

BREXIT – Temple Church

In this ancient church we have for centuries addressed the eternal verities. But BREXIT is not one of them. BREXIT is not an eternal verity. And next September, as we did last September, whatever the outcome, we will mark the end of summer on the last night of the Proms by singing with enormous enthusiasm and fervour, Land of Hope and Glory, notwithstanding some diminution in the glory, and that the Hope of which we will sing is over focused on aspiration and ambition and aggrandizement. Hope deserves rather better.

Of course Brexit matters. It raises serious questions. In whatever form it may take, assuming it happens at all, it matters seriously today and it will certainly matter seriously for a while yet, but surely, not quite so hyperbolically, if I may invent a new word, not quite so magnificatedly. Moreover the way in which we have been exposed to a political shambles, a muddle, and any other disparaging epithet you may care to use matters just as much, indeed if not more, than Brexit itself.

Taking both together, and taken with 24-hour news, and the perceived obligation to fill every minute of each 24 hours with excitement and stimulation and controversy, and plenty of individuals happy to join in, usually assertively, the news coverage has become intense and confrontational. We are becoming enured to intolerance. We have forgotten the societal need for moderation, and tolerance, not dull, insipid, bland moderation, but tolerance, moderation embraced with passion, Archbishop Fenelon's "white-heat" moderation.

I shall not discuss how I cast my vote on Brexit. However I like to think that when I voted my position was similar to that of many people who did not take an absolutist view. I acknowledged that there were arguments both ways, for and against remaining and for and against leaving. And voted accordingly, respecting the views of those who would, if they had known how I cast my vote, disagreed with me.

During the last few months of debate and discussion too many on both sides have embraced what I describe as absolutist opinions. Adherence to your beliefs and principles is not absolutist. Principles matter: I am not decrying them. What is absolutist is when you are so preoccupied with your own beliefs that you no longer allow for the possibility that there may be another sensible, even if misguided view opposite to your own, and simultaneously, while blind to that possibility, you truly believe that you are the only person being reasonable. There has been too much absolutism, and insufficient moderation. The constant use of intolerant language undermines our commitment to free speech. That is bad enough, but, worse, the language here has damaged the body politic.

These problems started much earlier than this week or last month or even last year. The referendum was a cardinal error, in constitutional terms, a sort of mortal sin. The politicians messed about with our constitution. Forgive me for repeating what I have been saying for many months. Your democratic constitution can be based on democracy on the basis of a plebiscite or referendum. It can be based, as ours is, on lots of very small plebiscites which

produce an elected representative to Parliament or a similar assembly. You can also have a constitution based on a representative assembly in which a referendum has a carefully defined function within the constitution. These include, the circumstances in which a referendum may be called, the size of majority necessary to effect a change, and the extent to which and the way in which the results of any referendum bind the assembly. Such an arrangement works perfectly well in, for example, Ireland, and recently produced the public decision on abortion. But what you cannot have is our system of representative government in which a referendum with no defined constitutional function is called to enable the leader of the party of government to escape a political problem. That is what Wilson did in 1975. It is what Cameron did relatively recently. If the Prime Minister is lucky (Wilson was) it works, but not if the result of the referendum is in sharp conflict, as here, with the majority views in the House of Commons. Mess about with the constitution or debase or misuse it as a political manoeuvre or for perceived political advantage or to avoid a problem and it can bite back. And that is what it did. What price now for cabinet responsibility? Does it make constitutional sense for the legislature to take over the business of the executive? If political parties do not regard themselves as bound by their manifestoes, why should anyone else be bound by them? And so on.

The referendum was an invitation to a political circus. Two horses called plebiscite democracy and representative democracy can be ridden round the circus ring giving the skilled horseman a relatively easy ride. Even at the circus both horses must travel in the same direction. If the horses are travelling in opposite directions even a skilled rider will fall off. It will be a shambles, a laughingstock. That is what we have here. With everyone looking for someone else to blame.

And our situation since the referendum was exacerbated by the nature of arguments deployed during the referendum, which beyond the usual misinformation, in my opinion practised by both sides, made the choice seem simple when it is complex. Since the referendum the language has become more shrill and antagonistic. And divisive. And worse, physically intimidating and threatening. In my opinion too many absolutist leavers still overlook that 48% of the voters rejected Brexit. And too many absolutist remainers provide colourable excuses for rejecting the views of the majority in the referendum in the hope of preventing Brexit. That has contributed heavily to the shambles.

