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Referendums / Referenda: odi et amo - by Catriona M. Munro, TA Editor in Chief



Referendums. Favoured by despots and autocrats as a populist tool to manipulate their citizens into reflex reactions for their own nefarious purposes, or a splendid affirmation of pure, fair, direct democracy that reinforce the people's role in their country's politics?

Clement Attlee, the first Socialist postwar Prime Minister of the UK, described referendums as, "so alien to all our traditions...which have only too often been used as an instrument of Nazism and Fascism."

Well, he would, wouldn't he? He observed with despair the machinations of Hitler in 1933, when he decreed that his two electoral victories authorised his government to hold regular plebiscites on national issues and to affirm laws already passed by his cabinet. Thereby able to declare continuing popular support for his murderous Nazi campaign and principles.

Napoleon's previous form would also have loomed large in the minds of Attlee and his contemporaries. His enthusiasm for referendums suited his view that government is for the people, but most definitely not by the people.

His 1800 referendum to ratify his constitution for France was declared by his minister of the Interior - who was conveniently his brother - to have won the approval of 99.9% of the turnout (it was under 54%). Academics have since claimed that the figures were falsified, and that a mere 1,550 million Frenchmen had voted "yes".

It is unsurprising for anyone who has visited Switzerland for a significant period of time to learn that the Swiss were the first to hold the first recorded referendum, in the modern sense of the term, in 1828, and they have held a breathtaking 321 since.

I was a student at Geneva University in 1984-85, and it was common, as it is now, to see a series of identically sized hoardings advertising the views of the various democratic factions in super federalised,

cantonised Switzerland.

With classic Swiss efficiency the hoardings were removed immediately after the vote and the roads cleared and cleaned impeccably, only for another set of hoardings on a completely different issue to appear a month, week, or sometimes a day later. It must be exhausting for the polling officials.

Device of dictators and demagogues (Margaret Thatcher)

Margaret Thatcher, the first British female head of the Conservative opposition, then 3-term prime minister and a political polar opposite of Attlee's, echoed his words in 1975, describing a proposed referendum (on the UK leaving the European Community or Common Market) as a "device of dictators and demagogues".

The then Socialist prime minister, Harold Wilson, abandoned his previous comment that referendums were "not the way we do business", sneering that a referendum would likely result in a popular vote to abolish income tax.

He held a referendum on whether the UK should remain or leave. The UK voted to remain, and the issue was apparently put to bed. But it suffered from severe, decades-long insomnia and ultimately caused a dramatic schism in the UK parliament and in the population.

The UK's political classes generally followed the spirit of Attlee and Thatcher with a deep seated distrust of referendums, with only one memorable vote in 1997 (applicable only to Scotland, when we were, for the second time, invited to vote for whether we wanted a Scottish parliament with certain political powers.

Unlike an earlier Scottish referendum on the same issue in 1979, which resulted in a slim majority in favour of a Scottish parliament, an added caveat from the British government demanded a vote in favour from 40% of the

Scottish electorate, which did not materialise. This rankled among Scottish nationalists and liberals alike for decades, until Tony Blair conceded in 1997 that another referendum was due.

After the 1997 referendum Scotland finally looked and felt like a modern component part of the G-7+1 (Russia) then. That was a referendum I approved of

I was in favour of the parliament. Whenever I travelled from London to visit my parents in northern Scotland I would take the bus, as air fares in the 1980's were too much for my paltry civil servant salary. This meant a sleepless night wending my way up a significant swathe of the UK, stopping in town and city centres in places I had only heard of.

It was magnificent to spend hours circumnavigating and entering Birmingham and its Spaghetti Junction, to see a busy, modern, if slightly architecturally brutalist city centre, apparently thriving despite the reports of poverty and hardship under Mrs Thatcher's hard line economic squeeze.

Even reaching the smaller, less successful cities in the north of England were quite impressive.

I saw Newcastle with its spectacular modern bridges and shipbuilding heritage. This was despite reports of extensive social and economic problems: unemployment and the painful consequences of the Thatcher de-industrialisation policy based largely in the north of the country, in favour of deregulation of financial services, based in London in the south.

Crawling over the border to Scotland was a salutary lesson. Navigating second rate roads through the tiny, bleak border towns to Edinburgh, a gothic horror city of grand spires, winding cobbled streets and a castle, all overseen by Calton Hill, a curious cut-price acropolis with its strange follies, all caked in centuries of filth and lack of municipal

attention. I could sense that the city rejoiced in a two-fingered defiance.

The austerity of the intervening towns towards the north was shocking. Stirling, Dundee and ultimately Inverness were terrifying in their manifest poverty and deprivation.

But taking that same bus a few years about a year after the 1997 referendum enabled the Scottish parliament came into being, following a shaky start and a shameful overspend of its budget, Scotland finally looked and felt like a modern component part of the G-7+1 (Russia) then. That was a referendum I approved of.

