

Post-Brexit Counselling in Middle England

notes for a programme

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A couple might decide to separate, remarks Jonathan Coe in his novel Middle England, for all sorts of reasons: 'adultery, cruelty, domestic abuse, lack of sex'.

But, he continues, a difference of opinion over whether Britain should be a member of the European Union or not? 'It seemed absurd,' he comments. And he adds: 'It was absurd.'

The couple Coe is writing about, Sophie and Ian, decide to take their dispute to a relationships counsellor, Lorna, who remarks that many of the couples she is seeing at present (autumn 2016, shortly after the EU referendum) have mentioned Brexit as a key factor in their growing estrangement.

'I usually start,' says Lorna, 'by asking each of you the same question. Sophie, why are you so angry that Ian voted Leave? And Ian, why are you so angry that Sophie voted Remain?'

Sophie thinks for a long time before answering. 'I suppose,' she eventually says, 'because it made me think that, as a person, he's not as open as I thought he was. That his basic model for relationships comes down to antagonism and competition, not cooperation.'

Lorna nods and turns to Ian. 'It makes me think that she's very naïve, that she lives in a bubble,' he says, 'and can't see how other people around her might have a different opinion to hers. And this gives her a certain attitude. An attitude of moral superiority.'

Lorna turns to the two of them:

'What's interesting about both of those answers is that neither of you mentioned politics. As if the referendum wasn't about Europe at all. Maybe

something much more fundamental and personal was going on. Which is why this might be a difficult problem to solve.'

'More fundamental and personal'

The more fundamental and personal things going on seem to include, Coe is suggesting, differences of worldview – different narratives about reality, human nature, evolution, progress, history, morality. Also, they include different expectations of one's life partner, soul friend, intimate, significant other, best mate. If Lorna had focused her enquiry around things such as these it would have been even more difficult for Ian and Sophie to answer her. It would, however, have captured more obviously why Coe wants to explore middle England at the current time, and why his readers want to keep turning the pages of his book.

The enquiry to Sophie and Ian might then have run along lines such as these:

- What sort of a world do you reckon we all live in? One where a lot of people are essentially different from yourself, with different values, assumptions, interests, concerns, intentions – and are they prone, in consequence, to see you and treat you as a potential or actual threat? Do you yourself therefore need to be suspicious, wary, on your guard? Is it prudent to defend yourself, assert yourself, get your retaliation in first, be in control? Are human beings naturally aggressive and competitive?
- Or do you think the world is basically a friendly place, a place where other people wish you well and will generally help you and trust you, be kind to you? Do you want, in consequence, to meet other people, and interact with them, and learn from them?
- This land you live in. England, part of the United Kingdom, part of the British Isles, part of Europe, part of western civilisation, part of Planet Earth. What do you like about this place you're in, what are you grateful for? What's not to like, what are you ashamed of, which things do you wish were different?
- Is the world getting more friendly, would you say, and less dangerous, less threatening? Has it improved for you? Is it still improving? Is the best still to come? Or is everything going downhill, getting nastier, falling apart?
- And what do you look for in a spouse or best mate, a husband or wife? Someone who gives you moral support, courage, affirmation and confirmation, reassurance, belief in yourself? Or someone who admonishes, warns, challenges, points out when you appear to see demons that in point of fact aren't there, someone who tells you when you seem to be getting arrogant, above yourself, superior?

No wonder Lorna comments that 'this might be a difficult problem to solve'!

Not that Lorna's underlying questions were only about relationships between lovers or spouses. Her searching questions were also about relationships between parents and children, and amongst siblings, workplace colleagues and neighbours, and amongst members of the same team, group, club, organisation, union, church, political party.

Fast forward

Fast forward two years. It's now mid-February 2019 in real time. Newspapers and broadcasts are crammed with discourse in which the dominant words and phrases include meaningful vote, withdrawal agreement, Article 50, leave-seat representatives, cliff-edge, world trade organisation, parliamentary arithmetic, Norway-style deal, Canada-plus, people's vote, countdown clock, extension, backstop, no deal.

No doubt such words and such discourse are necessary. But whatever they lead to at the end of March – 'leave', 'remain', 'still not yet clear' – is uncertain, and is probably dependent on chance and randomness as much as on rational resolution.

