

The political crisis we face is of gargantuan scale

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I spent time over the weekend with some of my oldest friends. We've known each other so long our narratives are well known to each other. And maybe we've survived as friends for this long because our outlooks are not dissimilar. So almost inevitably, it seems, we discussed Brexit, the state of the government and the alternative options that are available. It was fun, if worrying.

Much of what we discussed is reflected in the weekend's papers.

There is a growing consensus Theresa May is so hopeless it is hard to see how she can survive.

And that Johnson simply has to go.

There seems to be belief that there are bound to be more Tory sex scandal casualties.

Whilst almost everybody is of a single mind that the UK's Brexit negotiators have been even more incompetent than we might have ever thought possible.

That the EU's negotiating position may not be entirely reasonable is no surprise to anyone because the stronger party in any negotiation rarely feels obliged to be entirely fair, and this was wholly predictable since the EU is, despite Brexiteer claims, very obviously the party in control here.

What is only hinted at though is the sheer horror of no deal and what it might mean: it is apparent that this has still, as yet, to dawn on people. The country's unpreparedness for what happens if there is no deal is staggering, but in the context of the previous comment perhaps less surprising.

And in all this the economic downsides remain almost unfathomable because they are so unpalatable.

But these were just the more obvious conclusions to draw. What is as shocking is that as yet there doesn't seem to be anyone in a position of power who, as it was put, is

'grown up' enough to address both the pragmatic and existential issues that flow from these observations (and to use the words 'grown up' is also slightly shocking when those present had an average age in the 60s).

The pragmatic issues to be faced come in two forms. One required option is a clear statement of what hard Brexit actually means and what planning is needed for it, with a timescale and costing attached. I suppose we can hope that this is what the 58 risk assessments on Brexit might provide, but I am ready to be severely disappointed. What I do know is that in the absence of that information no informed decision other than to stay within the EU can be made. After all, rationally in that absence we are quite literally leaping into the unknown. I stress, I am saying this in the absence of any viable alternative in the situation I describe.

The second pragmatic issue is related to the first, and may well require the rational conclusion that we simply cannot do Brexit within any conceivable time scale and any conceivable cost and that it is time to own up and admit it.

Either way, pragmatically the time for costs and plans to be on the table has already long past and we do not have them for either of the only known options, which are hard Brexit and asking to stay: nothing else now looks likely. A 'grown up' really does need to address the options now, whichever is to be preferred, and to dare no one has.

That then leads to the existential issues. These also cannot be avoided. Some are glaringly obvious. The future of Ireland is, perhaps, highest on that list, where the consequential issues are so enormous that they hardly bear thinking about, and yet that thinking must be done. There is no easy solution to the issues that arise for Ireland, whatever happens (bar staying).

The Irish question does, of course, bring the future of the Union and the nature it might have into play. And that means that questions around Scotland also cannot be avoided. If they are, it will not be so for long and so, yet again, they require someone to address then head on.

Let's not ignore England and Wales in all this too. In saying that I recognise Wales as a country: I also suspect it is staying in Union with England. And for the English (most of whom have very little comprehension of the fact that they even live in a Union of nations) the questions are at least as hard. The myth of 'Great' Britain has, I suspect, now been shattered for good. It's not clear what Britain is in a political sense any more. And 'great' we are not.

For some that is going to be very hard to accept. Farage, Johnson and Gove promised them Greatness again. But, whatever happens, we are a massively diminished nation. We have no influence left almost anywhere, and it is apparent we have a political system so threadbare it can hardly deliver government, let alone competent participation in any issue of consequence. I think this is going to create enormous

stress. It also requires leadership to address the issues.

And let's be clear what those issues are.

It will be hard to see why we keep a permanent seat at the UN Security Council.

Hard too to justify our defence policy and belief that we have a right to intervene internationally when we will have pretty much voluntarily left that stage.

And we will also have to accept that outside any obvious network of states we will lead at nothing in what is a globalised world.

These are crushing blows to many English people's perceptions of what they are. Adjusting to failure and isolation when for centuries we have thought ourselves the epicentre of the known world is a challenge to the national psyche that will have consequences hard to predict.

In fact all of these issues have that same result: forecasting is nigh on impossible.

A grown up leader would, of course, make an open appraisal of the situation.

And they would deliver an evidence based opinion.

On the basis of that they might now be abundantly clear that we need more time for Brexit and ask for it, stating the price they will pay to secure it.

Alternatively they might be humbly apologetic. They might say Brexit is not possible. They might say to the country that the option Cameron gave to them cannot be delivered. And they might, when doing so, apologise to the EU as well, and ask to cancel Article 50, hoping that the worst that might happen will be that we have to abandon our rebates, which may very well be a price worth paying.

But that would require a leader with the courage of Michael Collins in Ireland in 1922, knowing all the risks that they would be taking.

And it would require the support of a national government created, temporarily, in the national interest.

In exchange that leader would have to face the issues of Ireland and Scotland, nonetheless, and address the issues that arise in both, including government deadlock in Stormont and the hobbled devolution to Scotland that was designed to undermine the credibility of any Holyrood administration.

That government would also have to address the failure of the Westminster system as well, where the Commons cannot now attract people able to form competent governments; where first past the post guarantees the very stalemates it was supposed

to guard against; and where the Lords has to be reformed.

Whilst doing all that the power of a hopelessly biased press has to be addressed and the BBC has to be allowed to be politically free.

At the same time the Bank of England has to be brought back under control and mechanisms to truly revive local democracy - which is the bedrock of a true democracy - have to be created to allow some degree of fiscal autonomy that has been denied them for so long.

And in between all this there will be a need to hold society together, and that cannot be guaranteed to be stress free.

Who is the 'grown up'? I am not sure. But we need them because we are facing meltdown in the UK on so many fronts the need for coherent leadership has not been greater since 1945. And I cannot now see how that can be achieved without cross party cooperation to achieve stability and reform (and to avoid backlash against any one party that takes on the task) when the risk to the country is enormous, in the face of which the current incumbents have so very obviously failed.

We face a political crisis of a scale I have never previously imagined now. And I won't beat about the bush: the scale of the challenge is both enormous, and a little frightening so deep are the issues requiring resolution. But first we have to recognise that. And right now our government, so incompetent is it, seems unable to appreciate the gargantuan consequences of its own failings and make way for the process of national recovery that has, if we are to get through the next few years relatively unscathed, to begin very soon.