

WHEN PEOPLE DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW: BREXIT AND THE BRITISH COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

A Review Essay by John Williams

Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union.

Harold C. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley. Cambridge University Press, 2017

Brexit: What the Hell Happens Now?

Dunt, Ian. Canbury Press, 2018.

Brexit and British Politics.

Geoffrey Evans and Anand Menon. Polity Press, 2017.

Six Days In September: Black Wednesday, Brexit and the Making of Europe.

William Keegan, David Marsh and Richard Roberts. Official Monetary and Financial Institutions Forum Press, 2017.

An Accidental Brexit

Paul J.J. Welfens. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Explaining Cameron's Catastrophe.

Robert Worcester, Roger Mortimore, Paul Baines, and Mark Gill. IndieBooks, 2017.

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About the Author

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The beginnings of Britain’s departure from the European Union go back much further than the 2016 referendum. There has been a fundamental failure of communication for a long time, and it continues. The problem is more profound than misinformation or disinformation. The voter at least has a chance to check or challenge mis- and dis-information,¹ but when no information is given, how is the voter going to find out the facts not given? Non-information is more difficult to deal with because we don’t know what we don’t know. If the complexities and the consequences are not debated or discussed, the country cannot take an informed view about strategic choices.

The impact on manufacturing supply chains if Britain leaves the European single market and customs union is an excellent example. The phrase ‘supply chains’ was not a focus of contention in the referendum, nor has it featured prominently in arguments about the British government’s strategy for departing the Union. The issue is too dull for media and politicians, difficult to convey compellingly in the familiar terms of debate. So it goes unmentioned, unless you have a subscription to the *Financial Times*, or seek out specialist websites, or read a book about it, which few voters, understandably, are tempted to do.

The *FT* has illustrated the supply chain problem by describing how the bumpers of some Bentley cars cross La Manche, known on the UK side as the English Channel, three times before the car’s final assembly in Crewe.² The fuel injector for diesel lorry engines made by Delphi in Stonehouse, Gloucester, uses steel

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1 ‘Disinformation’ is defined as ‘the manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead or deceive’, while ‘misinformation’ is defined as ‘inaccurate information that is the result of an honest mistake or of negligence’. The definitions taken from Jente Althuis and Leonie Haiden (eds), *Fake News: A Roadmap* (Riga and London: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and King’s Centre for Strategic Communications, 2018).

2 *Financial Times* <<https://www.ft.com/content/c397f174-9205-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78>>

imported from Europe, is sent to Germany for specialist heat treatment, comes back to Gloucestershire for assembly, and is then exported to Sweden, France, and Germany—four cross-border movements. Good business, very boring. The impact of disrupting these supply chains with customs checks and costly tariffs goes unheard and unread by the great majority of voters.

Only 44% of a British-made car is actually made in Britain, the rest crossing borders during the production process, according to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders,³ which estimates that 11 000 lorries a day enter the UK from the EU with car components. Do our politicians not know about this tedious business, or if they do, is it too much trouble to share the information with the ultimate decision-makers, the people? ‘Save our supply chains’ is not a catchy slogan.

Ian Dunt⁴ has no doubt what the problem is. He writes of the ministerial Brexiteers: ‘[...] the behaviour of these men during the referendum campaign and afterwards displayed their ignorance and set the tone of the European response. They have demonstrated a persistent inability to deal realistically with the challenges they face or set out a deliverable goal...’.

As we proceed towards our national destiny in ignorance—in its non-pejorative sense of simply not knowing—we have nothing to lose but our supply chains, as Marx might have said.

The profound point about the Brexit communication breakdown is this—the complexity of modern, multinational economies has outrun the capacity of our media and politics to explain or even to understand. To put it bluntly, we no longer understand how life works. This is as important as the cynical tendency of some in the media and politics to mislead. How are voters supposed to make informed choices about realities they are unaware of? Did the voters of the Nissan-producing city of Sunderland vote to leave the European Union in full knowledge of the risk to the town’s economy of leaving the single market? Did voters, swayed by fear of immigration, vote in full knowledge of facts that show the benefits of free movement within the EU?

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³ Costas Pitas and Kate Holton, ‘UK car industry says no Brexit deal would cause permanent damage’, ed. Louise Heavens, *Reuters Business News*, 20 June 2017; *Financial Times* <<https://www.ft.com/content/e00fbc9e-d438-11e7-a303-9060cb1e5f44>>

⁴ Ian Dunt, *Brexit: What the Hell Happens Now?* (Kingston upon Thames: Canbury Press, 2018), p. 109 [Kindle edition, Loc 1187].

