

Professor Vernon Bogdanor, one of the UK's foremost constitutional experts, said the referendum vote last June to leave the EU was the result of a long-simmering cultural revolt which showed Britain to be a 'totally different country' from its continental neighbours. But he also believes that the Brexit vote presents serious dangers for the future stability of Northern Ireland; that the so-called 'left-behinds' who accounted for the bulk of the Leave vote will suffer most from the consequences of their choice; that our current political leaders are sorely deceived about the kind of Brexit deal they can win from the rest of the EU in the allotted 2-year time-frame; and that there is still a chance – if a remote one -- that the government could decide to revoke Article 50 and abort the process of leaving if there is another major shift in public opinion.

What brought about the public rejection of the EU after more than 40 years of living with EU law as a 'superior legal order'? Prof Bogdanor says immigration was the lightning-rod around which the rejectionist mood coalesced, but it was fuelled by a deep-seated feeling in provincial Britain that the elite had ignored the will of the people for too long – over Europe, migration, and other things. The scale of the disaffection could be seen from the fact that London was the only major part of England that voted Remain; and the turnout was surprisingly low in London, in Scotland and among young voters, where the desire to keep up ties with Europe was strongest.

In constitutional terms, according to Vernon Bogdanor, the UK is unique in Europe for putting the sovereignty of parliament at the centre of its political system, with no written constitution of the kind that exists in every other EU state. But the issue of Europe has continued to be so divisive, and so toxic for the country's political leaders, that Prof Bogdanor says that it brought down five of the last six Conservative prime ministers: Harold Macmillan, Ted Heath, Margaret Thatcher, John Major and David Cameron himself. When Cameron resorted to the authority of popular sovereignty – through the referendum -- in the hope of settling the divisive European question, he not only misjudged the popular mood. The referendum has caused the ejection of the UK from Europe against the wishes of the government and parliament. Still, Prof Bogdanor suggests that in the light of the UK's post-war political history no-one should have been surprised at the result.

But Prof Bogdanor's account has a twist in the tail. While popular sovereignty trumps parliamentary sovereignty, he says, a sovereign people must always have the right to reassess their verdict.

It follows that even now there is a chance that Article 50, the notification of the UK's intention to leave the EU, could be revoked before Brexit takes place. He sees two scenarios in which another major shift in public mood could possibly take place. In one, the EU modifies the principle of free movement of people, which might substantially change public opinion in Britain. That's unlikely, he says, but possible.

In the second, the UK fails to secure a decent deal on its future relationship with the EU 27 in the two years' negotiating period, because the EU side 'plays out the time'. Any deal, Bogdanor explained, must be ratified by all 27 remaining EU states as well as 11 regional parliaments. And any member state could block the deal by insisting on its own demands – Spain, for example, could seize the chance to assert its rights towards Gibraltar.

Professor Bogdanor is scathing in his assessment of the approach displayed by British political leaders so far. They act, he says, as if the world revolves around Britain, without taking account of the national interests of all the others. Theresa May 'wants the benefits of membership but not the obligations'. But the UK is, in effect, a supplicant, and will have less leverage as a soon-to-be non-member state than David Cameron had in the run-up to the referendum, when he was in a position to urge the EU to make concessions so he could tell the British people he had got a good deal and say they should vote to remain. And a long-term trade deal is likely to take no less than five years to finalise.

So what *will* happen? Prof Bogdanor sums up the main lines of the British stance as 'no' to the EU's internal market and customs union -- because either of those would involve accepting the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice or the EFTA court -- and 'yes' only to the free trade element. But the special deals that Theresa May is looking at, namely

sectoral agreements for favoured industries like financial services and some kind of interim or 'transitional' deal to phase in new arrangements, will be hard to achieve.

The conclusion: the UK is likely to get a worse deal than its leaders have led the public expects.

A wide array of questions were raised by participants at the meeting, and Professor Bogdanor pointed out some glaring paradoxes in the present situation: Theresa May has said she wants her government to give priority to helping the 'left-behinds', but hints that the UK's future may be like buccaneering Singapore. The UK still has a 'stable and moderate' political culture while the EU, he considers, is suffering deep instability in the form of the possible break-up of the Eurozone and the refugee crisis. But then again, a 'hard' border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will be hard to avoid, putting the peace process at risk. And in Scotland, as in England, the cultural imperative of asserting a separate identity may prove stronger than cold economic self-interest. The UK itself is heading for 'an unknown destination'.

As for Professor Bogdanor, he volunteered that he voted in the referendum for Britain to remain in the EU. But all things considered, for the UK to leave 'may be the best in the long run', he remarked.

Sometimes there are no easy answers. It was an illuminating meeting.