

Could the futility of the referendum debate be the pre...

Published: January 13, 2026, 6:25 am

The sheer stupidity of holding a referendum on the future of the U.K.'s membership of the European Union is becoming more apparent by the day.

I know of no one who really believes that the UK public thought this an issue of real priority before David Cameron made it the focus of political concern. And, equally, I know of no one who thinks he did so because he thought it was the most pressing issue on his agenda. This referendum has always, and inevitably, been about the long-festering divisions within the Conservative Party, and what is now very obviously apparent is that it will not solve them.

I can completely understand why some are calling for the resignation of David Cameron. A person who puts the resolution of his own problems in managing his own party above the interests of governing in the national interest and of the state itself does not look to be fit for the office of Prime Minister. That these difficulties might reflect his own level of competence does not help.

Nor does the fact that in making the referendum the focus of his attention he has had to put aside a whole year of the government's legislative programme by offering a Queen's Speech with almost nothing to discuss within it help his case: this gives the very strong impression that he and his government have no idea why they are in office.

The recklessness of first calling and then facing the very real possibility that he may actually lose this referendum is unforgivable.

The fact that it has opened up space for the racist elements within British politics, and given them mainstream voice, is even worse.

That there is a real risk of significant cost to the UK as a result of Brexit reveals foolhardiness: every risk that he and George Osborne talk about is one that they created which the UK need not have faced.

And, whilst all this is going on, the rest of politics — where there is so much to discuss

— is on hold.

All of this is of normal concern to me, but over the weekend I have spent some time thinking about the discussion I will be having on Wednesday evening at the Hay Festival with Andrew Simms [when the subject will be how quickly we can change economics to meet current need](#). I am naturally optimistic: you cannot be an advocate for change if you do not think it is possible. This weekend the antics of those engaged in the referendum debate have been the cause for some pessimism on my part.

At least, that was until I realised that within the UK (perhaps in particular, because of its innate conservatism) we always need a crisis as a precursor for change. Whatever happens I think that the EU referendum debate will provide such a crisis.

There is a growing crisis of confidence within, and about, the Conservative Party.

Although I find much of the debate on immigration distasteful it is also true the discussion of this issue has raised real questions on the nature of identity, assimilation, change and community which need to be addressed.

I welcome the fact that John McDonnell and Caroline Lucas are now appearing on the same platform with each other, as a matter of choice.

Debate on democracy is also a good thing: it does however require that we now discuss how we wish to choose those who govern us in the future.

The surprising consensus on economics has indicated that from whichever part of the political spectrum comment comes from there is a value to cooperation, which is good news.

The distaste for bogus data, and both sides have been guilty of this, should surely be a lesson to politicians in the future.

But, most of all, what is most readily apparent is that too many politicians have been too willing for too long to play a game in a bubble that is contemptuous of most people and which does not consider the consequences for them. This referendum may, in this respect, mark the end of politics that respects those in that bubble in a way that was never wholly deserved.

If, however, (and it is a very big if that I am not wholly sure is justified) enough politicians can realise that it is now their job to create nothing less than a new political order designed to win support for the change that is necessary to embrace the issues that will challenge us in the 21st century then this referendum may just have been worthwhile. If the eventual outcome is the appropriate politics that is required to address the challenges that have become apparent during the course of the referendum campaign then we will have won, after all.

Those challenges are enormous. Climate change is at its heart; let's not pretend otherwise.

So too is robotics; indeed the challenges that it presents are, to me, the pivotal issues that will now bring about change precisely because we will have no choice about seriously reappraising how we organise society as a consequence of the readily apparent and immediate issues that robotics will raise when it still remains the case that climate change can be ignored.

And this issue raises identity in so many ways, including within the economy, the community, the family, and so much more, all of which will need to be addressed.

Just as we will also need to discuss how those communities work together to build the viable political agreements that are necessary to deliver the quite extraordinary processes of change which will be necessary if we are to adapt over the next 20 or 30 years (which will also require a complete redesign of the tax system, which I already thinking about).

To put it another way, we face the most extraordinary political, economic and social challenges in the future and, totally depressingly, we are spending our time engaged in a complete distraction that is all about wholly unsuccessfully seeking to resolve the fights of the past. You could get depressed about this, or alternatively you can hope that the futility of the referendum debate, which is so very obviously understood by the vast majority of people, can itself be the precursor for change to something better.

I will live in hope.