Even among the many who voted after balancing different considerations, we have become more polarised. When you have given a decision careful thought and worked out where, on balance, you should cast your vote in the referendum it is a normal human reaction increasingly to resent those who treat your decision with contempt. So you defend your decision with increasing vehemence and reducing tolerance for those who disdain it. And much worse, and this is the most alarming feature of it all, has been the deepening of profound disillusionment with our political and constitutional processes. Disillusionment with democratic processes is a parent of authoritarianism.

As I said at the outset, I do not believe that BREXIT is or is concerned with eternal verities. At the risk of an allegation of heresy, I have to express my personal opinion that five or 10 years from now we shall be engaged with problems at least as pressing as BREXIT. They

are already visible, merely obfuscated by BREXIT. One is the competitive economic development of the East. Just one small indication is the advance of China in Africa. Another is the advance of technology. Not merely social media. One example only . In the not too remote future society will have to address the creation of fatherless and motherless human beings. How shall we address, and with what institutions, shall we address these immense moral problems, which will indeed engage eternal verities?. Third is the accretion of increased executive power, which in our constitutional arrangements, is being vested in the executive with virtually every statute that is enacted. There is no time for me to analyse them all, but into this mix of huge problems , there remains the continuing damage which the Brexit process has inflicted on public confidence in our own constitutional and political processes. Perhaps, and I certainly hope, we shall relearn something of our former ability to respect views that we do not share. National characteristics do re-emerge. Today outside Parliament I witnessed demonstrations by supporters of the rival positions, and they were peaceful, noisy, but peaceful.

Could we also remember that this ancient church has witnessed the consequences of much worse disasters. 100 years ago the bells celebrated the end of the war in which millions, literally millions, of lives were brought painful, hideous, untimely ends, and millions more around the world were about to be eradicated by pandemic flu. Both were cataclysmic national disasters. And remember too that contemporaneously with those catastrophes something positive happened. That was the year our constitution at last acknowledged that at least some members of that half of the human race called women were entitled to participate in the electoral processes. Although we have only slowly appreciated the enormous value to society of the whole of that advance in 1919, it represented a remarkable and wonderful societal convulsion from which we continue to reap the benefits.

While putting Brexit into its proper perspective we should not overlook two stunning features revealed by the Brexit processes. The Prime Minister wished to proceed with Article 50 without Parliamentary consent. She was taken to court by one individual. Just one individual and a couple of supporters against the entire government of the United Kingdom. The judges ruled against the Prime Minister. Ignore the issue of the way some parts of the media criticised the decision; the Prime Minister obeyed the ruling. Indeed I am sure it did not cross her mind that she could disobey it. The individual continued to campaign. The judges continued in office. There are no proposals to alter the way in which the judiciary is appointed. In many countries that would be remarkable. In this country we take it for granted when we should remember it with pride.

Similarly, no one can doubt that the Prime Minister wants Brexit to be based on her deal. She cannot achieve a majority in Parliament. Indeed in Parliament she is personally criticised, occasionally vilified. But in terms of forcible compulsion she can do nothing to put aside her more vociferous opponents. She cannot rid herself of a single one of them. Indeed she may lose this battle and it will be the Prime Minister who is forced out of office, to take the lonely walk out of No 10. That may underline political weakness in a Prime Minister, but what a limitation on the exercise of power. In this country, again, we take all this for granted.

I return to Hope. Hope is a bit like moderation, like tolerance .It tends to sound a little bland. Rather dull. Faith attracts passion.people die horrible deaths for their faiths. Charity, love, also involves passion. Properly understood, Hope is no less positive and should be embraced with an equal passion.Like toleration we need it at white heat.

Come with me to a little church in the heart of Leicestershire. The King, the head of the Church of England, has just been executed . Oliver Cromwell had dispensed with Parliament . A Civil War with massive casualties had ended up with a more ruthless, absolute Head of State than any since Henry VIII. Anglicanism was in retreat. Yet in 1653 an Anglican church was founded, and this is what you read on the stone inside the church:

“ in the year 1653 when all things sacred were throughout the nation either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, founded this church; whose singular praise it is to have done the best of things in the worst of times and hoped in the most calamitous”.

Unlike Brexit Hope is indeed an eternal verity.This inscription is a message for the ages, and for us today.