

GUEST COLUMNIST



CALUM MACLEOD

Last week's EU referendum result catapulted the UK into uncharted political territory from which it's impossible to imagine it emerging intact. One glance at the electoral map of voting behaviour on June 23rd shows a country completely divided on whether or not to remain in the EU, and apparently much else besides.

By now the headline voting patterns have been hardwired into the national consciousness. England and Wales voted to leave. Northern Ireland wants the UK to remain in the EU, as do an overwhelming number of voters in London. Most decisively of all, 62 per cent of Scotland's voters cast their ballots in favour of remaining, with every local authority area producing a majority for that outcome. Highland polled 56 per cent for Remain and the equivalent figure for Comhairle nan Eilean Siar was 55 per cent. No repeat of the 1975 EEC referendum result there.

These results seem clear enough. Other things are also snapping into sharper focus now that we've stepped through the Brexit looking glass.

Most obviously, it's apparent that Boris Johnson and Michael Gove — the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of the official 'Leave' campaign — haven't the faintest semblance of a plan for how we are to 'take back control of our country' and head for the allegedly sunlit uplands of a post-EU future. That shouldn't come as any real surprise, of course.

For Johnson, the referendum campaign was always less about extracting the UK from the EU than implanting himself into 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister. He simply gambled that marching to the beat of a Eurosceptic drum was the best way to achieve that goal.

Gove's opposition to the EU is more ideologically deep-rooted, which doesn't make it any more appetising. He might want to consider revising his disdainful opinion of experts given that bluster and empty rhetoric must soon make way for the heavy lifting of actually disengaging from the EU, securing alternative trade agreements and stabilising jittery financial markets.

It's also becoming more apparent just how much of the 'Leave' campaign was premised on a scandalously false prospectus; one in which it sought to frame itself as an anti-establishment movement railing against an out-of-touch political elite. The idea that any campaign fronted by an Old Etonian and a current Cabinet Secretary was tilting at the establishment is frankly laughable. However, there's far less comedy to be divined from the intertwined lines of attack deployed by Brexiteers to explain how power to the people would magically be delivered.

One of these lines involved the idea that the EU is an undemocratic, unaccountable bureaucracy unscrupulously forcing the UK to contribute money to Brussels that would be better spent domestically on policy priorities of our choosing. 'Leave' wrongly claimed that the UK contributed £350 million a week into the EU's coffers (the Institute for Fiscal Studies has the figure closer to £175 million), but let that pass for now because they assured us that after Brexit the money would be spent on the hard-pressed NHS. Another line highlighted the alleged drag on business caused by regulatory red tape that protects workers' rights and the environment, amongst a myriad other things. Get rid of that, together with the free movement of people stipulated by the EU's single market, and the UK would soon be hurtling towards economic prosperity, we were promised.

Brexiteers' third line of attack — easily their most cynical — tapped into the deep well of disillusionment experienced by many in society who feel economically and politically marginalised, by framing EU migrants as the alleged source of their woes. This dog-whistle of an argument asserted that EU immigration would be dramatically cut if the UK controlled its own borders thereby alleviating pressure on welfare and other public services and safeguarding jobs. It's a relatively short goose step from there to the full-blown racist klaxon of UKIP's shameful 'Breaking Point' poster.

None of these promises are likely to be fulfilled because they never stacked up in the first place. Now that we're on the other side of the mirror it'll soon become apparent that pressures on public services and jobs have much more to do with Government-induced austerity than EU migrants, who collectively contribute far more to the UK economy than they take out of it. Ian Duncan Smith has already disowned the promise of an extra £350 million for the NHS, despite it having been emblazoned on the side of the 'Leave' campaign's battle-bus. Daniel Hannan MEP, another of the Tory high priests of Brexit, appeared on Newsnight last week to blithely dismiss talk of reducing immigration into the UK. He did, however, seem

warmer to the idea of maintaining access to the EU's single market after all if some of these pesky free movement obligations can be avoided.

Aside from the sight of Brexiteers' promises melting away like snow off a dyke, all there is to show for the early days of this brave new Albion is a political power vacuum; one likely to be filled by an even more right-wing Conservative Government once the Tories decide who will replace David Cameron in the autumn.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party seems hell-bent on self-immolation when it should be holding the Government to account and offering a vision for navigating the country away from the deadening grip of austerity. Amid the fetid atmosphere of xenophobia that Brexit appears to have encouraged in some quarters it's perfectly plausible that Labour may find itself supplanted by UKIP in many of its traditional English heartlands. In which case there is even less chance of Labour becoming a party of Government than the vanishingly small one it currently holds.

There's also a very real possibility that Brexit might not be confined to unleashing only domestic political turbulence. The gravitational pull to the further reaches of the right in European politics is a phenomenon that the UK's departure from the EU will do little to discourage. Marine Le Pen of France's far right Front National has ominously hailed Brexit as beginning a movement that can't be stopped. Far right parties in Denmark and the Netherlands have also vowed to push for similar referenda. The European Union therefore risks further fragmentation in the longer term, a situation that would do little for the political or economic stability of continental Europe but might serve the geopolitical interests of Russia very well.

These feel like historic times; disturbingly so. It now seems likely that there will be a second referendum on Scottish independence sooner rather than later. In September 2014 I voted to remain in the UK because I was convinced that a shared set of progressive social values bound its constituent nations together. I no longer think that's the case.

The drift to the right under the Conservatives is only likely to accelerate following the EU referendum result. A result achieved via a confidence trick of breathtaking cynicism played by the political equivalent of snake oil salesmen peddling easy solutions for complex problems. Regrettably the UK is now a broken state with little prospect of ever being fixed. So when the next referendum comes around, as it surely will, I'll be voting for Scotland to be independent.