An intriguing answer is given by the Remain campaign pollster, Andrew Cooper, in an email to one of the authors of a study of Brexit polling, Matthew Goodwin.⁵

We probed a lot in the focus groups and the ostensible logic was hard to crack.... [Reducing immigration] would obviously mean less pressure on public services, above all the NHS; no longer sending a fortune to the EU [...]. Most people simply refused to accept that the cost/burden to the NHS of immigrants from the EU using its services was a small proportion, overall, of what they contributed in taxes. We tried different ways of saying that [...], but *it felt too counter-intuitive to be true, when set alongside everything else people thought they knew.*

My italics: this is an important insight into the workings of public opinion in a political environment of mis- and non-information. If anti-EU newspapers regularly report on ‘welfare tourists’ without ever reporting that immigrants overall pay into the state more than they take out, then few will themselves seek out what they are not being told because they don’t know what they are not being told.

The Leave campaign director, Dominic Cummings, who came up with the ‘Take Back Control’ slogan, understood the importance of what people don’t know. ‘I am not aware of a single MP or political journalist who understands the Single Market....’, he has written.⁶

It was not in our power to change basics of how the media works. We therefore twisted them to our advantage to hack the system.... In an environment in which the central arguments concerning trade and the economy were incomprehensible to the ‘experts’ themselves and the history and dynamics of the EU, either unknown to or suppressed by broadcasters, people chose between two simple stories. Vote Leave’s was more psychologically compelling.

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⁵ Harold C. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 49 [Kindle edition, Loc 1715].

⁶ Dominic Cummings, ‘[On the referendum #21: Branching histories of the 2016 referendum and “the frogs before the storm”](#)’, *Dominic Cummings’s Blog*, Word Press, 9 January 2017; This important blog is quoted and analysed at greater length in my essay about Brexit in John Williams and Kevin Marsh, *Strategic Communication* (Wickford, Essex: Offspin Media, forthcoming in 2018), 130–39.

The ‘will of the people’ is not influenced by the latest paper from the Institute for Government,⁷ but people will read *The Daily Mail* or listen to the increasingly uninformative interviews of the BBC Radio’s *Today* programme, whose he-said-she-said format encourages the weary sense that everything is equally unreliable. The problem of the economically ‘left behind’ has been well-chronicled as a cause of Brexit, but there is also an issue of being ‘left behind’ by lack of information.

This is a democratic deficit at the heart of Britain’s media-political culture; rather, of England’s. The historian Robert Tombs⁸ has called the vote to leave the European Union an ‘English revolt’. Anti-EU newspapers created this climate over many years, and broadcasters follow their agenda, not just in what stories they report, but in what to ignore, in the culture of non-information. Supply chains are not good material for combative interviews—it’s easier to have one MP each from Leave and Remain slugging it out, spreading apathy across the land.

A second issue, equally ignored, is the effect of Brexit on the Irish border. It was hardly mentioned in the referendum by either campaign (an example of Remain’s weak communication strategy). This is a problem of non-information, not misinformation, leaving most voters unable to know what they don’t know. British readers can find what they don’t know about this issue, for example, in *The New York Review of Books*, where Fintan O’Toole of *The Irish Times* has written:

It is an impossible frontier. At best, attempts to reimpose it will create a lawless zone for the smuggling of goods and people. At

7 Joe Owen, Marcus Shephard, and Alex Stojanovic, *Implementing Brexit: Customs* (London: Institute for Government, 2017) do a much better job of explaining this costly reality than the British government. For example, page 4 says:

‘There are 180,000 traders who will need to make customs declarations for the first time after exit; many of whom will be small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). They will need to manage increased administration and incur the cost of doing so. **The introduction of customs declarations alone could end up costing traders in the region of £4 billion (bn) a year.** [sic] For these traders to be ready for exit, government must be clear about when and how they must adapt, and leave them enough time to do so. Until they are given some certainty on what is required from them on day one, the amount of this work that can take place is limited.

‘**There is a cliff edge at the other side of the English Channel too.** [sic] Even if the UK’s border is ready for Brexit, issues in Calais, Rotterdam or other European ports could cause significant disruption for British exporters and supply chains. The famous queues of lorries along the M20 in Kent in June 2015 were a result of problems on the French side, not in Dover. Government is dependent on the successful preparation of European partners. Engagement and collaboration are critical but so is certainty on what customs after Brexit will look like.’

