

As the reality of Britain's Brexit vote sinks in, racism and economic uncertainty is on the rise, amid wild speculation over what might happen next. *Paola Totaro* reports.

# 'Leave' of their senses



You couldn't make it up. Not even if you tried. At 4.30pm last Sunday, just 72 hours after Britain shocked itself, and the world, by voting to exit the European Union, Rachel Johnson, a high-profile editor and former London mayor Boris Johnson's sister, tweeted: "Everyone keeps saying 'We are where we are' but nobody seems to have the slightest clue where that is."

The tweet was hastily deleted but the cat was out of the bag.

In a newspaper column published a few hours earlier, Rachel, an outspoken but profoundly loyal sibling, effectively confirmed that her brother had "played a brilliant blinder" in pursuit of his ambition for the prime ministership, and that he'd simply been lucky enough to see "17,410,742 others" go with him.

Her passionately pro-Europe article admitted that the Johnson family – grandparents, parents and kids – were torn by the referendum and she eloquently described her own desolate, post-referendum moment weeping on a French beach.

"Oh Boris," the piece was headed, "you made my kids cry."

The referendum of June 23 has torn Britain in two. In parks and cafes, around dinner tables and pubs, on buses and trains across the nation, Brexit is the sole subject on everyone's lips.

Within hours of the result, the traditionally temperate *Economist* magazine launched its coverage under the banner "Anarchy in the UK".

The Conservative prime minister, David Cameron, shell-shocked but gracious in defeat, resigned. The pound went into freefall, reaching 30-year lows. The sharemarket plummeted. Richard Branson declared that his Virgin empire had lost one-third of its value as the world's financial capital began counting potential job losses in the thousands.

Now the British Labour Party has imploded. Left-wing leader Jeremy Corbyn is under siege, accused of running an opaque campaign for "Remain" and refusing to deny extraordinary claims that he had secretly voted "Leave".

Most of his frontbench has quit in fury. On Tuesday, 80 per cent of his parliament colleagues said they had lost confidence in him. Unlike Cameron, though, he is hanging on and refusing to budge. Meanwhile, Boris Johnson plots his ascension to Downing Street.

Significantly, a generational divide has also split the country. Figures reveal 61 per cent of those aged over 65 voted to leave, while 75 per cent of the nation's

Demonstrators in Trafalgar Square voice their unhappiness with Brexit.

18- to 24-year-olds, voted to remain.

In London, the Metropolitan Police reported an ugly new threat. A city known globally for its tolerance and civil debate has, in just a few days of this new, not-so-United Kingdom era, witnessed an unprecedented spike in racially charged attacks. Over the post-referendum weekend, police reported a 57 per cent increase in public abuse and hate crimes. A Scotland Yard source told *The Guardian* it was "no coincidence" that the increase came off the back of the EU vote.

In a rare moment of emotion, Cameron observed that in the few days post-Brexit, Britain has witnessed "despicable graffiti daubed on a Polish community centre, we've seen verbal abuse hurled against individuals because they are members of ethnic minorities".

At the big end of town, not one but three ratings agencies, including Moody's and Fitch, downgraded Britain's credit rating. High-profile investment programs – including the expansion of Heathrow international airport – were immediately put on the backburner in a continuing maelstrom of economic uncertainty.

A growing list of corporate heavyweights, including Goldman Sachs, have raised the spectre of transferring their British operations back to the Continent, as lawyers explained that all the big American banks – most of which employ tens of thousands of staff in Britain – now face massive transfer operations.

Chances are that, post-Brexit, these companies will need to find new, legal "home bases" and the only answer is to shift workers from London to other big European centres, including Paris and Frankfurt.

Oh, and let's not forget that Britain's EU commissioner has quit and that Scotland is now flirting with another independence referendum. Or that a haunted Northern Ireland can see its peace settlement, hard won on the blood, sweat and tears of so many, is now hanging by a thread.

After many months of imploring voters to "put the Great back into Britain" and "help take our country back, take control of our future" it became clear – as Rachel Johnson noted – that in victory, the Brexiters themselves were flummoxed about what tomorrow, let alone next year, might mean.

