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Review: Why the British Chose Brexit: Behind the Scenes of the Referendum

Reviewed Work(s): Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit by CRAIG OLIVER; All Out War: The Full Story of How Brexit Sank Britain's Political Class by TIM SHIPMAN

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Why the British Chose Brexit

Behind the Scenes of the Referendum

Anand Menon

Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit

BY CRAIG OLIVER. Hodder & Stoughton, 2017, 432 pp.

All Out War: The Full Story of How Brexit Sank Britain's Political Class

BY TIM SHIPMAN. William Collins, 2016, 688 pp.

The United Kingdom's vote last year to leave the European Union was a seismic event. The British people ignored the advice of the leaders of all their major political parties and of virtually all experts. George Osborne, the chancellor of the exchequer, told voters that leaving would wreck the British economy. U.S. President Barack Obama warned that it would reduce the United Kingdom's influence on the world stage. Financial markets, many pollsters, and political pundits all anticipated that voters would heed the elites' advice. And yet they decided not to, setting off a process

destined to transform the country's politics, economy, and society.

No wonder, then, that the referendum has generated a rash of books seeking to explain, or at least describe, what happened. The pace of academic publishing means that most of those that have already appeared are quick and dirty accounts by journalists or politicians and their advisers. Among these, two stand out: *Unleashing Demons*, by Craig Oliver, who worked as Prime Minister David Cameron's director of communications, and *All Out War*, by the journalist Tim Shipman.

These two books tell the story of Brexit in different ways. Oliver has drawn heavily on his diaries to produce an account of one part of the Remain side, whereas Shipman offers an exhaustive history of the campaign as a whole. But both are elite histories, focusing on the words and deeds of political leaders rather than the details of the ground operations or the reasons why over 33 million people voted the way they did. The doings of the elites certainly mattered. Cameron's team made huge errors when it came to immigration policy, messaging, and the decision to hold the referendum in the first place. Yet because both Oliver and Shipman focus on elites and on a fairly brief period, essentially from the start of 2016 to the vote on June 23, they largely ignore the longer-term trends that produced the vote to leave: rising distrust of politicians and experts, years of grinding economic austerity, and a political establishment that had converged on the center.

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HOW TO LOSE A REFERENDUM

Years before the referendum, Cameron's team made a series of mistakes that doomed its cause, as did the official

Remain campaign later on. The most serious involved immigration. Before the 2010 election, Cameron promised to bring annual net immigration to the United Kingdom down from more than 200,000 people to “tens of thousands.” The EU’s principle of free movement, however, made this promise impossible to keep. But at the Conservative Party conference in October 2014, Cameron doubled down. “Britain,” he declared, “I know you want this sorted, so I will go to Brussels, I will not take no for an answer, and when it comes to free movement, I will get what Britain needs.” By suggesting that control over EU migration was attainable, Cameron had created expectations he could not meet. By February 2016, his attempt to renegotiate immigration with the EU had turned into a political disaster. Although he won the ability to restrict access to some benefits for EU migrants for the first four years after they arrived in the United Kingdom, the deal fell far short of Euroskeptics’ demands. He had, in effect, taken no for an answer. Shipman, who has clearly spoken at length to almost everyone who matters, explains how, early on, the Leave campaign recognized the importance of immigration. After the release of official figures at the end of May showing that net immigration had risen the previous year, the campaign targeted the issue mercilessly. The Remain camp struggled to respond.

Shipman also shows how Cameron’s tendency to put the fate of the Conservative Party over that of the country led him into several blunders, beginning with the decision to hold a referendum in the first place. In 2013, incessant pressure from Conservative backbenchers, along with the fear of losing votes to the UK Independence Party, known as

UKIP, a Euroskeptical, anti-immigrant party, drove Cameron to promise to include a referendum in the next Conservative manifesto. Doing so certainly helped him defy the odds and win the 2015 election, but in the end, it proved a shortsighted move.

As a Cameron loyalist, Oliver is understandably less willing to concede that party unity trumped the national interest. But he provides a wonderful insight into how the prime minister and his team approached the issue when he argues that had a referendum not been promised, “the Conservative Party, and consequently the country, would have become almost ungovernable.” Oliver’s belief that only the Conservative Party could run the United Kingdom meant that, for him, the interests of party and country were one and the same.

