
LESSONS FOR BREXIT FROM THE INVASION OF IRAQ

04.08.2017

The Economist, Aug 3rd 2017

The parallels between Brexiteers and the American neocons who pushed for the Iraq war

ONE of the striking things about the Brexiteers is how keen they are on history. Many studied it at university, usually Oxford: Bill Cash, John Redwood and Chris Grayling from the older generation and Daniel Hannan, Dominic Cummings and Douglas Carswell from the younger. They rest their argument for Brexit as much on historical exceptionalism as on economic logic. Britain is simply too different from continental European powers, with their Napoleonic codes and Verfassungspatriotismus, to fit in. And they relish historical parallels: between Brexit and Henry VIII's break with Rome; between the Brexiteers and the anti-Corn Law activists who destroyed 19th-century England's equivalent of the Common Agricultural Policy; and between the legislation that will translate European law into British law and the 1832 Great Reform Act. Nigel Farage, the least cerebral of the Brexiteers, has encouraged young Britons to see Dunkirk, a new film, to stiffen their spines for the struggle ahead.

Bagehot would like to point to a more recent historical analogy: between the Brexiteers and the American neoconservatives who persuaded George W. Bush to invade Iraq. The comparison might sound provocative □□ bloody war and a peaceful referendum differ hugely. Nevertheless, striking parallels exist between the way that the neoconservatives and the Brexiteers think about the world. Indeed, there is even an overlap in personnel. Michael Gove wrote an essay on the very British roots of neoconservatism and its lessons for British conservatives, and Liam Fox is a familiar figure in Washington's neocon circles.

The neoconservatives were a group of maverick intellectuals who exercised influence out of all proportion to their numbers. Ditto the Brexiteers. The neocons worked their magic by focusing on a single aim (regime change in the Middle East, starting with Iraq) and pursuing it with tireless energy. Ditto again. The Brexiteers are in some ways more remarkable than the neocons, who had only to outmanoeuvre the American defence-and-intelligence establishment, which preferred containment to regime change. The Brexiteers had to outmanoeuvre their own side. The young ones understood that Brexit was doomed so long as it was associated with ageing monomaniacs like Bill Cash, and flame-flowing populists like Nigel Farage. They were as brilliantly ruthless in sidelining their soulmates as they were in outmanoeuvring their opponents, meeting in Tate Britain because they knew that nobody from the Westminster village would ever go there.

All very impressive. But the parallels also have a darker hue. The neoconservatives sold the Iraq war on the basis of dodgy claims about weapons of mass destruction and direct links between al-

Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. The Brexiteers sold Brexit on the basis of dodgy claims about giving our NHS the £350m the EU takes every week. The neoconservatives insisted that regime change in Iraq would be easy [] would set off a chain reaction across the Middle East. Kenneth Adelman called it a cakewalk. Kanan Makiya, a leader of the Iraqi National Congress, predicted that American troops would be greeted with sweets and flowers. Brexiteers have made strikingly similar claims about an easy divorce leading to a chain reaction across Europe. Boris Johnson justified his belief that Britain could leave the EU while preserving all the benefits of membership on the grounds that his policy on cake is pro having it and pro eating it.

In both cases overconfidence led to a lamentable lack of planning. The Americans were so certain that Iraqis wanted regime change that they did not plan for prolonged resistance or social breakdown (John Bolton suggested that, having deposed Saddam, the Americans could give the Iraqis a copy of the Federalist Papers and scarper). The Brexiteers are so sure that Britains destiny lies outside the EU that they have not planned for the sheer difficulty of undoing 45 years of legislation. Charles Moore argued in the Spectator during the Brexit campaign that it is crucial to the leave cause that it resist the temptation to set out a plan. One of the best books on the Iraq war is entitled Fiasco. The title could well suit an account of Britains Brexit negotiations.

Philip Hammond, Britains chancellor, is doing his best to tame Brexit, much as Colin Powell tried to tame the Iraq war. He is urging a long transition of two or three years after Britain leaves the EU during which trading relations will remain much as they are and Britain will continue to pay into the European budget much as it does now. He has ruled out adopting the Singapore option of radically reducing taxes and regulations. He has also argued that literally nobody wants to see a dramatic fall in migration immediately after Brexit. Prominent Labour figures, such as Sadiq Khan, Londons mayor, also want continuity, arguing that Britain should remain a member of the single market.

Look back in anger

Perhaps these moderates have hit on a formula that will allow Britain to disentangle itself painlessly from Europe. But William Hague, a former Tory leader, is probably closer to the truth when he worries that Brexit may become the occasion of the greatest economic, diplomatic and constitutional muddle in the modern history of the UK. Both the main parties are split over crucial questions such as membership of the single market. When Parliament returns, the government faces weeks of angry debates and nail-biting votes over the Great Repeal Bill. In the longer term it will probably face a rebellion by Conservative ultras who would rather see their party destroyed than Brexit diluted.

The real problem with the Brexiteers is that they dont spend enough time studying history. Since the mid-17th century the British have had a marked suspicion of radical change. They prefer their revolutions to be glorious [] is directed from above and dedicated to gradual change. And they insist that the popular opinion should be qualified and diluted by constitutional constraints. Leaps in the dark are supposed to be for foreigners.

This article appeared in the Britain section of the print edition under the headline "A history lesson"