What is, though, reasonably certain is that the questions posed by Jonathan Coe's relationships counsellor, sketched above, are not going to go away, and increasingly need to be attended to, difficult and painful though they are.

Reminders

Here are a few reminders of issues that need to be attended to:

'The divisions exposed by the EU Referendum were stark. In cities, younger middle-class voters came out overwhelmingly for remain while in nearby towns and villages older, working-class voters turned out in similarly large numbers to leave. We are divided by more than just attitudes to Brexit. Over the last 40 years, as our towns have aged, and our cities have grown younger, social attitudes on immigration, social security and civil rights have diverged. Steadily but increasingly there are now two Englands that sit unhappily side by side' (Lisa Nandy MP, 2018).¹

'We are a disunited kingdom – a country that is seen as increasingly unfair, less tolerant and headed in the wrong direction. Brexit has exposed fractures that have split families and divided friends, made us meaner and angrier as a society, and stoked fears of violent protest and civil disorder.' (Report on a public opinion survey, January 2019).²

'On both sides of what we might term our national trauma, there is fury and hurt. It hasn't gone away. In many ways it has heightened in the last fortnight [January 2019], as the clock ticks down. There is fear and a sense of fragility, often masked by aggression and even bullying. It is easy for both parties in this traumatic break to exclude or ridicule the

legitimacy of the other's position. The result of the referendum was a transfer of angry feelings from many leavers, those who had been economically and socially squeezed, to remainers ...The question is how to absorb and reflect on the dispossession and rage.' (Susie Orbach, January 2019).³

If Lorna and people like her had spoken out immediately after the referendum, and if their voices had been amplified in the media, and had been listened to, the debates and conversations currently taking place in Westminster, and up and down the country, might be rather different – might be rather more purposeful, hopeful, respectful, promising.

It cannot be denied, however, that Lorna's questions are uncomfortable and discomfiting. They demand – amongst other things – self-criticism and self-searching. As it were, they demand a kind of truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) inside each individual, group or faction and require participants in the commission to face their own shadows, mistakes, failures, histories and denials.

Also, in addition to such humility, and to the conditions that are safe enough for such humility to be worth trying, there needs to be empathy, compassion, mediation and patience.

It's not at all surprising, even though it's regrettable, that Brexit-related TRCs are so far so thin on the ground. For indeed, 'this might be a difficult problem to solve'.

Looking ahead

Looking ahead, beyond the end of March 2019, here are thoughts, images and hopes from the last pages of three recent books about Brexit. The first two quotations are respectively from *Heroic Failure* by Fintan O'Toole and *Rule Britannia* by Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson. The third is again from *Middle England* by Jonathan Coe.

A nation state is, first and foremost, a shelter. In the hard rain of neoliberal globalisation people know that they cannot be fully protected. But they do reasonably expect an umbrella over their heads ... The gross inequality produced by neoliberalism is increasingly incompatible with democracy ... If there is to be a world beyond pain and self-pity, it is necessary to fix the umbrella. (Fintan O'Toole)

This short-term folly over Brexit may well, in the longer term, make the chastened British kinder as a people, more worldly wise, more modest, more aware – better citizens of the world. (Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson)

Ian and Sophie in Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* eventually get back together and at the end of the novel they are expecting their first child, whose birth is due to take place on or about the 29 March 2019. Around the end of September

2018, which incidentally was close to Middle England's publication date, Sophie is driving along a country lane somewhere in the middle of England:

Her eyes were fixed on the road ahead as she accelerated down the lane, one hand on the steering wheel, the other resting on her swollen belly: home, for now, to Sophie and Ian's tentative gesture of faith in their equivocal, unknowable future: their beautiful Brexit baby. (Jonathan Coe)

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¹ Lisa Nandy MP, her foreword to *Fear, Hope and Loss: understanding the drivers of hope and hate* by Rosie Carter, Hope and Hate Charitable Trust, summer 2018.

² Quoted in a news item by Andrew Sparrow in *Angrier and meaner: Brexit exposes growing fractures in UK society*, Guardian, 28 January 2019.

³ Susie Orbach, *Where next? How to cope with Brexit anxiety*, Guardian, 26 January 2019.