

BOUGAINVILLE TO BREXIT: Peacebuilding help with referendum pains

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From Bougainville to Brexit

A few years ago, I led a very consultative '*peace, security and development*' assessment in Bougainville. Between 1988 and 1998, part of the population of this island fought a war against Papua New Guinea (PNG), a war that also turned internal, and left it with severe divisions after the peace agreement. The subsequent peace agreement provided for a referendum in Bougainville that includes the option of independence. It is now scheduled for June 2019. Two major concerns emerged from our consultations: First, most Bougainvilleans did not know that the results of the referendum still would have to be ratified by the National Parliament of PNG. Second, no one seemed to be considering different referendum outcome scenarios and thinking, in particular, about how to handle one in which, unlike the independence referenda held in 1999 in Timor Leste and in 2011 in South Sudan, there would only be a small majority for one option or another. That indeed would leave the island population very divided, and vulnerable to new violence. (I made the same point recently to members of the provisional government of the Western Sahara/Polisario Front).

Obviously, the possible consequences of only a small majority voting for one option or another, was also not anticipated in the UK's EU membership referendum of 2016. For major 'constitutional' changes and staying or leaving the European Union is of that order, constitutional democracies tend to set a higher marker than 'simple majority'. You would have expected a minimum requirement of, possibly 60%, to ensure there is enough societal support for such momentous change.

As it is, for the past 2.5 years, we have been living and observing the metastasis of a referendum, originally meant to resolve long-standing tensions within the Conservative Party, to have caused deep societal divisions, tensions also in the Labour Party and, in recent weeks, even a questioning of the political system in the UK. The latter results from the blatant political party jockeying of the Tories,

Labour and the DUP, and in particular manifests itself in the debate about a 'second referendum'. Democrats everywhere would do well to pay attention, because there are lessons here valid way beyond the UK. The UK would also do well to get some ideas from peacebuilding approaches to referendum pains elsewhere.

People participation and referenda

When in a democratic politics the political class is stuck, general elections tend to follow. That is a way of consulting the citizens again. In the UK, party interests currently work against that option: The Conservatives and DUP don't want to lose power. Also in the Labour Party, tactical calculations in the party interest are also at work: Labour is officially committed to Brexit. There is strong support among its membership for a second referendum, but also strong opposition (or hesitation) as Labour wants to win new seats in constituencies that voted 'leave'. Add to that time pressure and uncertainty, not to say suspicion, in sections of the British public, about what policies Corbyn would pursue as Prime Minister (he is known not be a fan of the EU, as its rules constrain policy options about the role of government in stimulating national economies, rules the current Italian government has also chosen to break), and it obvious why there is little appetite for a general election. A second referendum then?

There are good arguments in favour:

- Voters now have a much clearer idea of the complexities of divorcing from the EU and establishing a new relationship; they can make better informed choices;
- Voters should also be able to more critically assess what politicians of different stripes and colours tell them about the benefits of staying or leaving and assess whether or where they are being misled. Populations, like individuals, can change their mind. In Switzerland, with its unique political tradition of putting issues to referendum, it suffices to gather 100.000 valid signatures to a compel a referendum. The same issue can be brought back even if it has been rejected once. The Swiss have repeatedly chosen not to join the EU. Admittedly, the Swiss generally are behaving as mature citizens, that take into account collective interest and longer-term perspectives, not just their short-term individual benefit;
- Teresa May's government is only surviving because of contingent factors – the Conservatives and DUP don't want a general election, which would also add to the political chaos, and

parliament is deeply divided over what sort of Brexit could get enough consensus support. In addition, MPs are torn between what their constituents voted for, their personal views and their party (or factional) position.

- One of the reasons why, reportedly, a number of people voted 'leave', is their alienation from a political class in London, perceived as living in a bubble and not caring about the social and economic wellbeing of parts of the nation. The spectacle of the British political class in recent months cannot have improved that perception. That too should be an argument for going back to citizens.

There are also arguments against a second referendum:

- It would represent a shift to a citizen or people's democracy, undermining the institution of parliamentary majority. That is a silly argument: parliamentarians in any case are supposed to express the will of their constituents, and with that argument there shouldn't have been a first referendum either. Questions can also be asked about the role of the Brexit-supporting DUP from Northern Island, where a majority clearly voted 'remain'.
- It shows an unacceptable arrogance on the part of 'remainers', who seem to believe that 'leave' voters were 'misinformed' and 'misled'. It would further fuel resentment and anger among erstwhile 'leave voters', deepening divisions in society even more. That is a valid argument. But presumably the questions in a second referendum would not be a simple replica of the first, but ask people to make choices about more options ('Canada', 'Norway' style etc.)
- It's not necessarily a way out: If there is a second referendum, with an equally narrow majority now to 'remain', then what? Parliament could end up remaining equally divided. And even if there were a larger majority to 'remain', then why not -in a few years- a third referendum, pushed by those who wanted to leave?

So how to overcome this political deadlock, in the political class and the citizenry, to enable a choice that a good majority of people may not be totally happy with, but at least can live with?

One interesting move, belatedly, was the suggestion to test what level of support there may be in Parliament, for other options than Theresa May's rejected deal and her fairly identical 'Plan B'. The suggestion may stumble over internal and inter-party politics. However, in my view, there is no way

that the British citizenry can be left further as frustrated bystanders. Too much has happened in the past 2.5 years, in terms of new information, new debates, and evolving perceptions of and trust in politicians and political parties, that must be brought out in a larger, public debate, and especially in better quality 'dialogue'.