During the campaign itself, as Shipman details, Cameron’s desire to maintain Conservative unity decisively shaped his tactics. Confronted with opponents who relished provoking intra-Conservative fights, Downing Street hesitated to hit back. For much of the campaign, Cameron and Osborne refused to directly attack the two leading pro-Brexit figures in the Conservative Party, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson. In one such instance, the Remain campaign had designed a poster intended to tar the Leave camp with the brush of extremism by showing Johnson inside the breast pocket of Nigel Farage, the leader of UKIP. In the end, Cameron’s team pulled the Johnson-Farage poster because of fears that it would make post-referendum reconciliation within the Conservative Party more difficult. After the vote, Matthew Elliott, the boss of the Leave campaign, expressed

surprise at this decision to the *Financial Times*. Linking senior Tory defectors to UKIP as “crazy, rightwing nutters” would have proved “terminal” for Leave’s hopes, he suggested.

As *All Out War* explains, the Labour Party was also tearing itself apart over the EU. The referendum came just when Labour’s pro-EU establishment was on the back foot. In 2015, the party had elected a leader from the far left, Jeremy Corbyn, who had voted to leave the European Economic Community (a forerunner to the EU) in a 1975 referendum and had opposed various EU treaties as a member of Parliament. In the run-up to the referendum, Corbyn supported staying in the EU, but Shipman provides excruciating detail about just how reluctant his team was to cooperate with the official Remain campaign. “Jeremy’s advisers . . . absolutely wanted to leave,” Shipman quotes Alan Johnson, a Labour MP and the leader of his party’s pro-Remain group, as saying. “They might be leaders of the Labour Party, but they’ve got the hammer and sickle tattooed somewhere.”

No account of the campaign would be complete without considering the media. It is here that Oliver is at his best, especially when it comes to the BBC. Before joining government, he held several roles at the corporation, including as editor of the flagship 6 PM and 10 PM news programs. As he notes, the corporation tied itself in knots as it struggled to appear balanced. Presented with competing claims, the BBC often did not question the validity of one or the other but attempted to solve the problem by simply giving both sides equal airtime. For example, although expert opinion overwhelmingly held that leaving the EU would harm the

British economy, the BBC routinely put one of the few Brexit-supporting economists alongside a pro-Remain voice without mentioning that a clear preponderance of economists backed Remain. As Oliver recounts, although the Remain camp managed to pressure the BBC to reflect expert opinion more accurately on its flagship radio and TV programs, it had less success at shaping the rest of the corporation’s coverage. That hurt them badly because although much of the British establishment listens to a few major broadcasts—the *Today* program on BBC Radio 4 and *Newsnight* on BBC Two—a majority of the public does not. And the most popular outlets, such as music shows (which also feature news bulletins and debates on current affairs) and the BBC website, tend to receive far less editorial scrutiny than the BBC’s main programs.

In the end, however, despite the missteps of the Labour Party and the media, the referendum result stemmed primarily from the failure of the Conservative government. Having called an unnecessary referendum, it misunderstood its own people and lost despite arguing that defeat would have dire consequences.

A LONG TIME COMING

Shipman admits in his introduction that past relations with the EU may have been “more important than what happened during the campaign in determining the result.” He’s right. British Euroskepticism was a long time in the making. The seeds of the Leave campaign were sown during bitter parliamentary fights in the early 1990s, when a gang of Eurosceptical Conservative MPs rebelled against their own government over ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, which created the EU.

The fight over that treaty also led to the establishment of UKIP, which was formed out of an anti-Maastricht campaign group.

The Brexit vote reflected more than boiling Euroskepticism, however. It was also the result of a growing distaste for politicians, experts, and the United Kingdom's economic system. In the years before the vote, the country witnessed a sustained decline in trust in politicians. The perception spread that politics offered no answers. Both Labour and the Conservatives had bought into the same ideas: neoliberal economic thinking and a socially liberal cultural agenda. It was, for example, a Conservative-led coalition that legalized same-sex marriage in 2014. And so the public increasingly saw politicians as all the same.

The Cameron government exacerbated this rising distrust and detachment. In the wake of the financial crisis, it pursued policies of austerity that disproportionately hit the worst-off in society. And even as GDP growth recovered, most saw little benefit. Real wages, for example, fell by over ten percent from 2007 to 2015.