8 Robert Tombs, ‘*The English Revolt: Brexit, Euroscepticism and the Future of the United Kingdom*’, *New Statesman*, 24 July 2016; Tombs, author of *The English and Their History* ([London]: Penguin, 2015), wrote in the *New Statesman* about ‘an upsurge over decades of a more assertive, perhaps resentful, sense of English identity.’

worst, border posts will be magnets for the violence of fringe militant groups who will delight in having such powerfully symbolic targets. The British position paper for the negotiations with the EU, published in August, merely evaded all of these problems by suggesting that in the wonderful free-trading Utopia that will emerge after Brexit there will be no need for a physical border at all.⁹

This is an outstanding example of the democracy deficit resulting from non-information. And this deficit has continued to characterise Britain's approach to negotiating exit terms.

Ian Dunt says: 'Britain's government has approached Brexit ineptly, misjudging its opponent, underestimating the challenges, and prioritising its short-term political interests over the long-term interests of the country.'¹⁰

Geoffrey Evans and Anand Menon note a study by the Hansard Society showing what it called a 'disturbing' new trend: 'Indifference to politics, it argued, was hardening into "something more significant", with interest, knowledge, satisfaction and engagement falling, at times sharply.'¹¹ The 'knowledge' part of that equation is the responsibility of politicians and the media, not of the public. In a democracy, elected leaders and opposition politicians have a duty to explain the policies they want people to vote for. When they do not, it is their fault, not the voters', that national choices are made in a vacuum of non-information. The political duty to explain is especially important when the issues are complex, and have major consequences. Instead, the leaders of British government and main Opposition have deluded themselves and misled the public about the European Union.

Attitudes to the European Union were not formed during the referendum campaign, but developed over a long time. Back in 1983, the first Eurobarometer poll found that only 33% believed Britain was benefiting from membership, 56% did not. Thereafter there were only 'a couple of polls where more thought Britain had benefited than not, but the proportion seeing a benefit

9 Fintan O'Toole, 'Brexit's Irish Question', *New York Review of Books*, 28 September, 2017.

10 Dunt.

11 Geoffrey Evans and Anand Menon, *Brexit and British Politics*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017) p. 43.

never reached 50%, and from 1999 onwards, was never over 40%’, according to Sir Robert Worcester, founder of MORI (Market & Opinion Research International Ltd.), and others in their study of polling on Europe. This was a long-established apathy against which the Remain campaign struggled in 2016. Worcester et al make the valid point that ‘the Remain campaign made little ground in establishing a positive case for EU membership of Europe. This has been a consistent weakness for almost the whole of the 30-plus years that the Eurobarometer has been monitoring British opinions on Europe’.¹²

Ulrich Speck, senior fellow at the Aspen Institute Germany,¹³ writing on his Facebook page, says: ‘One can argue that Brexit at least partly is a consequence of that failure of Europe’s intellectual class to develop a political discourse—ideas, categories, analysis—that is focused on what the EU is and does. Brits only discover now what the EU is and does, as they are confronted with the prospect of losing it.’¹⁴

One of the United Kingdom’s most distinguished EU diplomats, Sir Stephen Wall, has written about ‘the perpetual difficulties Britain has faced in extolling the EU’s benefits’.¹⁵ I experienced this difficulty when working with Wall among others, as the Foreign Secretary’s Press Secretary. Long before the referendum, the British government faced the challenge in the year 2000 of explaining and extolling the benefits of enlarging the Union to include countries that had been part of the Soviet empire. The benefits of Britain being one of the most influential decision-makers in this wider EU seemed so obvious to senior officials that they were puzzled by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook’s concern about how to communicate them. Our pressing concern was how to prevent the anti-EU media from convincing the public that the necessary changes to voting weights and veto powers would amount to a surrender of sovereignty.

My notes from that time describe the challenge, beginning with this passage reflecting on a paper which I submitted to the Foreign Secretary during preparations for the negotiations on EU enlargement:

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12 Robert Worcester, Roger Mortimore, Paul Baines, and Mark Gill, *Explaining Cameron’s Catastrophe* (London: IndieBooks, 2017), pp. 130–31.

13 [Aspen Institute Germany](#).

14 Ulrich Speck, [Facebook post](#), 18 January 2018.

15 Stephen Wall, *A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), quoted in William Keegan, David Marsh and Richard Roberts, *Six Days In September: Black Wednesday, Brexit and the Making of Europe* (London: OMFIF [Official Monetary and Financial institutions Forum] Press, 2017), p. 25.

