

Brexit and Populism in Britain

Sir Ivan Roger's Resignation

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Region: [Europe](#), [USA](#)

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Populism has a much needed place in political arrangements, the necessary, disruptive gust that keeps the complacent from losing touch. For one, it often threatens to destroy those arrangements altogether, or at the very least provide a blustery challenge.

This, however, comes with its costs, notably in the modern State. For one, it promises a mixture of bloodletting and indifference to the technocrats and advisors who claim various skills and expertise. Killing the priest class, the monopolists on expertise and ritual, leads to blood, confusion, and the need for a good deal of re-ordering.

In the turmoil that is modern Britain, the resignation of Sir Ivan Rogers offers a rather brutal example of this in action. As Britain's former EU ambassador, he was meant to be the expert in formulating some plan of action regarding his country's exit from the European Union. What he found instead were few plans in the offing, and a refusal to accept the complexity of the task at hand.

In resigning, he accused his employers of "muddled" thinking. "We do not yet know what the government will set as negotiating objectives for the UK's relationship with the EU after exit." There was also a grave shortage of "multilateral negotiating experience" in Whitehall, a fact not replicated "in the Commission or in the Council."^[1] In the battle of the experts, Britain was coming up short.

The government's response was dull and domestic. In the words of a government spokesman, the resignation enabled "a successor to be appointed before the UK invokes Article 50 by the end of March. We are grateful for his work and commitment over the last three years."^[2]

What Sir Ivan was experiencing was a standard bureaucratic assassination, or, in this case, an assassination on one of the more expert figures on the business of European governance. His critics chose to focus on the fact that his views had become the subject of leaks (in the British civil service, the equivalent of contracting HIV).

"If the reports are true that he has been hounded out by hostile Brexiteers in government," suggested Sir Ivan's former employee Nick Clegg, also formerly leader of the Lib Dems, "it counts as a spectacular own goal."

But what is being sought? Hardly complicated advice, a true sign of the times. Former conservative Tory cabinet minister John Redwood hoped for a replacement "who thinks it's straightforward." Sentiment and attitude counted over evidence and application. Sir Ivan had been one of those cerebral nuisances, a person who did "not really have his heart" in

the Brexit process, castigating it as being “very difficult and long-winded.” Flat-earth theorists were far more preferable.

In such cases, the role of the expert is treated as handy scapegoat, the great obfuscator against feeling and sentiment. The experts are the modern variant of pre-Protestant Catholic priests. The populist revolution being witnessed in Europe and the United States resembles, in some way, a Protestant exhortation against Catholic establishment order, the savaging of the cult of the saints (in modern terms, neo-liberal market practices, trade deals, open borders), the concealing practices of the clerics. To know God, it is best to get rid of those who obscure pathways to his vision.

The United States has been no exception to such suspicions of the “expert”, ever perched between the radically innovative and the crudely atavistic. Ingenious political models of republicanism have been entangled with divination more rooted in primitive theocracy. God accompanies the workings of Lockheed Martin and Boeing; bustling punditry and political science exists alongside pure staple prejudices and hatreds, long nursed by frontier desires and racial division.

It was the sort of thing that worried Richard Hofstadter, who suggested that populism had its nasty analogues in the form of paranoia in politics.[3] Certainly, when it came to Senator Joe McCarthy, hunting the expert during the early phase of the Cold War was fair game.

It was a mission laced with anti-Communist fervour, while previous enemies of populism had been the Banker, the Jew, or Wall Street. As the “rogue elephant” of sorts, McCarthy, according to Daniel Bell, “formulated his appeal derived from something deep in the moralizing strain of the American temper, in the willingness to believe in conspiracy and that debunkers are usually more right than wrong.”[4]

In one way, McCarthy’s war on the experts (those in the US State Department bookishly versed with their portfolios) resembled the Stalinist purges without the number of fatalities, though the principle was the same: executing catharsis, a ceremonial stripping and ripping of the educated establishment in favour of visceral revenge for the natural voice.

Unfortunately, much of the modern populist purging has very much to argue against. It is not merely the issue of experts, but the broader managerial classes who have done their part in taking institutions out of their democratic, accountable orbit.

What we will mourn in passing is the killing of the genuinely informed citizen, providing unvarnished and unabashed advice to governments as they bumble through history. In the words of Sir Ivan, “I hope you will continue to challenge ill-founded arguments and muddled thinking and that you will never be afraid to speak the truth to those in power.”

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Notes

[1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38503504>

[2] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38498839>

[3] <http://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>

[4] <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/mccarthy-and-populism/>

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