Connecting citizens and political decision-makers

There are some interesting experiences from international peacebuilding, that are relevant here:

a. *Sustained dialogue circles*: 'Debate' needs to be complemented at least with facilitated dialogues. 'Debates' are mostly taken as opportunities to disseminate the positions of participants who are not really interested in listening to alternative views, and generally remain closed to influence. Participants to a 'dialogue' don't come with the prospect they will change their mind, but they have committed to listen, attentively and with respect. 'Dialogue' is a better-quality conversation that allows people to voice and possibly retain different opinions, without creating deeper antagonisms between them. To achieve its positive impact on the quality of relationship among people with different views, a one-off dialogue session is not enough. Dialogue, unlike debate, also enables the conversation to move from 'positions' to underlying 'interests' and 'needs', a classical move in mediation. Seeking to hear and understand the underlying 'interests' and 'needs' that make someone opt for 'leave' or 'remain' makes for a far more interesting conversation than a shouting match between two camps entrenched in their positions. My hypothesis is that not all the underlying grievances derive from policies made in Brussels. Some seem more the result of UK national policy choices and losing out in the structural trend of globalisation. The interests and needs that underpinned the 'leave' vote, have not received the attention they deserve. Hence, it has rightly been pointed out that if, for some reason, Brexit doesn't happen, it would be a fatal mistake to then ignore what led so many to vote for 'leave' in the first place.

b. *Deliberative polling*: This is a form of polling that incorporates the principles of deliberative democracy. Professor James S. Fishkin of Stanford University first articulated the approach in 1988. The Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University describes the process as follows: "A random, representative sample is first polled on the targeted issues. After this baseline poll, members of the sample are invited to gather at a single place for a weekend in order to discuss the issues. Carefully balanced briefing materials are sent to the participants and are also made publicly

available. The participants engage in dialogue with competing experts and political leaders based on questions they develop in small group discussions with trained moderators. Parts of the weekend events are broadcast on television, either live or in taped and edited form. After the deliberations, the sample is again asked the original questions. The resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions the public would reach, if people had opportunity to become more informed and more engaged by the issues." [i](#) A deliberate polling process has been used in many countries, including - yes- China, to make important public choices. Taking into account my earlier comments, I would suggest that the facilitators of a deliberative polling gathering, create an atmosphere that encourages 'dialogue' so that conversations don't remain stuck in adversarial debate.

c. *Participatory polling*: This is another mechanism to reduce the gap between citizens/stakeholders and those taking decisions over big public policy choices. There are different variations, depending on whether and when public dialogue is connected to the polling. A first principle is that the polling questions are shaped and agreed by the different groups that need to make hard decisions, and not by some polling institute, newspaper, academic group etc. The questions need to reflect the real preoccupations that the decision-makers are struggling with. Participatory polling can test the public mood about difficult issues, but subsequently also be used to test public reaction to more detailed policies and proposals that are seriously considered, but not yet decided. This is important as political leaders look over their shoulder, trying to gauge what their followers and supporters are ready for and what not? Between 1996 and 2003, nine 'peace polls' were conducted in Northern Ireland, around the difficult issues the political leaders were struggling with. [.iii](#) Generally, they turned out to be an enabling mechanism as they indicated to political decision-makers how much public support there was, and how broad. In divided Cyprus, the Annan Peace Plan fell apart in the 2004 referendum that sought public endorsement for it. On both sides, voter turnout was very high, but while 65% of Turkish Cypriots accepted it, 76% of Greek Cypriots rejected it. This put the whole peace process on hold for quite some time and left subsequent negotiators uncertain what to do. Ten years later, with a new process gaining some momentum, a bi-communal group of Cypriots evolved the participatory polling approach. They would work with the decision-makers but also thematic experts on difficult issues (e.g. what to do with land and property originally from Greek Cypriots but now on the Turkish Cypriot side, and vice versa).

This enabled a polling of public opinion on very detailed aspects of a complex issue. Polling results can feed into the negotiations but also into public dialogue circles, creating an additional, and more impartial, process of interaction between citizens and the political class.

Such form of participatory polling seems particularly relevant for the UK, given the combination of difficult issues (migration, economically deprived zones, discontent with European Court of Justice decisions etc.) that are all at play in the Brexit question. Such approach would allow, for example, to test public support for different types of immigration policies, or a sophisticated immigration policy with different components. Well designed and managed, this approach would enable more constructive dialogue among citizens, and between citizens and their political representatives, than a second referendum. Particularly if the latter again sets the bar at simple majority and offers only two options.

This should have been initiated two years ago. It is unlikely to be seriously considered now, on the argument that *'the clock is ticking'*. And many British citizens by now are fed up with an issue that has overtaken all other priorities and only generated huge amounts of negative energy. Yet the strategic error of not pursuing negotiations in a manner that also regularly involved citizen participation and tested what could get broad support and what not, will have a fall out well after whatever decisions is ultimately taken. It is never too late to start participatory policy making.

That also applies to the other EU member states and -societies. It would be a major mistake to just watch the drama series that Brexit has become, as if it was a pure UK story that has no relevance elsewhere. Comparable discontents, with globalisation, impacts of the digital revolution, alienation from the mainstream political parties, austerity politics etc. are alive and well among the other EU citizens. Societal divisions elsewhere are deepening. We must draw lessons from the UK struggles, and adopt more sophisticated approaches. So too can Bougainville.

Koenraad Van Brabant – Concerned citizen, Global Mentoring Initiative

[i] <https://cdd.stanford.edu/what-is-deliberative-polling/>

[ii] <http://www.peacepolls.org/cgi-bin/generic?instanceID=10>

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