[I]t has long seemed to me—I wrote this in the paper which Robin used as the basis for his [...] strategy submission to Blair—that the anti-European newspapers have set themselves the task of destroying this government’s pro-European policy by making it impossible to speak up sensibly and moderately for Europe. Their propaganda is a poison which will, if not drawn, kill this country’s commitment to Europe, within a very few years [...]. What Robin liked in the paper I had written for him was the trio of sceptic phrases which I picked out for counter-attack: superstate, surrender, sovereignty. These have been the devastatingly simple basis of their assault on the Major and Blair governments.¹⁶

The term ‘superstate’ was first used, as far as I know, by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in September 1988, in a speech to the College of Europe in Bruges. I was there as political correspondent of the *London Evening Standard*. ‘You will like this’, said her press secretary, Bernard Ingham, when he handed me the text on the way there, so that I could make the deadline for the front page. He and the Prime Minister knew the impact they wanted to make with phrases like:

We have not rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level, with a European superstate exercising a new dominance from Brussels.¹⁷

This was a ‘fantasy’, according to Hugo Young,¹⁸ one of her biographers, ‘a fantasy, however which [...] secured a life of its own that pervaded many corners of politics and diplomacy in the months ahead’.

Further ahead than a few months—it was arguably the most effective speech as strategic communication, by a British politician, in the last half century. It was the beginning of the argument that won the referendum nearly 30 years later. The Bruges speech set the framework in which the debate about Britain in Europe was argued from then on. By portraying it as a potential ‘superstate’, Margaret Thatcher simplified the complexities and ambiguities of modern Europe, and Britain’s role in it, to a narrative that served her followers well a generation later.

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16 John Williams, *Robin Cook: Principles and Power* (London: IndieBooks, 2015), p. 122

17 Margaret Thatcher, ‘Speech to the College of Europe “The Bruges Speech”’, The Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 22 September 1988.

18 Hugo Young, *One Of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 551

When our fellow Europeans wonder how Britain came to break with Europe, one of the answers must be that a mainstream political figure of such weight turned against the European Community.¹⁹ This gave the case against membership a respectability that it has not had in France, Germany, Italy, and so on, where the mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties of government have remained faithful to the EU consensus. Thatcher's legend remained an engine of anti-EU sentiment long after she left office in 1990.

Paul Welfens, a German academic who seems baffled by Brexit, gently understates the failure of communication about the EU's benefits to Britain: 'One may emphasise that knowledge about the EU seems to be rather modest in the UK.'²⁰ For Welfens, the referendum result was irrational. He notes Britain's long association with rationality:

The world owes British philosophy and scientific development a debt of gratitude for the modern approach of science which is based on observation, modeling and empirical studies.... Against this background of modern progress from 1700 to 2000, the run-up to the British referendum of 2016 looks particularly strange.²¹

He therefore cannot understand why the majority of voters were not persuaded by economic facts: 'The fact that a majority of British voters voted for Brexit, that is for the UK to leave the EU, despite expert warnings regarding its long-term reduction in income of 3–10%, demands closer attention—the rationality of western, or at the very least of British politics has been called into question by the referendum.'²²

Welfens is convinced that if the Treasury's forecast of a 3–10% loss of income had been more prominent in the campaign, especially in a government leaflet sent to all households, 'it can be assumed' this 'would have changed the result'.²³ But this is to misunderstand what moved the 52%: not the economy, but

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19 The European Community of Thatcher's day has been absorbed into the European Union.
20 Paul J.J. Welfens, *An Accidental Brexit: New EU and Transatlantic Economic Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 51.
21 *Ibid.*, p. xi.
22 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
23 *Ibid.*, p. 297.

immigration. The Ipsos Mori study includes a table which makes the point vividly, how divided the country was on what most mattered in the referendum.²⁴ For 54% of Leavers, immigration was ‘very important’ in deciding how to vote; for 18%, the economy. The reverse was true for Remain voters: 50% put ‘the impact on Britain’s economy’ first, while 12% cited ‘the number of immigrants coming into Britain’.

According to this analysis of the polling, we should ‘think of the referendum decision as one entirely deriving from a competition and interaction between different issues [...] these are not necessarily all policy issues decided entirely upon a rational and deliberative basis: we must remember to include issues which may be more emotionally or value based, such as perceptions of national identity, as well as those that may in theory be more solidly factual such as economic impact or immigration levels’.²⁵

Worcester et al go on: ‘What does seem clear is that most Leave voters rejected any likelihood that Brexit might be economically painful [...]. A comfortable majority of those intending to vote Leave said they thought the economy would be better[...]. This of course was directly contrary to the pronouncements of the government and many experts, who argued that Brexit would be economically disastrous, and most Remain voters accepted this message.’²⁶

