

Trump, Brexit and gradualism

Published: January 13, 2026, 2:35 pm

Might I equate Trump and Brexit? Some will, I am sure, be deeply offended if I do. But I am going to, anyway.

I am not going to point out that almost everyone genuinely pleased to see Trump in the UK this week campaigned for Leave.

Nor will I mention the Russian connection.

Or, even, the mistrust of trade deals, which simply makes May's hopes for the visit look like pure folly.

Instead I want to talk about things that are much more serious, like trust, communication, relationships, and the process of change. Those, and the importance of knowing where you are going, of course.

I claim no special expertise in the issues of which I write. My only qualification in them is sixty years of experience negotiating what life has had to throw at me, not all of which has been what I might have desired. Well, it's that coupled with a desire that I can only guess was born in me to not leave the world the way I found it because I sensed when quite young that for some, at least, this world was deeply unfair. For the last fifteen years or so I have pretty much dedicated my career to effecting a process of change.

It can, of course, also be said that Brexit and Trump are dedicated to change. I admit they wish for change that I am not motivated by. Whereas I believe in change likely to be of benefit to anyone, regardless of their situation, it is very clear that in their own ways Trump and Brexit promise change in the interests of certain, and I think, rather narrow interest groups. Our philosophies are clearly not matched. But it is process that I am most interested in this morning.

It is a gross summary, but one that works well enough to make it useful, to say that there are two processes for effecting change. There is radical, revolutionary, change. And there is the alternative of taking things gradually. Political causes of all persuasions

have tried both. There is no political reason, per se, to say one is to be preferred to the other based on precedent alone. But they have very different consequences. And, rare moments apart, there is a choice between them at some stage in a planned political process.

I am, of course, assuming there is a planned political process. It is a big assumption because it presupposes thought. And thinking is rare. As a public figure I greatly respect said to me in an email yesterday 'We need more thinkers doing more thinking...'. I could not agree more. But let's assume there has been thinking even if the evidence for that is increasingly hard to find in the case of either Brexit or Trump. What characterises both would seem to be the absence of a well worked out plan prior to gaining power. I will then substitute the goal of favouring a few within a nation as 'the plan'. If that is done we can assume that this condition is met.

So what then? To achieve change how is it best effected? Is gradual reform better than revolution, or vice versa?

It fair to say that I am a gradualist. I think it equally fair to say Trump and the Hard Brexiteers are not. But let's not assume the difference is politics. Many Lexiteers are happy with Hard Brexit for reasons entirely different from those of Jacob Rees-Mogg. I make the point deliberately: process and politics are not the same. The differences in approach are instead threefold, I suggest.

First, there is the issue of consent. There will never be universal consent to change. It is absurd to think that possible. Some are simply pathologically opposed to all change, almost as a matter of principle in itself. Others, cannot handle the stress its unfamiliarity creates. Others will withhold consent because they do not like what is happening and do not approve of its motivation. These are realities. But that does not mean change cannot happen. Nor does it even mean that change in the interest of all is not possible. It simply means that a process of winning consent has to be engaged in. Sudden, and imposed, change does not meet that criteria. Nor do radical changes of direction that alienate substantial numbers assist that process. In fact, it endangers it. That is why the referendum was so dangerous; its threshold was too low, and the process of both claiming it was absolute and irreversible was so alienating. Consent is won and not imposed. Gradualism works.

Second, there is the fact that even if change within some sphere of influence is possible the chance to change the whole world at once rarely, if ever exists. Trotsky might have wanted world revolution and I hate to disappoint those who remain true believers, but the chances of any such thing happening remain remote. Post any revolution there will be large parts of the world, including most of it beyond the immediate epicentre of radical reform, that will be remarkably unchanged by what has happened. And revolutionaries might find that if they attempt to impose change on them the kickback might be more than enough to undermine the advantages they think they have won.

And third, there is the desire for success to be sustained. Because nothing in life ever works out quite as planned, revolutions included, mechanisms without adequate feedback loops that allow for adaptation in the light of experience have low chances of success. By definition such feedback loops and the process of change that they require are gradual. That means revolutions have inbuilt features that make them less likely to work.

Put this together and Brexit is not working, as is obvious.

And nor is Trump's aggression working.

That is because both are built on aggression, separation, and a sense of entitlement that alienate at almost every imaginable level.

The sense of progress that they might initially create is then, illusory.

And that is why I have little time for the revolutionary approach.

I also happen to think that the lack of consent within the process (and a gerrymandered referendum is not an indication of consent) undermines the very process of fairness in which I believe. Don't get me wrong: I want change, including in the EU. But quite specifically seeking to impose this in one country that will have to co-exist, with its immediate neighbours who are its former partners after a period of aggressive relations was never going to deliver the best prospect of sustainable change.

There is a process for change.

It is thinking.

Followed by persuasion.

Followed by consensus building.

Followed by change.

Followed by feedback management.

Followed by review.

And new thought.

And throughout it all there has to be respect for difference, dialogue and accommodation of difference.

Politics has moved a very long way from this process, as Trump and Brexit prove.

We need to re-embrace it.

But first, as my correspondent said yesterday, we need more thinkers doing more thinking. That is where everything starts. And we have far too few people engaging in that process. We know where to start. But please, take your time.