

MPs' expenses scandal, and traceable in large part to the war in Iraq. That conflict and its aftermath, as the former UN ambassador Jeremy Greenstock later put it, was "one of those things that got people in this country thinking [that] our elite, our toffs, our leaders up there are not listening to us, are not looking after us in the way that we want". It also alerted us to how far institutions could be pushed away from the demands of truth and sense.

For any serious politician, Iraq should have been a salutary lesson in how big deceptions change things in messy and unpredictable ways, and the pretext for a profound rethink about how politics and power operate. But it did not quite play out like that. One of the most overlooked aspects of modern British history is the fact that the supporters of military intervention included such Conservatives as Johnson, David Davis, Iain Duncan Smith, John Redwood and Michael Gove. In that context, their eventual championing of Brexit represented something grim: people using a collapse in trust they themselves had contributed to, to build support for a course of action that risked squashing trust yet further. (It is telling that in July 2016, Davis used the publication of the Chilcot report about Iraq to accuse Tony Blair of being a liar – and then, three months later, brazenly told the House of Commons that if leaving the EU went to plan: "There will be no downside to Brexit at all, only a considerable upside.")

Among some of the people we once termed remainers, there seems to be a belief that the chaos Brexit causes will sooner or later have beneficial political effects. When people realise their error, perhaps the political mainstream will realign in a pro-European direction; eventually, Labour may rediscover its European voice and lead us back in. It is an appealing vision, but I am not sure the world works like that any more.

One of the surest signs of England's strange political condition is the way that the right seems to benefit from the very chaos it causes. Eventually, if people's anger rises and cannot be quietened, Johnson will doubtless put out the union jack and direct it towards the French and Germans; if their fury grows so uncontrollable that it somehow sweeps him away, it may well benefit altogether shadier forces. Put another way, taking such a vast, historic gamble with this country's future was irresponsible enough, but doing it in the age of QAnon and Tommy Robinson was reckless beyond words.

All this enforces a duty on the politicians who might eventually lead us towards something better. Dysfunctional circumstances give rise to dysfunctional politics, particularly if bad faith is allowed to run rampant and plain truths remain unspoken. So people in the political mainstream – by which I chiefly mean Labour MPs – need to start loudly talking about Brexit, the promises of the people who led the campaign for it, and what life outside Europe is doing to us. Whatever happens, the resentments Brexit causes are likely to benefit some dark political forces, but without voices trying to direct people's exasperation towards something positive, that problem will be even worse.

Such realisations have seemingly yet to arrive in the minds of Tory Brexiteers. It may take a few years of queues and chaos for everything to become clear; Johnson's undoubted political skills and the opposition's shortcomings will probably delay any moment of reckoning yet further. But when it eventually comes, the cleverer politicians among them will surely feel it as a pang of remorse – realising, perhaps, that whatever their aims, hindsight will cast them not as visionaries, but people whose hubris and carelessness were always going to have disastrous consequences.

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