

Brexit: Divorce or Reconciliation?

That was quite a shock last Friday! I went to bed on the news that the polls were showing a 4% margin in favour of remain and when I opened the computer in the morning to see the result my first reaction was that it was a hoax! Someone had hacked into the Guardian and changed the headlines.

Then reality sank in and much of the morning was taken up exchanging news / messages with friends and children on what had happened. The joke that I had made the night before about "how I had voted Brexit to get rid of these difficult Brits" was suddenly not so funny as a few friends commented – although how they could think I have any political opinion in common with Farage and Johnson I found a bit disturbing.

So now we face the outcome; and what a strange situation it is. The adolescents have shown that they can act independently but now plead the parents to let them stay at home after all. But the house is changing hands and no one knows what to do. The lies and dishonesty of the Brexit campaign are coming home to roost. Already claims to use money saved for the NHS are being denied and that in fact immigration will not change much post Brexit. Many of the leavers would like to have another go because, maybe it is better inside the EU than outside, alone in a new and strange world. "We only voted leave because we were sure remain would win".

What a mess. The official opposition is in complete disarray with a leader who refused to side with Cameron on a Remain platform even if he whispered "stay" to his party supporters. But then many of them did not hear and those that did heard and were seduced by the louder cries of "leave". With a possible general election to come Labour needs to get a new, charismatic and most importantly forward-looking leader quickly.

And the bottom line is that to leave, Britain must trigger article 50, but maybe no one wishes to do so? Cameron has said it is up to his successor. It will take some months to decide the succession and what a poisoned chalice it is. Whoever is responsible for the negotiation has a thankless task. Not much power and anger on each side that divorce proceedings have been started. Each side fighting over the assets of a political union but with no court to arbitrate the dispute.

So could it be possible the UK will not leave after all? Are there statesmen on each side capable of looking beyond the wreckage of last Thursday? Angela Merkel may have seen it as she has said there is no hurry. On the British side there is no relief in sight; but it is perhaps too soon after the betrayal of the governing party led by Cameron. New leadership is being sought. Could Boris now be the one to change sides again; because Boris likes to be loved and at the moment there is only hate for him. Once (if) he has entered number 10 could he find that maybe it would be better to stay in the EU? He certainly thought, early in the campaign, that a leave vote could lead to renegotiation? He has changed sides once, why not a second time; he is an intelligent man.

It is ironic that the vote which complained of a lack of democracy in Europe now needs a more democratic process to satisfy its fears of losing control. Because Europe does need to reform; Germany needs a UK ally to balance the views of southern Europe, Germany does not wish to be the sole dominating force and, in the next few years, France, Italy and Spain will all have big problems to solve within their own economies and with their own electorates.

So could it just be possible that as the dust settles, a new Europe emerges. Already, over 3 million voters in the UK have asked their leaders to try. The key is for all the Member States to start to acknowledge to their own people that it is not all "us" when it is a success and "Brussels" when it is a failure. They need to recognise that some try to go too fast and that a sounder political base will be needed. It will be extremely difficult and require courage and supreme diplomacy on each side. But divorces are messy affairs and rarely are all parties satisfied; children share the pain and reconciliation can be rewarding as well. After 43 years, maybe it is still worth a second go.

I'll try to reflect on consequences for the EO services sector in a (near) future post.