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**The EU Debate:
A European Neighbourhood**
Professor Sir Geoffrey Nice QC

UK Member of Parliament Jo Cox’s murder was a shock; but not a complete surprise. Thousands, perhaps millions, of our citizens realised that our politicians were taking risks with our often peaceable natures by the language they have been using. Those perceiving risk said nothing or little so as not to scare-monger, not to make self–fulfilling prophesies. They watched and listened with despair waiting for some politician who would concede real sense in her/his opponent’s argument and invite the audience to weigh things up carefully, just as you might hope would happen if you were a cabinet minister being briefed by civil servants, or a decent ‘Captain of Industry’ being advised on how a particular decision should be made. Instead, with our politicians persisting in the belief that aggressive, gladiatorial, adversarial debate is as useful as it is entertaining, we have been bombarded by competing arguments we cannot possibly evaluate.

The language many politicians have used in these adversarial debates was not for our benefit, not truly to inform or to educate us, the mass electorate. Justice Minister Gove and former London Mayor Johnson, Prime Minister Cameron and Finance Minister Osborne do not *really* want the voter to weigh up economic forecasts or security briefings in order to make a decision. Not at all. They want us to be *persuaded* by their – G&J’s or C&O’s – arguments and presentations on the facts they *assert* because they know the electors do not have the necessary expertise properly to judge. Can many of us explain why we accept or reject an argument about loss of GDP that will or not follow BREXIT? Few; almost none. We *choose* between presenters; we do not assess and decide on merit of argument because, in truth, we cannot. And so language has – from the start – been more important than content, something that will become only too clear if the winning side’s forecasts are shown in due course to have been wildly or even dangerously wrong: then it will be the presenters not the arguments who will be held to account.

You need little experience or knowledge of violent conflicts to know that to divide a society by thoughts or beliefs that confront each other across an unbridgeable trench is to take a risk. And it is no use saying that anyone who responds to the sight of the trench with violence is mentally unusual – this is close to the argument America uses about lone gunmen time and time again. We liberal outsiders from the UK will have none of *that* argument – it is the gun-laden society, we argue, that allows the mentally unusual individual to commit mass killings and that is to blame. And so, closer to our UK home, to create by extravagant language a trench between lines of thought that makes one part of a society see no sense at all in the other part of society was always to create a grave risk. ‘Tribal’ division of any society thus achieved is one of a limited number of prerequisites for mass violence. Did our politicians not realise that; did they not sense the slope on which they balanced and may have slid?

It will be interesting to see if any MP or Peer in Westminster apologises for having raised the linguistic ‘stakes’ to such a pitch as to release active lunacy in others. It won’t happen. Governments, political groups and party machines do not acknowledge guilt and never apologise. Justify, yes. Get others to apologise, yes. Apologise themselves – never. The mental state of MP Jo Cox’s killer *can* be questioned – but the Referendum was imposed on all: the clever, those who think they are clever, those who are not clever, and those who may be disturbed. A decision by all for all. A decision pushed onto us for no good reason and something that will not be apologised for whatever the result.

None of the above helps me with my vote, which is to Remain in the EU. And for the simplest reason rarely stated, namely that we are neighbours engaged in a neighbourly project that it would be quite wrong to quit. The economic /world influence arguments have been won. Of course those foreign and national experts *could* all be wrong. But the arguments about economic consequences combined with loss of influence are overwhelming and it would have been better for BREXIT to have said: ‘assume a 2% drop in GDP, accept departure of major institutions from UK, allow for an increase in unemployment and a drop in house prices, we STILL say BREXIT is right’. Then their argument might have won respect from those wrestling with expert opinions they can only assess by their overwhelming bulk.

No, we joined up. ‘We’ are quite as much part of the villainous ‘they’ attacked by BREXIT as anyone else: it is our democracy that puts in place our EU Commissioners; it is our citizens who are part of the EU civil service because they can apply to work for the EU just as for the UK civil service; it is our Ministers who work in the Council of Ministers and our lawyers who become members of the Court of Justice. Throughout the life of the club we asked to join we have been able to seek change, to publicise the need for change and to effect change. And we have done much of that. It may well be that we have not done as much as we could have done to publicise in our national electoral contests what needs to be improved in Europe – if so then it was our fault, not the fault of the EU ‘they’ on whom BREXIT campaigners heap all criticism. The referendum has at least shown that there is fellow feeling – fellow concern – from others within the club about many topics. We can work harder on those and with increased prospects of support. But on whether we should break up the club and return to nation states seeking power they do not merit in a world largely centred elsewhere, the answer is clear to me. