

Brexit: A fatally flawed process

HOW COULD IT BE that a country's membership in a multinational federation, achieved as a result of long negotiations and a parliamentary vote, could fall victim to a simplistic referendum in which no one could possibly know the long-term consequences of a breakup?

That, of course, is precisely what has happened in the (dis)United Kingdom, thanks to a process that in our view was fatally flawed from the outset.

Just why the Brexit referendum was called in the first place is a matter of speculation, most observers seeing it as the result of Prime Minister David Cameron's desire to quell dissent within his own Conservative party over the pros and cons of membership in the European Union.

To us, it's even more of a mystery why the referendum's result was to be decisive or merely advisory, and why a single vote beyond 50 per cent of the total would have such enormous consequences.

Interestingly, the British vote comes at a time when Canada's Conservatives are clamoring for a referendum on our 'first-past-the-post' electoral process, confident that most Canadians would favour the status quo.

Were such a vote be between the existing system and either proportional representation or a ranked ballot, the Tories are probably right. Pure proportional representation would mean an end to our constituency system, and the ranked ballot would look too much like a bid by the Grits to stay in power forever.

But would there really be a need for such a referendum if the parliamentary committee simply recommended preservation of the 'X' on the ballot but the addition of run-off votes between the top two candidates in any riding where the first-place finisher failed to win half the votes?

As we see it, the Brexit referendum should have been advisory, and the choice should have been between the status quo and renegotiation of the terms of membership to clarify continued (or greater) control over immigration.

Instead, what Britons have been left with is a situation where clearly most of the 'Leave' supporters were elderly, poorly educated and motivated by thinly disguised racism.

In the circumstances, there's surely little doubt that in a few years a majority of residents of the present-day UK would favour rejoining the EU.

However, in the current chaotic situation there's a real likelihood that before any such vote could take place Scotland would have voted to separate and Northern Ireland would have at least considered the pros and cons of staying in the EU by joining a federated Republic of Ireland.

One of the strangest predictions following last Thursday's vote was by a leader of the Leave campaign, Tory MP and former London mayor Boris Johnson.

Believe it or not, his prediction was that despite leaving the EU Britain could remain within a European common market.

There's clearly no doubt that such an arrangement would benefit the UK, but equally no doubt that the remaining EU members would see no advantage for themselves and much to be gained from imposing high tariffs on British exports.

It would be interesting, indeed, to see the result of a second referendum, held only in England and Wales (the two parts of the U.K. where 'Leave' won), with the question posed being: Would you still favour leaving the European Union if it means losing membership in the European Common Market?

Our hunch is the 'No' side would win handily.