So Paul Welfens has a point in seeing the outcome as not entirely rational. He describes the pro-Europe referendum campaign as a ‘Fatal Communication Disaster’²⁷ and blames the European Commission as well as Prime Minister David Cameron: ‘One can criticise the entire Brexit manoeuvre by Conservative PM Cameron, but it was also incumbent upon EU partner countries to demonstrate the benefits of EU membership and argue against Brexit[...]. The anti-EU focus of the British tabloid press hampered the European Commission’s attempts to make the EU institutions and politics understandable. From 2013 at least, however, the commission should indeed have invested more in UK information projects.’²⁸

This underestimates the problem of the so-called British tabloid press. *The Daily Telegraph* is a broadsheet, and influences—or reinforces—the beliefs

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²⁴ Worcester et al, Table 24, p. 117.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 121.

²⁷ Welfens, pp. 33–79.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

of a different segment of public opinion from *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. There is a sadly amusing illustration of the gulf between Brussels and the *Daily Mail* in Christopher Patten's *First Confession*.²⁹ Lord Patten became a European Commissioner after leaving British politics. He describes how the head of the Commission, Romano Prodi, an Italian unfamiliar with London's media culture, decided to go and see the editor of the *Daily Mail*, Paul Dacre, to try to convince him of the virtues of Europe. Patten warned him he would be wasting his time and 'Romano returned, chastened, to Brussels, his belief in British commitment to responsible free speech and liberal values considerably dented'.³⁰

Patten was a Conservative pro-European who served in Thatcher's Cabinet and was among those who urged her to resign when challenged by Michael Heseltine, a pro-European ex-minister. The fall of Thatcher was not all about Europe, but her 'increasingly belligerent'³¹ attitude was a major factor, her hostility prompting the resignation of Sir Geoffrey Howe, triggering Heseltine's challenge.

Thatcher was succeeded by John Major, who 'rejected any idea that Europe was heading towards a "superstate"'.³² Major had persuaded Thatcher in her final weeks to take Britain into the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), a forerunner of the euro, which tied currencies to limited ranges of fluctuation. This brief and unhappy experience, when Britain lost £3.3bn³³ in a single day,³⁴ unsuccessfully trying to stop sterling's freefall, is another long-ago factor in the minds of older voters and of veteran Conservative MPs committed to leaving.

The story is told in *Six Days in September*, as stylishly as you would expect from a book co-written by William Keegan, whose column in *The Observer* has been a weekly pleasure for non-believers in Thatcherite orthodoxy from her heyday through to his continuing critique of the May government's handling of negotiations.

Wednesday 16 September [1992] was a day of transformation for Britain and Europe. Just 12 hours of frenetic foreign exchange trading tore apart Britain's economic strategy. John

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29 Christopher Patten, *First Confession, A Sort Of Memoir, European* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 219.

30 Ibid.

31 David Cannadine, *Margaret Thatcher: A Life and Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 103.

32 Keegan et al, p. 86.

33 Ibid., p. 4.

34 Ibid.

Major's Conservative government never fully recovered its authority. As Stephen Wall, one of Major's closest allies, said: "Black Wednesday altered the course of UK politics on Europe, and was fundamentally the end of the Major government."³⁵ Britain's new trajectory of EU semi-detachment culminated 24 years later in the referendum vote to Leave.³⁶

The anger generated by the ERM episode fused with resistance to the Maastricht Treaty, as Major was challenged by a parliamentary revolt led by Tory MPs who today remain prominent in the anti-EU movement, such as Iain Duncan-Smith and John Redwood. Thatcher herself believed Maastricht 'passes colossal powers from parliamentary governments to centralised bureaucracy'.³⁷ She left Britain's centre-right party of government, the Conservatives, permanently divided on Europe, an essential pre-condition for the 2016 referendum. Without a divided Conservative Party, Nigel Farage of the United Kingdom Independence Party could not have emerged as a political force strong enough to push David Cameron into holding the referendum.

Farage's significance in the Leave victory is astutely explained by Goodwin et al.³⁸ Though 'toxic' to many voters, his 'populist appeal was a plus for Leave in other respects [...] [with] his forthright emphasis on the dangers of mass immigration and accompanying argument that Brexit was the only way ordinary people could "take back control" [...]. Farage had recognised the potency of the immigration issue from the outset of the campaign and indeed years earlier.³⁹ In this sense Leave's dual-track organisation enabled its two rival armies to leverage the populist power of the immigration issue while simultaneously allowing miscellaneous middle-class eurosceptics to keep a safe distance from the politically incorrect UKIP chieftain'.

