A Few Random Thoughts on Brexit and Europe

Berlin, 11th July, 2016

N. B. These thoughts reflect the author’s ongoing despair over the outcome of the referendum of June 23rd, and his conviction that everybody should give this some thought and speak his and her mind. They are strictly personal and neither final nor comprehensive, nor necessarily original, but may be shared with anybody ad lib.

I. As the dust caused by the explosion on 23rd June is beginning to settle, we can start picking up the debris to see what may possibly be salvaged from the disaster. It is still much too soon to tell what the final outcome of the referendum will be, which was directed at Westminster, not at Brussels. Probably, Britain will leave the EU, but contrary to what the politicians are presently saying in public, I still believe there is a chance the UK government will find a way never to send the letter required by article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and will thus either formally or tacitly not do what a very slim and obviously badly informed majority voted for. It would be the sensible thing to do. But it will need courage.

II. For the moment, we are reminded of four people in a car going down a one way street, who agree by a majority of three to one to turn around. This, while beautifully democratic, is still stupid. Why, if not for keeping us from making such stupid decisions, do we go through the immensely cumbersome procedure of electing political leaders? How come they dare throw an issue like that back at their principals and lie to them about the facts, when it becomes too sticky for them to sort out, while pocketing a more than handsome reward for acting as our agents?

1 Published on the following web sites:
And also on: German British Forum, Views: http://www.gbf.com/toward-a-europe-of-the-regions-breixits-real-implications/
A Few Random Thoughts on Brexit and Europe; on: D/Part Blog 14 July, 2016: https://dpartblog.wordpress.com/2016/07/14/a-few-random-thoughts-on-brexit-and-europe
What the people want is courageous leaders who lead and don’t follow campaigns with ulterior motives that drum up public opinion.

III. Why did all this come about?

(1) David Cameron’s government showed a horrific lack of leadership. But ...
(2) Fundamentally, the outcome of the referendum is the inevitable result of many decades of refusing to come to terms with the modern world and Britain’s role in it. As close as one may feel to one’s country’s glorious past, there is no way one can get round letting bygones be bygones and looking ahead.
(3) The standards of politics and public service have deteriorated everywhere in Europe. Sleezy party politicians and insensitive civil servants have let the notion of a state fall into disrepute. Checks and balances no longer work. For many, democracy has become an absurd game.
(4) No European politician seems to realize we are in the middle of a fundamental crisis of Western-style democracy. An increasing number of business leaders see China as a valid post-democratic option, affording them more influence.
(5) Strangely, many people are full of Angst and succumb to anyone who promises authority.
(6) In the run-up to the referendum, a bunch of shockingly irresponsible politicians lied to the voters.
(7) Nobody seemed to notice that the Leave camp did not have even the sketchiest of plans what to do in case of victory.
(8) The Remain campaign had all the arguments, but no conviction or mission.

IV. What does this mean for Europe?

(1) The United Kingdom will probably break up. This will be important for Scotland; for Northern Ireland, it will be dramatic. For others, it will set an example.
(2) Europe will miss the pragmatic, experienced, and well-informed voices of Britons in shaping the future of Europe.
(3) Trust in politicians anywhere in Europe has reached an all-time low. Trust leaves on a horse, but arrives on foot.
(4) Europe has lost its prestige in the world. It is no longer the continent that sets the standards, but one that cannot get its act together.
(5) The European Union, for years to come, and to its detriment and chagrin, will have to deal with Brexit rather than getting on with its far more urgent business.

V. What may be the bright side?

(1) Britons are now forced to discuss and finally decide what Britain should look like in this century, rather than continuing in the aftermath of battles won in the 20th.
(2) If Britain does choose to remain, she will have to behave herself.
(3) All over Europe, including the UK, civil society and individual citizens are beginning to think for themselves. Rather than seeing the European Union as
the worst possible solution bar the others, they take pride in this unique venture of shaping their future together.

(4) Within the EU, the balance of power will be reframed. As the treaty stands, it is the 28 national governments that make up the Council who are in the driver’s seat, and while neither the Commision nor the European Parliament should question that, the Council may begin to accept the responsibility and pledge to be loyal to the Union rather than to ist members. Hopefully, palming anything that is uncomfortable off on to the Commission and then blaming it for making unnecessary rules, will slowly come to an end.

VI. What should we think about?

(1) We must take the European project out of the hands of economists, lawyers and regulators. What Europe needs is a vision, not ever more complicated rules and political compromise. There is no need to harmonize more and more details of people’s daily lives. We want a varied and colourful Europe.

(2) We need to take into account that European Civil Society has gained strength and power and is currently gaining momentum. 21st century society will be built on a functioning division of responsibilities and checks and balances system between civil society, the state and the market.

(3) We must shape the notion of a European demos. By definition, this will be ultranational and will entail complex arrangements of mixed loyalties to family and friends, segments of civil society, and multiple governmental structures.

(4) Europe’s intellectual elites must think what a European governmental structure could eventually look like. Europe will not be the United States of Europe built on the theory of the United States of America in the 18th, nor a Union of Sovereign States like the German Confederation in the 19th century. It could well be the United Regions of Europe, which would ease tensions between the smaller and the larger EU member states, or it could be something quite new. We need lots of proposals on the table to discuss. At the moment, we have none.

(5) If the Scots decide to end the Union with England, the EU must offer them as quick and easy a Remain scheme as possible. The same goes for other regions.

(6) Perhaps some of the present EU member states will take longer than others to join the new Europe. We will need to devise a road map.

VII. Germany is now in the uncomfortable position of having to assume a rather solitary leadership role, for which the government, let alone the citizenry is neither well prepared nor well suited. Yet, Germany’s geography and size, the strength of its economy, and, in comparative terms, its political stability all seem to suggest this. We can only hope the German government will continue to act with extreme prudence and caution. In a sense, the way the government handled last year’s refugee crisis has become Germany’s entry ticket to the global village. Germany, for the first time in history, has become an immigrant society – like the rest of Europe.
VIII. There is no alternative but to get on with building the Common House of Europe. This will have to be achieved by the citizens bottom-up, and with the help of committed and honest leaders. We have nothing else to offer to our children and grandchildren. And what is most important: It will be a great place to live in!

The author is half-German and half-English, and lives in Berlin. He is a political scientist and historian by training and has spent most of his many years of professional life as a practitioner, consultant, and academic in, with, and about Civil Society and Philanthropy. He published ‘No Brexit – Why Britain Belongs in the European Union’ in 2015 (http://www.maecenata.eu/images/documents/mst/EBU/2015_EBU_13.pdf)