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How Brexit caught Britain with its democratic pants down

I do not think anyone can deny that Nigel Farage managed to pull a really fast one on the EU in general and the British in particular. Of course he did not manage this single-handedly. He had help in the form of UKIP, various Oxford Club buddies such as Michael Gove and Boris Johnson, the notorious complacency and bureaucratic arrogance of the EU institutions, the convenient lies all politicians in the European Union seem to use in blaming the EU for any unpopular decisions they need to take, and last but definitely not least, the ignorance of a large part of the British public.

This last one was an eye opener for me - a consolation of sorts. And it shouldn't have been, not with the rise of so many different populist parties and politicians everywhere, providing over-simplified and completely impossible solutions to gullible populaces eager to believe anything that would promise to take them out of the perceived funk they are in (Trump, anyone?). Yet somehow it still fascinated me - the fact that such an advanced nation could end up the hostage of a decision taken by millions based on, in my opinion, utter rubbish arguments. You see, I am highly critical of the political (I am being selectively generous here) intelligence of the Maltese population, and this weakness I attributed to our Mediterranean culture (think Greece, Italy, and even worse, North Africa), to our small island mentality (whole essays can be written about that), and our low democratic maturity. Let's face it, we only became independent in 1964, and were always dependent on some foreign master to tell us what to do for two thousand years at least. But Britain? Rich, old democracy Britain? And in the third millennium to boot.

Then again, when faced with such complex issues, which population, bar the few, would not be "ignorant"? It seems to me

that in whichever country, with possibly very rare exceptions, democracy does not work very well. Politicians find that hot button that they realise will catapult them to power if pressed hard enough, irrespective of whether it makes sense, is true, or even morally right. The important thing would be to dupe enough people into believing, by exploiting the emotions of the masses. After all, reason has always taken the back seat to emotions. The Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow* makes a very useful - and shocking - point in identifying this difference in thinking processes, and how easy it is for people to fall prey to simplistic solutions.

So the Brexit campaign lied and offered false promises that it reneged immediately after the referendum result was known. Why is this so shocking? How many political campaigns, of any party in any country that wins an election do you know, that delivers on their promises? Isn't it a given that politicians lie? A recent veracity poll by IPSOS MORI in Britain put politicians exactly at the bottom of the trustworthiness scales. Less trusted than real estate agents, journalists and bankers.

So why do people fall for the politicians' siren songs? Is it because people will believe what they would like to believe (back to Kahneman's simplistic solutions), or is it because when one politician says black and the other says white, they hardly have a trusted choice? In the case of Brexit, though, we had economic experts and academics almost unanimously telling the British that Brexit is a bad idea. Yet many millions heeded Michael Gove's advice to not heed the experts. Amazing, really.

I remember reading Michael Crichton's *State of Fear*, which is about the thorny issue of global warming. The book has an interesting prologue about eugenics, a science that had also become highly politicised. It seems that when an issue, whether scientific or other, is politicised, it gets screwed up.

This is an important lesson to learn for all democratic societies. When people are unhappy about something, and you find a politician with enough self-interest and support, who can stoke the fire with the right words, you are in trouble. Emotions will trump reason, every time (apologies for the unintended pun).

On the other hand, should a democratic society allow cynical, amoral or unhinged politicians to just spew any lies they want, because it is a free democracy? In the area of business, medicine, food and others, there are watchdogs to protect the citizen from exactly that. Why not in politics? Would it make society less or more democratic, if there was an independent (if such a thing is possible) watchdog to oversee politicians' statements? To at least stop the blatant lies, as one would with slander in a court of law? Would such a watchdog be too powerful to have, thus undermining the same democracy it is supposed to protect?

So true democracy only seems to work if you have a fully informed and rational public. And that, I am afraid, will never exist. Yet democracy is all we have got, in a supposedly free society. Because, after all, what would the alternative be?

"Democracy is the dictatorship of the ignorant masses" – Plato