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A rejection of the globalised world order

James Crabtree
For The Straits Times



Ballots being counted at a centre in Glasgow, Scotland, and (below) the first ballot boxes being opened at a centre in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Scots voted strongly to remain in the EU, as did Northern Ireland. PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Britain's exit from the European Union will cause ruptures in every corner of the world. Beyond the short-term drama over the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron, the odds now are that a further breakdown of the United Kingdom will follow.

The future of the EU will be drawn into question. The plunging pound – down to its lowest level against the US dollar since 1985 – roils financial markets. Yet the most profound question Brexit poses is to the post-war liberal international order itself, and the assumptions about globalisation that have long underpinned it.

Mr Cameron's decision to call this week's referendum will go down as one of history's greatest miscalculations. It was born of reckless expediency, and designed to quell tensions within his eurosceptic Conservative Party. Mr Cameron – a self-confident politician, but not a wise one – thought he could win the country round. He was wrong. Having gambled and lost, his departure from Downing Street was inevitable.

Britain's odds of survival are little better. Mr Cameron's greatest political achievement came in last year's Scottish independence referendum, when a narrow majority opted to remain in the United Kingdom. But that legacy is set to be undone along with him. The Scots voted strongly to remain in Europe, as did Northern Ireland. In the English nation, only London voted to remain.

As Britain prepares to leave the EU, calls for a second Scottish referendum on the UK question will prove hard to stop, and with them the dissolution of the United Kingdom.

At a more intellectual level, however, yesterday's results will send shockwaves through the establishments of Britain and Europe, and the prosperous elites who comprise them. As a British citizen who moved recently to Singapore, I watched the recent campaign from afar. But I was nonetheless struck by the uniformly pro-European views held by most of my country's educated, urban upper strata.

Among my own circle on Facebook over recent months, I read just a single post advocating leaving. By contrast, hundreds tumbled out with passionate calls for Remain, some from europhile Britons, others from cosmopolitan Europeans, urging friends across the Channel to stay. Mine is admittedly not a representative sample, but it provided something of a window on to the much larger echo-chamber made up of the winners from globalisation – and one whose members must now rethink many of their most basic political and economic assumptions.



At its heart, Brexit was a rejection of decades of European and global integration, a process that has benefited well-to-do residents in cities like London, Paris and Washington, but proved deeply disquieting to most of those living in the countries around them. In this sense, this week's vote is just the latest and most significant example of a pattern of anger and outrage against globalisation and capitalism which links the march of populism around Europe, via the Occupy movements that fanned out from Wall Street into Asian cities, to, more recently, the rise of Donald Trump in America.

At its most visceral, this rejection focuses on migration, one of globalisation's defining attributes. Britain's Leave campaign deployed two winning messages: that immigration was too high, and that Britain needed to "take back control". Behind this lay a melange of worries about an influx of Polish workers, Syrian refugees and Muslim terrorists – fears that are strikingly similar to those Mr Trump exploits in the US.

In Britain, the Remain camp never did find a convincing reply. If the EU itself is to survive, it too must find better answers to the misgivings of its citizens over unfettered movements of people.

Yet Brexit is also a forceful repudiation of a second set of views favoured instinctively by liberal metropolitan types, namely that the present era of open globalisation could produce prosperity for all citizens. It is by now widely accepted that the last two decades have seen a highly uneven distribution of the gains from global integration, most of which have been enjoyed by those who, in Britain's case, likely voted to remain in the EU. But so far, even Europe's redistributive welfare states have failed to redress this.

It is little wonder that anxious voters in Britain, in common with those in many other wealthy countries, expressed frustration at institutions, like the EU, that they view as having failed them.

Just as the intellectual basis for globalisation is challenged by this week's vote, so the political institutions that sustain it will be shaken too. Britain and the EU will spend years painfully unpicking their union.

Other European countries will consider leaving. The economic fallout from Brexit will be felt in America, at a tumultuous time in its own politics, which Mr Trump could exploit. All this will sap energy from the Atlantic alliance, leaving the West weakened and self-absorbed at a critical juncture in global history.

Those who seek to challenge it, not least Russia's President Vladimir Putin, will smell an opportunity. Crucially, the attention of leaders in Europe, and likely even North America, will be drawn away from Asia, and their faltering attempts to grapple with the challenge of a rising China in particular.

This week's vote may well bring about the end of the United Kingdom, a union that has endured since 1707. It is going to take quite a fight to avoid much of the post-war liberal order going down with it.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is a visiting senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He is on sabbatical from The Financial Times, where he was until recently its Mumbai bureau chief.

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