The turn of the 21st century suddenly unlocked a Pandora's Box of referendums in the UK

The turn of the 21st century suddenly unlocked a Pandora's Box of referendums in the UK. Perhaps the British were secretly irritated that we had such little "direct democracy", or did we, "faute de mieux", finally become less deferential and more politicised?

A now largely forgotten and effectively damp squib UK referendum was held in 2011 by the recently elected Conservative prime minister, David Cameron who had failed to secure a majority government and was squeezed into a Faustian pact with his only substantial ally in Westminster, the Liberal Democrats.

Its leader, at that point a charismatic and popular politician, Nick Clegg, demanded a referendum on AV, (Alternative Vote, better known as Proportional Representation).

This was an attempt to change the British electoral system from a First Past the Post system (all elected members are elected to parliament by winning a simple majority in their constituencies, disregarding all votes against them and their party).

This means that the ruling government is elected by having simply won more constituencies than their opponents overall,

and results in what objectors see as unfairly elected governments, occasionally with a landslide majority, which does not reflect the will of the people, unlike in most of our Western European partners.

The campaign failed to grip the nation; Nick Clegg lost the referendum, his charisma, popularity and ultimately his seat. He left British politics and now earns what I assume is a better salary, having joined Facebook as an executive, and now Global President of Meta. Bad referendum.

I tend to reject and abhor nationalism and populism, but is it different if it concerns your own country?

In 2014, Cameron conceded that following the establishment of the Scottish parliament and the decisive, lasting elected governments of the Scottish National Party (SNP) had earned the right to exercise their principal demand; full blown Scottish independence.

The SNP's original purpose as a political party was to leave the UK, claim all its rights to run its own country, remain in the EU and forge its own path in the modern world.

This was a dilemma for me. I tend to reject and abhor nationalism and populism, but is it different if it concerns your own country?

I watched as the people of Montenegro and East Timor delivered resounding yes votes in their own referendums on independence. Why was Scotland so poor compared to its larger and more significant neighbour, England? Were we being ripped off?

Liechtenstein, Malta and Monaco manage to exist through their own crafty policies, but so do Denmark, Sweden and Finland (similar population size, similar climate concerns, similar liberal-left leaning tendency of our populations).

The debate raged throughout the old cities, the shires and through the glens. It became a

source of dispute, family fall outs, public and private arguments which continue to this day.

Of course I want Scotland to be independent, but not now! It's not the right time

I remember a family friend stating that he felt morally obliged to spoil his ballot paper and thus waste his vote, for "linguistic and philosophical reasons" on the grounds that the question, "Do you want Scotland to be an independent country?" was unfair and badly worded.

"Of course I want Scotland to be independent, but not now! It's not the right time" was his battle cry.

I wondered when it would actually be the right time: when we discovered enormous hitherto undetected oil deposits in indisputably Scottish waters, perhaps?

Or an impoverished crofter foraging for seaweed on the north coast might find a miraculous glowing stone on the beach which proved to be a new element which superseded every part of the periodic table and as a marvellous panacea for all ills, made Scotland the wealthiest country in the world? A purely economic issue? The latter scenario actually suits our Scottish romantic and arguably disingenuous view of our own blood-steeped, warrior history.

The nationalist government was resoundingly returned to power in the 2016 British General Election, which might have prompted them to think again about the Scottish view of independence

There were no conditions on victory this time, and the Scots voted by 55% of turnout to remain in the Union. The outcome still has reverberations, but the verdict was generally accepted, with or without heavy hearts.

Immediate reactions were more likely to consist of a few drunken punch ups in bars or homes, rather than a trigger for a brutal meltdown into ethnic cleansing.

Despite losing the referendum, the nationalist government was resoundingly returned to power in the 2016 British General Election, which might have prompted them to think again about the Scottish view of independence versus good government, and consequently kick the independence issue into the long grass for a couple of generations.

But they didn't. They carried on demanding and wasting time entering into legal shenanigans to try to secure yet another referendum.

Two weeks ago, the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, largely popular and respected in Scotland but loathed, feared and ridiculed in England, resigned dramatically for her own, strangely uncommunicated reasons, but widely suspected due to her having failed to secure her dream of independence.

The referendum was organised properly, most of the legal and political conventionalities were observed and there were no reports of murderous rampages or any frightening social schisms as a result. So in my view, that was also a good referendum, and a lesson from genuine history perhaps?

The referendum mania failed to subside in the UK

The referendum mania failed to subside in the UK. In Westminster, the re-elected Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, boldly set out to emasculate his *bête noir*, the Eurosceptics. This vocal, militant faction of his party who strongly advocated Britain's withdrawal from the EU, had been a thorn in the side of most Conservative leaders for decades.

