

# The Guardian

## I'm a remainer. So why do I feel more and more sympathy for leave voters?

*Joseph Harker*

Anti-Brexit campaigners really do act like a 'metropolitan elite', with little or no interest in northern and working-class people

Sat 12 Jan 2019 08.00 GMT



**T**he outcome of the 2016 referendum horrified me. Despite my doubts about the European Union as an institution (its remoteness, lack of democracy, and inflexibility in dealing with crises such as the eurozone debt), I was, and remain, convinced that it's better for nations to work together to deal with problems than apart.

Since then, the chaotic fallout of the vote has made Brexit seem even more scary: we have witnessed an unstable government, inept negotiations, early signs of the economic damage to come, and a looming no-deal outcome.

So why is it that, almost by the day, I grow more and more sympathetic to the people who voted leave? Not to the Boris Johnsons and Jacob Rees-Moggs, of course, nor to

the middle-class little-Englanders across the Tory shires - nor either to the thuggish nationalist bigots of the far right: but to the millions of ordinary working-class voters who saw leaving the EU as a way to improve their lives and finally have their voices heard.

Remember that brief moment after the referendum, when commentators started acknowledging the “left behind”, admitting that they’d been ignored for far too long? The swaths of the country beyond the M25 where industries had been lost, where communities had been torn apart, and where the idea of prosperity was a long-forgotten dream.

What happened? Before long the Westminster village reverted to type, and began obsessing about political plots, obscure article wording, and parliamentary procedures. All the talk switched to meaningful votes - yet in vast stretches of the UK, what they want is meaningful lives.

And amid the panic to stop Brexit, their stories have been forgotten. It often seems the message to them from remainers can be boiled down to two words: “Stupid northerners.”

There’s been little attempt to acknowledge the widespread poverty, deprivation, insecurity and marginalisation of so many towns and cities that led them to seek such a drastic solution to their problems. Yes, of course it’s clear that all the predictions are for the economy to take a hit and the poorer, northern regions to take the biggest hit of all: “What on earth were you thinking,” the liberal commentariat say (it’s a statement, not a question). Yet they fail to realise that these parts of the country have mostly been untouched by economic growth, even in the so-called boom years.

I was born and raised in Hull, a medium-sized, solidly working-class city in east Yorkshire. I remember the Thatcher recession of the 1980s, and the hit the city took, along with the collapse of its fishing industry. I also remember feeling incredulous when the media, over the following years, reported the economic boom: the yuppies, the “big bang” in the City of London, the “share-owning democracy”. None of that was felt anywhere near us.

And little has changed. The only two regions of the UK that have recovered after the 2008 crash are London and the south-east. So, during the referendum campaign, to raise the economy as a reason for staying in Europe was always likely to fall on deaf ears - and it did. Yet since 2016, remarkably, most remainers seem to feel that if they keep repeating this message, somehow people will change their minds. It won’t work. Nor will that other continuously repeated phrase: “You were lied to.” As if leave voters are so gullible they’d believe anything politicians tell them: in fact, they voted Brexit because they totally distrusted politicians. All these remainer arguments do is make people feel their protest vote is being ignored, and that establishment voices just want things to carry on as before.

There’s a great scene in James Graham’s 2017 play *Labour of Love*, which centres on a Nottingham Labour MP and his constituency agent, played in its original production by Tamsin Greig. At the end of another long day pounding the streets, trying to show voters how her party can improve their lives, she says wistfully: “What a glorious

peace, it must be, to be on the Right. To wake up every morning and look around and think - yeah, this is pretty much how it should be.” The same is true over the EU vote: working-class Brexiters could equally think, “It must be glorious being a remainder ...”



Pro-Brexit activists hold up placards in Westminster this month. Photograph: Niklas Halle'n/AFP/Getty Images

Certainly, few of them are likely to be persuaded by the leading voices in the people’s vote campaign - almost all wealthy and middle class, and most of them southerners. The same is true of almost all remainder commentators in the media. The notion of the “metropolitan elite” used to seem like a ridiculous putdown; yet, more and more, it seems to be becoming a truth. “The people have spoken. The people must be wrong,” seems to be their mantra.

And in the face of their impotence over changing hearts and minds, and as Theresa May drives on towards the cliff edge, they turn to the one person they know they can damage: Jeremy Corbyn.

