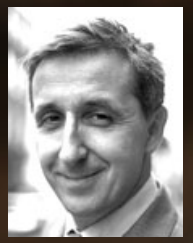
# From BREXIT to EUXIT?



**JAMIE PRIESTLEY,** correspondent London.

Since 24 June we have been watching the Brexit Show with a mixture of horror and fascination. Nobody looks good but, as entertainment, it is irresistible. First Mr Cameron falls on his sword. Then Michael Gove (also Conservative party) kills Boris Johnson and, in the process, kills himself. Nigel Farage (UK Independence Party) decides that nothing will ever compare to the shuddering climax which was the referendum, and resigns. Not wanting to be left out, the new presenter of Top Gear, Chris Evans, resigns after 99% of viewers vote Leave (= leave their TV off). Labour MPs denounce their leader Jeremy Corbyn for taking English understatement so far that nobody actually noticed his support for Remain. But he refuses to kill himself and tells them all to go to hell. After waiting until everyone else falls over, Theresa May ve the promise of independence to be bogus and illusory. Leave voters feel more British, are breezily optimistic about the future, and call Remain voters sleepy or cowardly. I voted against Brexit and fear its consequences. My wife voted reluctantly to stay in ('head over heart', she said) and now thinks Brexit will be positive for the United Kingdom and perhaps for the EU also.

By contrast, the EU's official position is one of unity. Sadness and disappointment, yes, but its leaders show few signs that they will grant any favours to the country that rejected it.

The reasons behind Brexit are complex and not yet fully understood. One factor should make EU leaders worry, because it is not uniquely British.

Wigan is a gritty town in the northwest of England. George Orwell's novel 'The Road to Wigan Pier' immortalises the hard lives lived there in the

**BORIS JOHNSON:** author, mayor, clown, Leave campaign mascot, Foreign Secretary.

foundations of Europe. They attract the worst bigots and scumbags, it's true, but they also represent more general doubts which Europe's leaders are unwilling to discuss openly. The two major questions seem to be: (i) for how long must the stronger economies like Germany pay for the rest? And (ii) how will the EU control its borders? The 64% vote says that Wigan has not yet seen the benefits of the EU. Perhaps above all it says that they judged political leaders to be out of touch with their lives. And not just in Wigan or the United Kingdom. Euroscepticism is on the agenda of eve-

scare stories in part because it struggled to make a positive argument about the free movement of people. In any case, the most basic rule of public relations is to admit that you see a problem when most of your audience sees it. And then you set about finding solutions which remedy the problem. The EU's leaders need to talk to the corporate communications people at VW, BP and any number of troubled firms who have learned this lesson the hard way.

The dreaded Article 50 is not yet active so nothing official has happened. Perhaps Brexit means the UK will sail off into the Atlantic. Perhaps this small island will become a little smaller as Scotland leaves to join Europe. Or maybe, just maybe, a newer and slightly more pragmatic version of Europe will emerge which brings back the doubters and makes it stronger than it looks today.

**by Jamie Priestley**

emerges from the shadows and takes up residence in 10 Downing Street. In a further plot-twist, Boris Johnson is brought back from the dead to become the international face of the British government. Author, mayor, clown, mascot for the Leave campaign and now Foreign Secretary. And all this 400 years after the death of Shakespeare. If only he were here now to turn our tragicomedy into fiction.

The referendum has divided the country, straining friendships and family relations almost everywhere. A wildly romantic movement is finally starting to abandon its dream of reversing the referendum result. This is an undemocratic fantasy based on the assumption that many Leave voters did not know what they were doing. Remain voters are ashamed to be British, accuse Brexiteers of stupidity and xenophobia, and believe the 1930s. The town strongly supports the Labour Party and last voted Conservative in 1910. In spite of Labour's official support for Remain, Wigan chose Brexit by 64%, far above the national vote of 52%. Unemployment there is a modest 5%, yet many have seen their income fall because of 'zero hours' contracts which give employers flexibility and cheaper labour. Immigration around Wigan is a modest 2.9% of the population compared to 11.5% nationwide, yet locals (including resident immigrants) believe it is a threat. A few are motivated by racist ideas. Most are simply worried about future opportunities for their children.

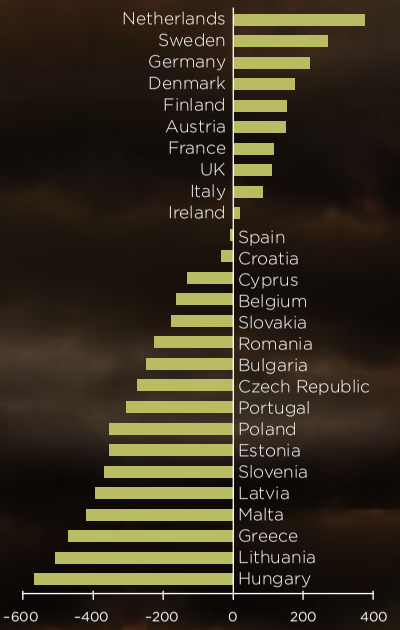
This could be dismissed as a purely British problem if Wigan were not repeated across Europe. From Mr Hofer to Marine Le Pen to Thierry Baudet, eurosceptic leaders have given voice to a mood which seems to threaten the ry European leader. Wigan shows that the facts have nothing to do with it any more. The EU brand is now at the mercy of raw emotions.

So its leaders have a dilemma: do they defend the EU's original ideals, or do they acknowledge popular resistance and engineer something new? They of course believe strongly in the ideals which have been central to the European project and its treaties. And they worry that forgiving the UK will only encourage more exits. Yet they must also have nightmares about a European disintegration which they are powerless to stop: a disintegration which the historians may attribute to their idealism.

The EU will no doubt learn from the Remain campaign and tell a more positive story. But it is hard to justify porous borders to a Eurosceptic. The UK's pro-Europe campaign relied on economic

**EU member states**

Net contribution per capita 2014 in €

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