Cameron's alleged dismissal of them as "swivel-headed loons" was seized on by the leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party

(UKIP) led by Nigel Farage, a furious opponent of the EU, who succeeded in becoming an MEP, where he and his cohorts waged a campaign of mayhem and obstruction in Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg, but only one ever won a seat in the UK parliament, and it wasn't Farage (yes, the Proportional Representation versus the First Past the Post quandary again).

Farage sent a rallying call to the Eurosceptic Conservatives and challenged them to step up their campaign.

He demanded that they take their views from the hallowed halls of the House of Commons and to the people - enlighten the British public of the horrors of unelected, detrimentally bureaucratic Brussels.

Buoyed by electoral success, and viewing his Eurosceptic wing and UKIP as a pesky bacterium that needed eradication, Cameron boldly announced a referendum in the UK, which had been part of his electoral manifesto anyway, on whether to remain in or leave the EU.

The political quality of the run-up to the referendum was frankly lamentable

The campaign - I can't dignify it with the word "debate" - was bad-tempered and highly divisive. The Leave campaign was trammelled with inflammatory racism against immigrants and breathtaking lies about how much the EU cost us.

Britain needed a return to its glorious past of Splendid Isolation were we to withdraw and forge spectacular WTO trade deals with anyone outside the robbers and autocrats of the Single Market

The Remain side was effectively a non-campaign due to the hubris and patronising attitudes of long-serving Conservative politicians and experts, confident that the generally pro-status quo British would neither understand nor care about the technicalities

of Qualified Majority Voting, Sunset Clauses and the Luxembourg Compromise that represented how the EU strove to democratise its institutions.

Nobody stated publicly and clearly that the European Court of Human Rights was an independent Court and nothing to do with the European Union, and it was ruthlessly pilloried by the Leave campaign as an EU-inspired apologist for unwanted, economically draining, immigrants. The political quality of the run-up to the referendum was frankly lamentable.

“Brexit” fallout continues in the UK, fuelled by recrimination and defensive denial in politics and families

On the morning of 24 June 2016, we awoke to find we had voted to leave the EU by a margin of under 2%. David Cameron’s political career ended, he resigned, Remainers reeled in shock; Leavers danced in jubilation and all hell was unleashed.

“Brexit” fallout continues in the UK, fuelled by recrimination and defensive denial in politics and families. All the current woes of the UK: 4 different prime ministers since the referendum, a looming or actual economic recession, alarming reports of bitter resentment and attacks on immigrants, unprecedented inflation rates and shocking price rises: all attributed by the government and its supporters to the Covid-19 lockdown and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. No acknowledgement of the possible consequences of Brexit.

I can’t predict the future and I’m reflecting on referendums. If the 2014 Scottish referendum was a good example of a rule-observing process which led to a generally accepted verdict, the Brexit one was the opposite.

The Purdah principle (strictly no initiation of new legislation and an acceptance of political omerta in the months before the vote), vanished in a puff of smoke.

Thinking again of my friend’s complaint about the linguistic failings of the Scottish referendum question, I wonder what will happen if our new-found mania for referendums continues?

Fortunately there is no visible pressure for a referendum on abolishing the monarchy, but we are in the early days of a new monarch, and the new, younger electorate, suffering from their disrupted education yet saddled with debts that my generation never had to face, makes it an outside, if unlikely, possibility.

Now, that would be a pedants’ picnic. We would have to face the prospect of multiple referenda on a tortuous, constitutionally dynamite matter.

Do you want a Republic and an elected President? What kind of republic? Constitutional? Representative? In what form? A French system, a German system, an American system or another? Who do you want to be president? An elder statesman? A sportsman? An actor? Do they have to be British? What powers and palaces and privileges should they have? You decide!

How about a global referendum on the colonisation of Mars

Here’s a suggestion, if we feel the need to determine every thorny issue with a referendum. How about a global referendum on the colonisation of Mars (or the moon, if it turns out to be easier)?

They would need a leader, who would clearly be a Tech Giant, because scientific know-how and superb management skills would temporarily precede the political creation of a paradise society in outer space, which would circumvent all the monumental human mistakes throughout history.

So let’s let everyone in every country, dictatorships and shambolic failed states included, vote from a list compiled by voting rolls, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, of suitable candidates for a permanent move to a

suitable part of the cosmos.

Obviously, there will be a few voluntary candidates, but everyone can vote for whomever they want out of their lives, excised from their social media and televisions for ever.

The count would be performed by a team of visually and audio impaired technophobes who are capable only of reading ticks in boxes.

I'm sure ChatGPT can provide a super efficient team of robots (who have no right or wish to vote) to offer us succinct advice on voting preferences, immediately sniff out and cancel any bad government Napoleonic shenanigans and oversee the entire process fairly and accurately.

Then maybe we'll see whether referendums and -da are a live, democratically pure and beneficial tool.