In other words, while Farage and Boris Johnson differed on the issue of immigration, each reached parts of the electorate the other couldn't. 'Leave's bifurcated campaign became an increasingly potent political weapon in the run-up to the balloting.'

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35 Major's government actually lasted nearly five more years, having just won a general election, but its authority and support were badly damaged by Black Wednesday.

36 Keegan et al, p. 86.

37 Ibid.

38 Goodwin et al, p. 32.

39 Matthew Goodwin and Robert Ford, *Revolt on the Right* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014) was a good guide to the voters UKIP was attracting, well before the referendum.

It is a commonplace in political communication that the messengers matter, as well as the messages. Andrew Cooper, the Remain campaign's chief pollster, says that 'it was clear from all our tracking research that Boris was having a big impact. This came through clearly in the focus groups in our (weekly, twice-weekly, then daily) polling, Boris invariably came top on the question of which politician has made the most persuasive impact (Cameron invariably came second)'. Johnson was 'especially important. Although the multiplicity of factors at work means that it is not possible to conclude "No Boris, No Brexit", it is clear that the widely unexpected presence of London's former Mayor at the heart of the Leave campaign was a major asset for the Leave side'.⁴⁰

To the extent that Cameron did not calculate for a politician of Johnson's appeal opposing him, it was an 'accidental Brexit', as Welfens terms it.

The German Chancellor Angela Merkel presciently feared such an accident well before Cameron made his strategic choice to hold a referendum. One of her biographers refers to 'the scenario that in Berlin was always described using an English expression: "accidental exit". Hopes of a referendum might be too high, there could be a backbench revolt, an unexpected result at the next general election [2015], and then a country that was unable to handle the consequences. At which point the situation would be beyond saving.'⁴¹

One accident waiting to happen turned out to be Boris Johnson. Another was a failure of communication between Cameron and Merkel: '[...] Merkel was keen that her British counterpart should get the right message: Cameron should not over-estimate his position, he should not count on her being too accommodating [...]. This short-term failure combined with a longer-term factor, in Merkel's view, according to one account: '[...] in Berlin there is always a note of sympathy in people's voices when they talk about Great Britain and its romantic view of a world that has long since changed.'

British nostalgia is one of the deep-seated reasons for Brexit, in my view: call it the Dunkirk factor, or as Hugo Young described it, 'the mythology of the sceptered isle, the demi-paradise'.⁴²

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40 Goodwin et al, p. 173.

41 Stefan Kornelius, *Angela Merkel: The Chancellor and Her World*, (Richmond [London]: Alma Books, 2014), [Chapter 12: The British Problem, Kindle edition, Loc 3319].

42 Keegan et al, p. 34.

Tony Judt wrote in his epic history of modern Europe, *Postwar*, of the effect of post-imperial nostalgia on both Britain and France: ‘It was not very surprising that history-as-nostalgia was so very pronounced in these two national settings in particular.’ Britain and France had ‘entered the 20th century as proud imperial powers [...]. The confidence and security of global empire had been replaced by uneasy memories and uncertain future prospects. What it meant to be French, or British, had once been very clear, but no longer. The alternative, to become enthusiastically “European”, was far easier in small countries like Belgium or Portugal, or in places—like Italy or Spain—where the recent national past was best left in shadow. But for nations reared within living memory on grandeur and glory, “Europe” would always be an uncomfortable transition; a compromise, not a choice.’⁴³

France has made a different choice to Britain, electing President Emmanuel Macron, with his enthusiasm for a more integrated EU. Compare David Cameron or Theresa May with Emmanuel Macron talking about Europe, and you see in the French President a man profoundly at ease with the Union, in contrast with the deep discomfort of the current British Prime Minister or the unconvincing rhetoric of Cameron: unconvincing on Europe because he was himself unconvinced.

Macron and May are the current reflections of different national cultures and identities and histories. It is no wonder that Britain is leaving when even advocates of EU membership speak with tongue-tied reluctance about the benefits. The contrast between French fluency and English fumbling is more than a matter of personal political style. Mrs May represents in her paralysed thinking the deadlocked English attitude to Europe, split almost equally for and against. This deadlock is the result of failure to think seriously about modern Britain’s role in the real world, preferring misunderstandings about how nations prosper now, and myths about free trade glory a hundred and more years ago

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43 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 769.

at the pinnacle of empire.⁴⁴ As Tony Judt wrote, there is ‘a genuine nostalgia for a fake past’. The insistence of leading Brexiteers that Britain must leave the customs union and return to its free trading heritage leaves out the inconvenient fact that it was not free but colonial trade that made Britain great.

