

Even the Murdoch press is now waking up to the truth: Brexit was an act of self-harm

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When the most anti-EU newspapers are pointing to the policy's inevitable failures, it's time our government admitted the truth.



'Brexit has had dire consequences for the economy.' Lorries queue at the entrance of the Port of Dover, February 2022.

My love of gardening is grounded in the thrill of renewal: the first snowdrop bulb, the first songbird to break the silence, that shaft of warmth in early March. This week, as a veteran party member and supporter of every Conservative leader from Churchill to Cameron, I have detected something similar: the renewal of my party's European legacy.

The disastrous consequences of Brexit for living standards, for our economic wellbeing and for Britain's reputation abroad, have so far been obscured by Covid, the war in Ukraine and the headline-grabbing story of our prime

minister's lack of truthfulness and integrity. But this week, the British press perhaps unintentionally revealed the real world that is emerging as a result of Brexit.

While readers of the Guardian have been kept closely informed about the continuing tragedy of Brexit, it's only now that other parts of the British press have begun to consider the truth of its legacy. The economies of three of the regions that voted most heavily for Brexit were "smaller at the end of last year ... than at the time of the vote", wrote David Smith in the business section of this week's Sunday Times. Despite a weak pound making Britain's goods cheap for foreign buyers, "exporters are ... struggling", Jim Armitage wrote in the same paper. "First-quarter figures last week showed exports of food and drink to the EU were down 17%, or £614m, on pre-Covid levels. Exports to non-European countries increased by 10.7%, or £223m, but not enough to offset the European decline."

Brexit was meant to be a "new beginning for the Tory party," Jeremy Warner wrote this week in the Daily Telegraph, "but by making trade with Europe more difficult and costly it has so far only added to the country's travails". In its coverage of recent OECD warnings, the Daily Mail reported that the UK economy "is set to flatline next year – performing worse than every other G20 country except for sanctions-crippled Russia". Most of these countries have also felt the consequences of the war in Ukraine and the Covid epidemic – but not, of course, Brexit.

It goes on. Earlier this week, the Times reported the vice-chancellor of Cambridge University's warnings that a failure to agree terms to remain part of the EU's largest science funding scheme is "already harming researchers". On the same day, the paper published an opinion piece by Iain Martin, a prominent Brexiteer, who wrote: "Painful as it is, we need to talk about Brexit". In the same paper was a story about Brexit immigration rules being to blame for "airport chaos", and an opinion piece by Simon Nixon, who warned that "the outlook for the UK is deteriorating".

Not all those who voted to remain agreed with me that the campaign to re-join the EU needed to begin the day after the referendum. But in my view, democracy is a vehicle of choice. Successive governments reverse each other's

mistakes. The bigger the mistake, the more urgent the need to reverse. It may take time. Brexit took 43 years. Initially, that process began slowly. It picked up pace and virulence with the acquisition of major newspapers by Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black, and with the replacement of David English, a staunch European, with Paul Dacre at the Daily Mail. Over time, the public were fed a diet of deception, culminating in the lies of the Brexit campaign itself.

Here we come to the core of the matter. Brexit carried clear promises. No border between Northern Ireland and the Republic; new trade deals to replace the single market; a golden future with rising living standards. But a million Europeans have left our country, and Brexit has had dire consequences for the health service, social services and the economy.

Perhaps worst of all is the imminent publication by the government of laws to break its word over the Northern Ireland protocol. Trust is a characteristic of infinite value. It is the rock on which democracy stands. This government regards it as an optional extra to be used when convenient, and disregarded when not. You hear this on every doorstep, read about it in every opinion poll. I overheard two ladies talking about the prime minister: "I wouldn't want him to marry my daughter. I wouldn't want him to rent my house, I wouldn't want him to manage my money." Brexit is at the heart of the deception that the British people are feeling so keenly. That is why the issue will not and should not go away.

I have always been sceptical of the approach to politics where so-called experts in opinion manipulation send out ministers like parrots to tell us what they would like us to believe. "Need to move on. Draw lines in the sand, squawk. Get on with the job, squawk ... squawk".

This issue of trust is not going away. Everyone knows that the prime minister effectively lost the vote of confidence. More than 40% of his colleagues openly voted against him. Significantly more will have voted for him not out of any confidence but for a range of reasons. When I stood against Margaret Thatcher, her majority evaporated within days when the real judgment of her colleagues was about to be tested for the second time.

Yet as we have seen, and in some cases almost despite themselves, even the most Europhobic parts of our press are beginning to shine a light on the

inevitable failures of Brexit and – perhaps inadvertently – to fertilise the green shoots of a return to truth-telling in politics, to British values, and to economic common sense.

I say to all those who have supported the European vision of prime ministers from Churchill through to Cameron: now is the time to restore this vision of our country as a major European partner in one of the world's most powerful and influential organisations. We owe that to generations that are yet to come.

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