

The improbable revolutionaries

England's vote for Brexit exposes the anarchic streak in an otherwise pragmatic people

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“THE English are not intellectual,” wrote George Orwell. “They have a horror of abstract thought, they feel no need for any philosophy or systematic ‘worldview’.” England’s finest chronicler had a point. **The country is rightly known for its pragmatism and suspicion of wide-eyed ideas. This was the nation that turned its nose up at republicanism,** fascism and communism; that has typically advanced not through revolutions but by tweaks and fiddles; and that tolerates the ensuing tensions and contradictions like wrinkles on an old face.

Whence does this predilection for muddling through come? Some point to the English civil war and the short-lived but tyrannical republic that ensued. This, the argument goes, put the country off purisms of all sorts. **Religion? The Church of England is more like agnosticism with tea.** Politics? When the French descended into regicide and then terror, the philosopher Edmund Burke shook his head and later wrote approvingly of his compatriots’ aversion to “pure reason” and “abstract” principles. To this day the national character appears, to outsiders, rather like the weather: mild, homely, rarely extreme. Violent tempers and upheavals (at least, excepting the country’s drinking culture) are as uncommon on these damp, green islands as tornadoes, tsunamis and droughts.

Thus England’s shock vote for Brexit on June 23rd—Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to stay, Wales to leave—looks like a stark departure from the country’s usual

sanguine demeanour. Faced with a choice between an imperfect status quo and a leap into the dark, this usually practical, cautious people has flung itself into the unknown and left its leaders, and the rest of the world, aghast.

It was not just the fact of the result that was unEnglish, but its manner. **It was a triumph for a Leave campaign that had conspicuously failed to answer the obvious hard-nosed questions about Brexit.** What sort of trading relationship would the country secure? What would it mean for peace in Northern Ireland and the future of the union? What about Britain's 1.3m expats in the EU? In place of facts, **the Brexiteers had furious bombast; lurid assertions about immigration, sovereignty and national destiny; fantasies of purgative chaos. They wanted "their" country back. Even the weather was unEnglish:** window-rattling thunder filled the skies above the south-east on polling day as torrential rain flooded London streets (probably lowering turnout in the strongly pro-EU capital).

But just as the placid English weather can, on occasion, act in an uncharacteristically volatile manner, so can the country's denizens. Buried beneath all the "mustn't grumble" and "I'm terribly sorry, but..." is a streak of rebellion. Think again about the country's history: from the Luddites and Chartists to Johnny Rotten and Margaret Thatcher, the English are not averse to flipping a middle finger at the establishment, when the fancy takes them. Its newspapers are much ruder to its political leaders than those of most other European countries. Satire has a special role in English life. **Inside every tea-sipper there is an anarchist waiting to be stirred. In this context the Brexit vote looks less odd.**

Especially as the anti-establishment seam does not, in fact, contradict the nation's otherwise pragmatic, level-headed character. The English may be sceptical about big ideas, but they are also leery of authority. As Burke put it, their faith is in natural wisdom; the common sense of the common man. Pragmatism is not the same as deference: **Orwell, writing of soldiers' songs in the first world war, noted that: "The only enemy they ever named was the sergeant-major."**

Recent events helped the Brexiteers tap into this instinct: the financial and euro-zone crises and the ensuing austerity, the MPs' expenses scandal of 2009 and the growing gulf between cosmopolitan and nativist parts of the country have all contributed to a quiet seething. As early as January a top Brexiteer freely admitted to Bagehot that his campaign planned to turn the public against its leaders; **it wanted systematically to delegitimise Britain's pro-EU political, bureaucratic and business elites.** Sure enough, Vote Leave activists heckled at a conference of the Confederation of British Industry; Michael Gove, the pro-Brexit justice secretary, compared economists to Nazis; a government leaflet setting out the case to remain was decried as "propaganda".

The peasants' revolt

It worked. At successive Leave events around the country your columnist encountered smouldering anger about the establishment, broadly defined: the banks (especially

Goldman Sachs), the Bank of England, the business leaders, the universities, the “experts”, and Mr Cameron, the prime minister who only last May had led his party to its first majority in 23 years. At a pro-Brexit rally in the Midlands an activist opined: “David Cameron has dominated the media like the Germans dominated the skies with their aircraft. We need some anti-aircraft guns.”

What, then, does this tell us about the uncertain new world into which England has now thrust the United Kingdom? In the coming weeks and months Brexiteers and Remainers alike will rightly dwell on the need to listen to an alienated public: **particularly voters in the post-industrial north, who backed Leave more strongly than had been anticipated. Yet the old English pragmatism is not dead, despite the emotional spasm of June 23rd. Voters will soon realise that they have been sold a pup.** They are surely still practical and hard-headed enough to want whoever leads the coming negotiations **to cut a deal with the EU that preserves many of its benefits; that keeps Britain as open and prosperous as possible.** For now Brexiteers will congratulate themselves for unleashing the inner anarchist in a normally sensible nation. But then that doughtier, more familiar English trait—worldly scepticism—must and will reassert itself.

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