Street. That charge is still levelled at me occasionally from overwrought Leavers on social media and I have been horrified at the virulent attacks on our elected representatives, mainly from Leavers.

But Remainers are no better. Many seem incapable of understanding, let alone accepting, that people might have voted Leave in 2016 for good reasons. They find challenging the idea that 17 million of their fellow citizens voted Leave; but, frequently, instead of trying to engage with the reasons for this result, they take refuge in displacement. For example, Leave voters are all “up north” (whatever that means) or are in “the country” (wherever that is). In other words, they do not come from round our way, where everyone voted correctly. That this is far from the truth can be easily shown by a glance at the area voting figures, such as in Guildford where 44%, nearly 35,000 people, of those voting voted Leave or in York where 58% of those voting voted Remain.

Another trope is that Leavers are “farmers/fishermen” or “the old” or “the poorly educated”. In other words, they voted out of blinkered self-interest or nostalgia or ignorance. Unlike, of course, Remainers, who were all high-minded platonic philosopher kings voting disinterestedly and for the good of all. The truth is, Leavers were perfectly capable of voting intelligently while many Remainers voted as they did for poor reasons. We are all prone to thinking that we know best and those who think differently are fools or knaves. It was ever thus.

People who voted differently to us in 2016 did not come from somewhere else, nor were they socially or demographically much different to us. They were our fellow citizens, our fellow human beings. Is it not time we stopped thinking in strident slogans and lazy generalisations and reached out to “the other”? The Remain/Leave split in Guildford was 56/44. This means that we almost certainly know someone who voted differently to us, in our street, at our work, *in our church*.

Let’s get together. Reconciliation begins with us.

We can work it out.