When Britain lost an empire and searched for a role, we found it as one of the leading powers in the union of European nations, far more influential in EU decision-making than British leaders ever dared admit to, in a political-media culture that caricatured Europe as a series of zero-sum squabbles. Britain is now on the way to losing its enviable position as one of the strongest nations in the world’s biggest free trade area, whose democratic values need defending collectively more than ever, without quite realising what we are walking away from. Scotland seems to have understood what Europe means to its nations, and voted decisively for modernity against nostalgia, as did France when Macron defeated Marine Le Pen.

Macron sounds like a leader who has thought seriously about his country’s role in the actual world his generation lives in, for example when he speaks about needing a common European response to migration because the challenge cannot be met by ‘leaving the burden to the few, be they countries of first entry or final host countries, by building the terms for genuine, chosen, organized and concerted solidarity’. Or when he speaks about economic mobility in the digital age: ‘We are no longer living in times in which our economies can develop as if they were closed, as if talented people no longer moved around and as if entrepreneurs were tied to a post. We can regret this, but this is how it is. This digital revolution is being led by talented people and it is by attracting them that we will attract others.’⁴⁵

In his speech on Europe at the Sorbonne last September, the French President set these specific modern challenges in a strategic context that offers the

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44 Maia de la Baume, ‘UK has “huge misunderstanding” over post-Brexit customs: Senior MEP’, *Politico*, 12 February 2018, updated 14 February 2018. ‘Britain has a “huge misunderstanding” about how it will be able to trade with the EU after it leaves the bloc, a leading Brexit expert in the European Parliament said. Danuta Hübner, a member of Parliament’s Brexit Steering Group, said British leaders thought they could leave the EU’s customs union but enjoy an arrangement with Brussels that would produce similar benefits. But, Hübner said in an interview with POLITICO, British politicians did not seem to grasp what a customs union is or how it operates. “There is a huge misunderstanding”, said Hübner, who is an important voice in the Brexit debate as the European Parliament must approve the final withdrawal deal between the U.K. and the EU. “All the comments that we hear from politicians in the U.K. clearly show that there is no understanding between what it means to be in the customs union ...’

45 Emmanuel Macron, ‘Initiative pour l’Europe: Une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique’, speech at the Sorbonne, full text English version, 26 September 2017.

opposite vision to the Brexit mentality: 'We can no longer choose to turn inwards within national borders; this would be a collective disaster. We must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by the illusion of retreat. Only by refusing this lie will we be able to meet the demands of our time, its urgency, its seriousness. [...] [W]e must instead consider how to make a strong Europe, in the world as it is today.'

He might have been speaking about British leadership when he said: 'It is so much easier never to explain where we want to go, where we want to lead our people, and to remain with hidden arguments, because we have simply lost sight of the objective.'

Macron gave a master class in strategic communication when he came to Britain for talks with Theresa May in January 2018. Interviewed on the BBC, his body and verbal language exuded confidence in the case for the EU.⁴⁶ He talked about 'a more protective Europe. [...] Europe is something which will protect you'. The Remain campaign might have made that its theme, talking about membership of the single market as the best protection for the jobs of workers in places that ended up voting to leave; might have highlighted the workplace and social rights protected by EU membership, for the very people who feel excluded from the modern economy; about EU protection of the environment that has cleaned up British beaches and rivers. But even if Remain had had the confidence to take this sort of case to the people, it would have struggled for a hearing because of the decades of reluctance to speak positively about the EU in the face of media hostility. It would have been, in that deadly phrase of Andrew Cooper's, counter-intuitive to what people think they know about Europe, to say that actually if you feel vulnerable in the free market, it is the EU that provides the economic strength and the political values that you are looking for.

46 'French President Emmanuel Macron on Brexit and Trump', *The Andrew Marr Show*, 21 January 2018; *The Huffington Post* commented that 'it was Macron's willingness to engage with Marr, ditch soundbites and speak with passion that led many political observers to reflect on why the UK has to make do with second best'. Graeme Demianyk, 'Emmanuel Macron's Andrew Marr Interview Has People Swooning', *Huffington Post*, 21 January 2018, updated 22 January 2018; Tweets from the political editor of *The Sun* and one of Sky TV's presenters gave the consensus view of the media. Tom Newton Dunn: 'Think what you like about Macron, but by God he answers a straight question. Our obfuscating politicians need to learn how to do that fast.' #Marr 9:45 AM - Jan 21, 2018; Kay Burley: 'Excellent body language from Macron on #marr. Plenty for our politicians to build on. Engaged with the interviewer. Answering the questions.' ✓@KayBurley, 9:33 AM - Jan 21, 2018

France is of course not immune to the kind of self-doubt that fuelled Brexit. ‘A book entitled *Le Suicide Français* became a runaway best seller in 2014 as it proclaimed that “France is dying, France is dead”, killed by a “vast subversive project” driven by globalization, immigration, feminism and the EU Bureaucracy.’⁴⁷ France had a straight choice in its Presidential election of 2017 between this bleak vision, as expressed by Marine Le Pen of the Front National, and a young man standing for national self-confidence. Nostalgia was defeated in France, but won in England (whose votes overwhelmed the rest of the UK in the 2016 referendum).

