

The London Bubble, Brexit and Smug Incompetence

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Getting to London at this time of the year still sees that early summer foliage in full bloom. There is a rich sap-green life to the trees, and the prospect of a wet season. As the environment teams with turbulent activity and adjustment, the political scene is proving just as frantic. Britain goes to the referendum polls on June 23.

London is snared by the Brexit debate, with posters and placards festooning the city speaking to the benefits and catastrophes of remaining in the European Union. But for all that, such activity is taking place in the beast of Britain's political and financial establishment. For all that, it remains a supremely padded cocoon, a vast bubble of protection against so much about what the rest of Britain is saying.

The Leave and Stay campaigns have been at each other's throats in what has been, or some time, a campaign more on illusions than facts. Veteran journalist Peter Osborne went so far as to describe the debate as a post-factual one. Those arguing for staying in the EU have done so clumsily and unconvincingly; those on the leave bandwagon have done their best to make omission and misguided patriotism their central policy.

There has even been a good deal of dark cynicism thrown into it, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne using the NHS, that long hated symbol for Tories of universal health care, as political hostage. His promise: Leave Europe, and we will have to gut the service to plug inevitable deficits. The parochial, John Bull set have capitalised on such stances, marking out areas of fiction to assault the British public with in the lead up to the poll.

The Leave campaign, masking itself with stern officialdom, has been busy sending formal correspondence to voters urging the good thing: exit with pride. One leaflet titled "The European Union and Your Family" is keen to illustrate "The Facts". Such a document is designed "to help you make your decision in the referendum on Thursday 23 June." Comforting.

Then come those mysterious fog dispelling facts (facts, for some reason, is always coloured a good bolshie red). Again, the magic figure of 350 billion pounds a year for being an EU member makes its tiresome appearance. No mention of other facts, be they subsidies and assistance for British agriculture.

Another fact, conveyed with omissions and faults, is the expansion of the EU. There are legitimate reasons to argue against such a move in terms of political and economic stability, but the Leave campaign has no holds barred on the issue of how troubling it is that other states, when they join "will have the same rights as other member states." Equality between members? Revolting, sneer the campaigners.

There is no qualification to the list of states in the queue either. “Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey” are written in bold text, suggesting that new thieves and brigands are being readied to land on Britain’s shores. Such hysteria ignores the fact that the British service industry is dominated by a multitude of European nationalities, doing jobs Britons feel beneath, and in some cases beyond them. In that sense, an expanded EU has been an unqualified boon.

For all that, London remains a Venetian city state in the national debate, a point which might explain the bizarre show that unfolded on the Thames on Wednesday.

It was a moment of stock political surrealism, featuring battling flotillas, pleasure boats, and dinghies. It saw Nigel Farage from the UK Independence Party with supporters yelling as they clamoured for a swift departure from the EU, and a combative greying Bob Geldorf, flicking V-signs from a pleasure cruiser stacked with pro-EU supporters. They were armed with the Sixties pop hit “I’m in with the in crowd” blared at deafening levels.

That was not all. Farage, with his boat decked with patriotic balloons, chairs and baubles, had joined pro-Brexit Scottish fishermen squirting water at rival campaigners who had taken to dinghies to harry the Brexiteers. To add to this assembly line of absurdity were transfixed Members of Parliament and a hundred souls or so on a bridge singing Rule Britannia.[1]

The exchange, verbally, was hardly Shakespearean. More like unsupervised playground spluttering. There were rude gestures. There was shouting and jeering. “You’re a fraud!” charged Geldorf through his microphone. “You’re no fisherman’s friend!” Geldorf’s point was fair enough, obscured as it was by the scene. Farage, despite being on the European Parliament Fishing Committee, was hardly a regular, having only attended one out of 43 meetings.

Never exaggerate the credentials of pure opportunism, especially from a politician who loathes the EU but has been subsidised by its accounts for a good period of time. Farage has always liked to play the enemy within the Brussels establishment, all too often coming across as the resident philistine.

Nor has Geldorf done much to clarify the issues for the Remain campaign. To those outside London, he remains the millionaire who has dandified causes, a wealthy individual who ennobles poverty and privation for the sake of mission. Furthermore, much of the ground for those wishing to remain in the EU is taken to be obvious for the campaigners, which is exactly why it has verged on smug incompetence.

The idea of Britain leaving the system is deemed so imbecilic it does not warrant a decent counter, hence the Leave campaign’s main handicap. It warrants no coherent critique of various European practices that require a good deal of trimming, or the basic notion of constitutional reform. London, as it proved to British Labour in the last election, risks becoming an isolated oasis in the debates of Britannia. Voters outside the vast metropolis will make the difference.

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Notes:

[1] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/15/nigel-farage-bob-geldof-a-chase-down-the-thames-and-the-most-sur/>

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