The former deputy prime minister and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg wrote that the "Leave" lot managed to persuade the nation to "jump out of a plane without parachutes" but they've

"no idea how to avoid a crash landing".

Worse still, he noted, the pledges they made about the future have all turned out to be porkies. The UK Independence Party leader, Nigel Farage, has already reneged on claims by the "Leave" campaign that EU membership savings would provide £350 million a week to spend on the resource-strapped National Health Service (NHS).

And then there was Tory Daniel Hannan, a member of the European Parliament, who had the gall to deny that the "Leave" campaign never really believed its mantra – repeated ad nauseam – that an exit from the EU would "reduce immigration".

And so, by the middle of this week, Brexit had turned to Regrexit.

Four million people had signed a petition stating that the "undersigned call upon Her Majesty's Government to implement a rule that if the remain or leave vote is less than 60 per cent based on a turnout less than 75 per cent there should be another referendum". This is not insignificant: in Britain, any petition with more than 100,000 signatures must be debated in parliament.

The madness continued with the councils of Cornwall and Yorkshire, both proudly "Leave" voters, who shamelessly issued a demand for the new Brexit government to commit to replacing the hundreds of millions of pounds they stand to lose. The farce continued in Wales as visiting TV reporters interviewed "Leave" voters outside brand new, shiny football stadiums, built with the help of EU funds, and broadcast quotes along the lines of, "What has the EU ever done for us?"

Britain's global status wasn't helped by news reports that soon went viral suggesting that in the 24 hours following the referendum, the most searched question on Google from Britain was "What is the EU?"

Of all the numbers bandied about this week, the most important is 50.

Article 50 is a fundamental plank of the Treaty of Lisbon, signed in 2007 and made law two years later as part of a concerted push to make the EU "more democratic, more transparent and more efficient". Ultimately, it is the rather basic, five-point mechanism to be followed by any country that chooses to leave the European Union. Trouble is, nobody has ever used it because when it was drawn up no lawmaker countenanced the notion that anyone would actually want to leave.

Understandably, Britain's audacious decision to bail out sparked an

immediate retaliatory demand from EU powerbrokers that Article 50 be triggered immediately to launch the two-year pull-out negotiations stipulated by the treaty.

But exactly when the trigger should be pulled and by whom – let alone what exactly can be negotiated – remains clouded in legalese. Pre-referendum, David Cameron had suggested that if "Remain" lost he would invoke it immediately. Instead, he resigned and handed the gun to his nemesis, Boris, who continues to delay, fudge, prevaricate.

Some lawyers, including Australia's Geoffrey Robertson, argue it must be the parliament that approves the move. After all, the referendum result was only an "advisory" to the elected representatives and theoretically, at least, it can be ignored.

This would not be unprecedented: There are examples of other European parliaments, most recently Ireland and Greece, that have simply overlooked referendum results. But for Britain, this could foster continuing toxic economic uncertainties.

The reality is that talk of a second referendum – is just that, talk.

If Article 50 is indeed invoked, Britain will find itself in a profoundly weakened position, sitting at a bargaining table stymied by a two-year sunset clause which means that at the end of the set negotiating period it will have to leave the EU – deal or no new deal.

And exactly what can be negotiated is also messy and difficult to comprehend.

The "Leave" voters insist that Britain – or just England, if Scotland and Northern Ireland eventually seek independence – can have its cake and eat it too. They say they can remain part of the single market and allow free movement of labour while taking control of immigration borders.

The problem with that scenario is that one cannot be exclusive of the other. Norway, put up as a post-Brexit model for Britain, is part of the single economic market but is not an EU member. The downside of this kind of membership is that Norway pays into the Brussels pot just as all other EU members do, on a formula based on population, but it also has kept its immigration borders open. And Norway pays to maintain a government in which it gets no say or vote.

For Britain, with a population of 65 million, it would mean a huge bill and no voice – exactly what David Cameron had been warning the public for months.

As one Australian wag put it this week, "The whole thing's a darn Eton mess." ●



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