

My advice to Brits: exit Brexit at your peril

By Tony Abbott, ex Australian PM, 3 September, 2019

The argument over whether Britain should leave the EU is the nation's least civil and most seismic disagreement, at least since the Irish question that shaved off part of the country and irrevocably split the Liberal Party. It's that serious.

I want what's best for Britain because it's in the best interests of the wider world that it be strong; and Britain can't be its full strength without also being free — free to set its own course and to chart its own future.

As a free-trade zone to promote mutual prosperity between relatively well-off neighbours, the European Economic Community, as it then was, made much sense. That is what Britain belatedly voted to join. It's just that the evolution by stealth of this free-trade zone had always been planned by those at the heart of Europe, in order to create a new entity commanding more loyalty than its member states.

And yes, the conservative instinct is not to change without good reason, because change is often far more trouble than it's worth. But when change must happen — because the people understandably want a polity that's fully accountable to them — it's not reform so much as restoration that's called for: in this case, restoration of the free trade with the major countries of Europe that Britain thought it had signed up for back in 1972.

Whenever the citizens of the different countries of Europe have been asked what they thought of “ever-closer union”, their first response has always been to reject it. And oblivious to the ever-widening democratic deficit, the high priests of Europe have always found ways to subvert every outbreak of independence or of national feeling, through legal back channels or through bullying the local establishment into second votes, until the poor old benighted majority of voters could be brought to see how misguided they'd been.

That's what's happening in Britain right now. The people voted to leave but the establishment wants to stay.

Theresa May was right, at the outset, when she insisted that Brexit meant Brexit. What's happening now is a determined campaign to stop Brexit happening at all; or to ensure that it's a Brexit that doesn't change anything.

The Remainers, some of them at least, are prepared to concede that Britain will leave the political union but all of them still insist that it must stay in the economic one, because, deep down, they fear that Britain can't cope on its own.

Yet this is the country that has seen off the Spanish Armada, the French emperor, and the German kaiser. Against Louis XIV, against Napoleon, against Wilhelm II, and then against Hitler, this country didn't need Europe. It saved Europe, helped — as it always should be — by its friends and family across the sea.

Anti Brexit demonstrators protest outside the Cabinet Office in London on Monday.

This is the home of the Mother of Parliaments, of the Industrial Revolution, and of the world's common language. That's right; the modern world has been made in English; so no country on Earth should be more capable than Britain of standing on its own two feet.

Deciding to leave the EU but failing to carry it through would be defeat on an epic scale, hardly matched since the Norman invasion, a national humiliation to echo down the ages.

Let me reassure anyone in Britain anxious about the prospect of a no-deal Brexit, that Australia does \$100bn trade with the EU every single year, on the basis of no deal. Britain already does 55 per cent of its trade with countries outside the EU on the basis of no deal.

A full economic partnership between Britain and Australia — restoring the almost completely unrestricted commerce that we enjoyed for 150 years, and allowing Britons and Australians, once again, properly to experience each other's wonderful countries and lives — would be about the best Christmas present our two countries could have.

For almost 50 years, goods have been freely traded between Britain and the countries of the EU without tariff or quota or hold-ups at the border. Offer to keep that. For almost 50 years, someone qualified to work in France could work in Britain — and vice versa. Offer to keep that.

Millions of people have come here from the Continent to live and work. They're good people. Let them stay for as long as they like and become citizens if they wish, and ask the same for Britons in Europe.

With goodwill on Europe's part, this could be agreed on the spot. It would be what's best for Europe and what's best for Britain. In the long run, Europe has more to lose, which is why they're so assiduously trying to exploit the fear of no-deal to bluff Britain into becoming an economic colony, stuck in the customs union but with no say over making the rules.

Like parties to a bad marriage, Britain and the EU should make a clean break; and once done with it, will probably surprise themselves at how much better they can then get on.

Still, the next few weeks will be full of political fury, as Remainers plot to sabotage Brexit, or to turn it into a self-vindicating disaster. And I know that with 27 EU countries now lined up against you, because they don't want to lose a friend at court, you must often feel alone and full of doubt.

But know this: there are some 160 other countries out there, too polite to take sides, but ready to welcome you back: back into a wider world; back into a bigger family; nearly all of them willing you to succeed; and just wanting you to get this done.

Tony Abbott is a former prime minister. This is an edited text of an address he delivered last night to the Policy Exchange in London