Nostalgia is an essential ingredient of English nationalism, that sense of destiny, separate from Europe, which has a strong pull on the national imagination. Margaret Thatcher’s pivotal Bruges speech was heavy with this nostalgia: ‘Over the centuries we have fought to prevent Europe from falling under the dominance of a single power. We have fought and we have died for her freedom [...]. Had it not been for that willingness to fight and to die, Europe would have been united long before now—but not in liberty, not in justice [...]. And it was from our island fortress that the liberation of Europe itself was mounted.’

This historical narrative—tinged with longing for past greatness—has lasting appeal well beyond those who see Margaret Thatcher as the most significant British leader since Winston Churchill. If it was not Boris Johnson who single-handedly won the referendum, I would argue that Margaret Thatcher had at least as much influence, posthumously, having set the terms of debate in her last years of power. The ‘superstate’ narrative was never successfully countered, even by Tony Blair during his decade of advocating and playing a constructive British role in Europe. It distilled all the anxieties about national impotence and decline, and it provided the fertile soil in which fears about immigration could grow. The superstate ‘fantasy’ provided not only something to blame, but better, something that could be revolted against.

As Fintan O’Toole says: ‘Since England doesn’t actually have an oppressor, it was necessary to invent one. Decades of demonisation by Rupert Murdoch’s newspapers and by the enormously influential *Daily Mail* made the European Union a natural fit for the job.’⁴⁸

47 Éric Zemmour, *Le Suicide français* (Paris : Albin Michel, 2014) quoted in Jonathan Fenby, *The History of Modern France: From the Revolution to the War on Terror* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2015, pp. 462–84) [Chapter 24: The Weight of History, Kindle edition, loc 7811].

48 O’Toole, ‘Brexit’s Irish Question’.

Ironically, Thatcher called at the end of the Bruges speech for the completion of the single market,⁴⁹ having herself negotiated the Single European Act of 1985 that created it. She herself said she had ‘surrendered no important British interest’ in doing so.⁵⁰

How different might English attitudes be to the European Union if the single market had been portrayed as a great legacy of Margaret Thatcher. All those companies trading across European supply chains have Margaret Thatcher to thank for their freedom to do so. To try that now would feel *‘too counter-intuitive to be true, when set alongside everything else people thought they knew,’* as Andrew Cooper described facts about immigration. This is perhaps the biggest lesson for strategic communication to come out of Brexit, that in our politics, the most powerful force is what people think they know, in the absence of information they never see nor hear.

Brexit is what happens when the seductive simplicities of nostalgia and nationalism triumph over the counter-intuitive realities of modern economies, in a vacuum of political non-information.

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49 The relevant passage from the Bruges speech is: ‘My third guiding principle is the need for Community policies which encourage enterprise. If Europe is to flourish and create the jobs of the future, enterprise is the key. The basic framework is there: the Treaty of Rome itself was intended as a Charter for Economic Liberty. But that is not how it has always been read, still less applied.

‘The lesson of the economic history of Europe in the 70s and 80s is that central planning and detailed control *do not* work and that personal endeavour and initiative *do*. That a State-controlled economy is a recipe for low growth and that free enterprise within a framework of law brings better results. The aim of a Europe open to enterprise is the moving force behind the creation of the Single European Market in 1992. By getting rid of barriers, by making it possible for companies to operate on a European scale, we can best compete with the United States, Japan and other new economic powers emerging in Asia and elsewhere.

And that means action to *free* markets, action to *widen* choice, action to *reduce* government intervention. Our aim should *not* be more and more detailed regulation from the centre: it should be to deregulate and to remove the constraints on trade [...]’. Thatcher, “The Bruges Speech”.

50 In her autobiography, Lady Thatcher wrote: ‘I was pleased with what had been achieved. We were on course for the Single Market by 1992. I had had to make relatively few compromises as regards wording: I had surrendered no important British interest [...]. I still believe it was right to sign the Single European Act because we wanted a Single European Market.’ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperPress, 2012), pp. 555–57.