Neither of the books captures much of this background. But its absence from Oliver's account—the word “austerity” appears nowhere—is particularly galling. After all, the government Oliver served in from 2011 onward played a crucial part in alienating the people who turned out to poke the political establishment in the eye.

During the referendum campaign, these trends combined to mobilize several disparate groups in support of Brexit. Almost three million people who did not vote in the 2015 election turned out in 2016. Those who held conservative social values were far more

likely to vote Leave. That side did well in areas of the country where jobs are hard to find, easy to lose, and badly paid; where affordable housing is scarce; and where levels of education rank far below those in London. In these places, people no longer believed what experts or politicians said about the economy and were profoundly skeptical of those who described the status quo as the safer option. Shipman cites a Labour campaign source who told him that the problem with the Remain campaign's focus on the theoretical economic dangers of Brexit was that poorer Labour voters in the north-east and the northwest already felt that the economy wasn't working for them.

FALLOUT

Despite the centrality of economics to the Brexit campaign, its immediate effects were political. The morning after the vote, Cameron resigned. (*The Sun* quoted him expressing his desire to avoid operationalizing Brexit: “Why,” he asked aides in private, “should I do all the hard shit for someone else, just to hand it over to them on a plate?”) To his successor, Theresa May, he bequeathed not only possibly the most challenging set of negotiations the United Kingdom has ever undertaken in peacetime but also no contingency plans (it would have looked bad, apparently, to do such planning before the vote).

As a result, under May, the civil service has spent much of the last year analyzing how Brexit might affect the United Kingdom and how it should approach negotiations with the EU before the country leaves the union on March 29, 2019. Slowly but surely, May's position has crystallized. In her view, respecting the referendum outcome

means a so-called hard Brexit. This implies taking the country out of the EU's single market and customs union, which together embody the shared rules and regulatory standards and the absence of internal customs checks that make the market across the EU resemble that of a single country. But a hard Brexit is not the only way of interpreting the referendum outcome. Another, for instance, is "the Norway option," which would see the United Kingdom remain within the single market even after leaving the EU.

Whatever kind of Brexit the government decides to adopt, the United Kingdom seems set for a turbulent few years. Even now, economic warning signs are flashing red. Inflation is on the rise, partly driven by the devaluation of the pound that immediately followed the referendum. Business and consumer confidence have fallen. And things are likely to get worse before they get better. Economists estimate that a hard Brexit would lead to a 40 percent reduction in trade with the EU, the United Kingdom's largest trading partner. The British economy will have to adapt as some export industries decline and firms, especially in the manufacturing and service sectors, consider relocating to a country within the EU's single market and customs union. That adaptation will likely prove a slow and painful process.

The British state will also have to change to cope with Brexit. It will need to organize new customs arrangements, enact new regulations and policies in such areas as agriculture and immigration, and set up new regulators to replace EU bodies. For the next several years, it is hard to see how the government will be able to do much apart from operationalizing Brexit.

Of course, the government's approach to Brexit might change. The stable, pragmatic United Kingdom of old is no more. Politics has become febrile and unpredictable. May is heading a minority government. Ministers squabble in public. Senior civil servants leak damaging stories about their political bosses to the press.

A growing number of people seem to take this instability as a sign that the result of the referendum may be overturned. But it is hard to see how that could happen. The Conservative Party has (with the exception of a few die-hard Europhiles) committed itself to enacting Brexit. And the current leadership of the Labour Party, never particularly keen on EU membership, has decided to maintain the ambiguous position on the issue that helped it exceed expectations in the last election.

Those whose hubris and willingness to put party before country brought the United Kingdom to this juncture, however, are all thriving. Cameron has hit the international speaker circuit and, between jaunts, is writing his memoirs in a designer garden shed that cost him 25,000 pounds. Osborne, the architect of the austerity that impoverished and alienated so many, was hired as the editor of the influential *London Evening Standard*, despite his complete lack of journalistic experience. As for Oliver himself, he was knighted for his achievements and now makes a living working for a high-end consultancy firm providing advice on Brexit. He ends his book with a plea on behalf of his former boss: "I hope history will be kind to you." There is little reason it should. 🗳️