

# Brexit: Calm after the Storm?

*Phil Jump considers that the consequences of the vote to leave the EU are not as serious as imagined, but suggests that the church has a function to provide a vision for the forward process. However, there are worries that the prophetic function of the EU will be lost, along with initiatives to rebuild the northern UK economy.*

I am no expert, but I sense that the consequences of Britain's decision to leave the EU are nowhere near as serious as many are making them out to be. I would equally argue that had we decided to remain, the outcome would have been nowhere near as catastrophic or indeed utopian as many sought to maintain.

It was incumbent upon advocates of both sides of the referendum debate to devise sufficiently compelling narratives to convince a largely undecided and bewildered electorate, to ascribe to their cause – and narratives aplenty seem to have been the consequence. Within the EU, Britain was portrayed as being in the helpless grip of a bureaucratic, unelected conspiracy that undermined our sovereignty, wasted our finances and left us helplessly over-run by an ever-growing mass of undesirables, whose only purpose in being here was to drain our welfare system of its last penny. Outside of it, we were doomed to economic catastrophe, burdensome trade barriers and a complete abandonment of every principle of social justice that has prevailed on the continent for the last four decades.

It is true that Brexit has launched us into a somewhat un-anticipated era of uncertainty, but I would argue this is more the aftermath of the debate itself than the reality it has created. I say this not to be flippanant or

dismissive, but I sense that many of the concerns that prevail are an expression of the possible rather than the inevitable. Whether or not they come to pass is a matter of choice and political will, both in terms of the potential benefits and disadvantages of life outside of the EU. What is certainly true is that we have reached a moment in history where the shape and direction of our nation's political identity is up for grabs, which in turn raises questions for the Church about her role in influencing and enabling that forward process. I sense that in particular, people of faith have two potential roles: one is to name reality and the other is to offer a vision of society that embraces those values and priorities that we see as essential to human flourishing.

I have been asked to explore this from the particular perspective of my native north of England, which is of particular interest given that one observation is that (excepting Scotland), the referendum has revealed something of a north-south divide. I am though something of a rarity, in that I live in one of the few northern "constituencies" that voted to remain – made all the rarer by the fact that it does not include a major city centre. There is a serious point to be made here; I believe that one of those realities is that Britain is not as divided as some are making it out to be. For the majority of areas, it

seems that the difference between being an "in" or "out" community was down to around 10% of voters (7% of its actual adult inhabitants) swinging the result between around 45% and 55% to remain.

There has hardly been a General Election in my lifetime that did not deliver a majority Government which the majority of the electorate had not actually voted for. The fact that the eventual result of the referendum was determined by a relatively small percentage, and that this was pretty much representative of the thinking that emerged across the population, suggests that this is a matter about which we are far less divided than say, who should be our Prime Minister. Yet we do, and always have, managed to live with one another in the wake of such outcomes. Perhaps it's a northern thing, but most of the "Remainers" I have spoken to are neither incensed nor mortified by the eventual outcome; they simply shrug their shoulders and acknowledge "it's not the result I wanted, but let's get on with making the best of it."

A deeper concern to me is that many of those exaggerated arguments which became the relentless accompaniment to the campaign itself, are now being seen, albeit by a small minority, as having been endorsed by the Brexit vote. This is not helped by political opportunists of every shade seeing this as the

moment to pursue their own particular ends. Perhaps this is more a time for party activists to recognise their own deep divisions and the damaging public consequences of the unprincipled pursuit of partisan ideologies at the expense of common good. It is clear from a number of reported incidents that some of the divisive and at times downright racist narratives that emerged from the Referendum campaign are being perpetuated, which is both wrong and unjustified.


This indicates another reality that needs to be named. The decision to leave the EU was exactly that; a choice of whether or not the United Kingdom should remain part of a particular political structure. It was not a wholesale rejection of all things European, it was not a closing of our doors to people from other nations, it was not an abandonment of any of the principles and priorities that the EU seeks to embrace. None of those things were an option on the ballot paper; the decision people made was one of personal choice, not a wholesale endorsement of any party's accompanying agenda.

But for all of that, genuine concerns, largely related to issues of social justice, have certainly emerged within the communities of the north. It was sufficiently disturbing for the Mayor of Liverpool to call together faith leaders as part of a "post Brexit" consultation. Significant rafts of European Funding have enabled many of the post-industrial communities of the north to begin to rebuild their economic infrastructure – this process could now be under serious threat. But herein, I would argue, lies the key

question. If, as politicians have insisted, life outside the EU gives us more resources and greater flexibility, can we ensure that these resources continue to be invested in the economic recovery of those communities that were decimated by the dismantling of our Industrial heritage? At least our departure from Europe has had spotlight attention; this was not the case when the newly elected coalition government closed down the various regional development agencies, which were largely responsible for instigating and co-ordinating that investment. At the time it was suggested by insiders that it would be a decade before the true impact of this decision began to be felt just about the time when the loss of European funding might also begin to be realised. There are good reasons to be concerned.

But, as I have already argued, none of this has to happen; outside of the EU, we will still have resources to invest in building a strong northern economy, but will need those with the political will to make that happen. This is important for the whole of the United Kingdom, as an over-concentration of population and commerce in the South East quadrant brings its own disadvantages. This line of argument cannot avoid mentioning George Osborne's famed Northern Powerhouse and interestingly some of the stronger concerns have been raised about the political fall-out of the Brexit decision. Osborne's departure has left even his political opponents candidly admitting their dismay that such a clear and committed advocate for the northern half of England is no longer in a place of such significant influence.

It may seem an unusual term to use, but reflecting on this more broadly causes me to ask to what degree was the EU a "prophetic" voice within our nation's political life. Perhaps it might be more accurate to describe European legislation as providing the frames of reference for such voices within our society, thus giving them stronger legitimacy and purchase. Some of the deepest concerns do relate to the potential abandonment of European-based principles of human rights and social justice, and it would seem that much of the European investment was around restoring and developing disadvantaged communities. Do we risk losing a significant voice in the public square?

But this brings me back to my original point. If Brexit was, as many claim, a matter of "taking back control" then we need to ask some deep and searching questions about who is now holding those controls and what agendas and priorities are informing their actions. People of faith have a clear opportunity, even responsibility, to help the United Kingdom envision and define its future, and can be a clear and effective prophetic voice in taking that vision forward. The Church of Scotland has already done some excellent work in helping ordinary people share their hopes, dreams, aspirations and frustrations in helping define a vision for their own nation – perhaps there is a blueprint here for something that needs to happen across these islands. Whatever emerges, this does not feel like a time for the Church to wait and see, but rather to be on the front foot in helping the United Kingdom determine its future. 



**Phil Jump** is Chair of Industrial Christian Fellowship and Regional Minister of the North Western Baptist Association. He entered Christian Ministry after a career in marine engineering and is married to Janice. They live in north Liverpool and have three children.