

Brexit, just like your right to know, is about our fundamental liberties

By Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 23 October 2019

Brexit is evidence that a values divide is harder to resolve than socio-economic debates.

A year ago, when British historian Robert Tombs was in Australia to speak about the unfolding story of Western continents, the burning of heretics, the atomic bomb and the Reformation, the Enlightenment, democracy, his soft, polite English way, why on earth are Australians so damn interested in Brexit? No matter where he went, his fascination with a vote by 17.4 million Brits to leave the EU.

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My answer to the question was simple: our fascination then and now is with freedom.

When the most fundamental freedom in a democracy, the sovereign right to determine your own laws, comes under attack, wouldn't Australians be interested? More than just a fascination, Brexit became a rare celebration because, in a country where it is as rare as a conservative ABC host in Ultimo or Southbank.

Brexit matters because we are in the midst of writing our own chapter to the long story of Western civilisation and its values — meaning our liberty — but seriously, which federal politician can lay claim to a serious win for liberty?

For example, in Australia right now, the media has united to fight for your right to know important things that you don't know. We want to inform you about details of abuses in aged care, Australian Taxation Office bullies and a much more than a decade ago, we were fighting Labor's thinly veiled attempt to regulate media critics.

We will keep fighting for freedom of the press because we are not just in the media business, we are in the business of educating the public because a free and democratic society depends on an educated people.

Just as others are watching this battle for greater press freedom in this country, we, as Australians, should be watching it across the West.

That is why Brexit matters here. Brexit tells a story of democracy in crisis, crumbling governance and a deepening divide. More than three years after the British people voted to leave the EU, Westminster remains paralysed.

Demonstrators outside the Houses of Parliament.

Last weekend's much-touted Super Saturday, when the House of Commons sat for the first time on the week since the referendum, fizzed into yet another shameful opportunity to deliberately thwart the 2016 referendum result. And yesterday's vote was another vote because "it would be repetitive and disorderly to do so". Is this man's swan song an audition for a new role?

Westminster's repetitive snubbing of the people's vote confirms why Brexit happened. A noisy, confident group of daily practitioners of democracy, are increasingly removed from the values, interests and experiences of a large group of British commentators and authors. David Goodhart calls this last group the hidden majority. Scott Morrison calls it the "anywhere, any time" group.

The divide, similar in both countries, is between what Goodhart calls a group of people called the "Anywheres" and the "Somewheres".

The Anywhere people are well-educated, mostly professional people whose sense of self comes from their own individualistic identity, not rooted to place or people; this group of roughly 20-25 per cent of the population

By contrast, people whom Goodhart calls Somewheres have an identity ascribed by place and people, with stability. Though there is a wide spectrum from achieved identity to ascribed identity, most in this latter group they live and work are changing fast in the face of globalisation, tech explosions and immigration.

Brexit happened because politics today means a cabinet table that is largely a homogenous group of Anywheres with varied lived experiences and values to match, mostly university graduates claiming to know better what others

This cosy environment makes groupthink and confirmation bias inevitable among Anywheres. This political environment is the fundamental challenge today of bridging the values gap between Anywheres and Somewheres. Hence, Westminster cannot deliver Brexit.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson reacting during the debate on the Brexit withdrawal agreement bill in the House of Commons

Brexit transcends the tabled issue of EU membership. It is a warning shot across the bows that Western political systems

During a recent podcast interview with former deputy prime minister John Anderson, Goodhart, the founder of *The Economist* magazine, explained the new divide. He said that while traditional socio-economic issues about state versus market and the public pie and who pays for it, remain the bread and butter of politics, “they’ve been joined by, and even replaced by, new issues, issues to do with security and identity, and borders and boundaries, who we are, issues of belonging, and

Brexit is the democratic marker for values of national sovereignty and democratic rule rather than subservience to global elites. It is the rightful, inevitable push back by people who do not have the resources to avoid the social challenges of some social changes. Brexit is a democratic assertion of national borders over open-slather immigration, and a necessary step for cohesion.

Goodhart pointed to family policies as just one of many examples of the rift between Anywheres and Somewheres. It is as easy as possible for both parents to spend as little time in the family as possible. “But most people want it to be the mother, to spend time at home when children are very young and for the tax system to make it possible for the father to

Instead of respecting different choices, the shallow liberalism of Anywheres seeks to enforce a particular Ayn Rand-style

This cultural divide presages a governance challenge that is set to become worse in modern democracies such as the UK

Goodhart points to the massive explosion in university education — a place that pumps out Anywheres — which has been neglected.

“You would expect a society with a much larger proportion of graduates to produce a society that is more informed and more tolerant,” Goodhart said.

“But over the last generation we have become less tolerant, and less generous, much quicker to judge ... The society that we have made us a more tolerant society, seems to have made us a much harder society to govern.”

Brexit is evidence that a values divide is harder to resolve than socio-economic debates. While the centre-right has tried to budget an inch on its rigid cultural agenda. Hence, at the time of writing, Westminster has still failed to deliver Brexit to the EU.

Even if the House of Commons passes the withdrawal agreement this week, the long tedious road to Brexit we need a new generation of politicians able to mend the divisions between the Somewheres vs Anywheres

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