“Why won’t Labour’s leader help us and make all this nightmare end?” they say. It is of little importance to them that Labour, as a national political party, has to listen to the voices of its northern voters; nor that Corbyn has, so far, played a tactically astute game.

They forget that in the general election of 2017, less than two years after becoming leader, he gained 3.5 million extra Labour votes (and 1.5 million more than David Cameron had for his majority government in 2015). Corbyn did this backing a soft Brexit. And he did this when there was a clear remain option on the ballot paper - in the form of the Lib Dems, whose vote bombed. Much as the Labour membership is clearly pro-EU, Corbyn’s stance helped Labour in large parts of the country beyond the south-east - it held on to all three seats in Hull, a city that voted 68% leave. He correctly judged that, above all, people wanted to be listened to, and for the misery of austerity to end.

Of course, this mattered little in the media world - dominated as it is by Oxbridge graduates, especially at its most senior levels. These are the people who have least to fear from austerity, and the most to lose from leaving Europe; nor do they have to worry about migrants moving in next door or changing their neighbourhoods, taking their jobs or undercutting their wages. To them, the concerns of poorer or working-class areas are irrational, merely evidence of their simple-mindedness. So the commentators demand Labour ditch all connection with its heartlands.

“This shouldn’t be about tactics,” they insist, “it’s about putting the country first.” Yet, conveniently, they forget that Tony Blair used exactly the same strategy for humiliating and discrediting the John Major government during the 1990s. Blair stayed “constructively ambiguous” over the big European questions of the day - Maastricht, and joining the euro - while the Tory prime minister was skewered by his eurosceptic “bastards”. The only significant difference to today is that the media establishment loved Blair (private school, Oxbridge, centrist - “one of us”), so they saw his manoeuvrings as the work of a genius. When, in an interview just before Christmas, the Labour leader repeated the carefully crafted thinking behind his party’s Brexit policy adopted just three months earlier, he was accused of “defying” his membership. He’s accused of secretly voting in favour of Brexit in 2016 (which goes to prove that you don’t have to be a Trump supporter to believe fake news). And party members are urged to revolt against him.

They claim Corbyn is a hopeless leader. But if that was true, the whole Brexit issue would be playing out completely differently. Given May has shown herself to be totally out of her depth, any ambitious Tory leader-in-waiting (and there are several) would have taken her on by now, ousted her, and called a new general election to gain a solid majority and the chance to put through their own kind of Brexit deal.

Yet they haven’t. Why not? Because they know Corbyn’s message of ending austerity and taxing the rich still resonates. In fact it’s Corbyn who’s calling for an election, confident he can take his party to victory. And if he did, who knows what might happen over Brexit?

Corbyn, unlike his liberal critics, understands that Brexit is a matter of timing. If you oppose it too soon, you’ll be labelled as someone who never accepted the referendum result, showing contempt for the 17.4 million leave voters. When thousands took to the streets demanding a people’s vote last summer, I couldn’t help thinking that, up north, many leave voters would be digging their heels in even further.

Something dramatic has to happen before Labour changes the stance which proved so popular at the last election. The past few weeks have felt like the start of that drama: a dud deal; cabinet resignations; the withdrawal vote pulled at the last minute; a Tory leadership challenge; a parliament asserting itself over the government. In the following days there will be more such moments.

If May’s deal is voted on and then defeated, everything will change.

Paradoxically, even if May gets her deal through, she will automatically lose the support of the DUP and therefore provide the very real prospect of the government losing a no-confidence motion. (So if Corbyn really was putting his party’s interests above the country’s, he’d back May’s deal and create this very scenario.)

Assuming her deal is defeated, this would indeed be a moment for Corbyn to push for an election.

And given the calamity of no-deal, which was certainly not on the side of any bus in 2016, it would also be a valid moment to call for a second referendum.

Either of these options would provide the potential to alter Britain's current catastrophic trajectory. I'd back them both. But if I had to choose between an election or a second referendum, I think that ultimately it would have to be for the option that could transform Britain - rather than the one under which things would remain just the same.

Joseph Harker is the Guardian's deputy opinion editor

#### Topics

- Brexit
- Opinion
- North-south divide
- Jeremy Corbyn
- Labour
- Theresa May
- Conservatives
- Article 50
- comment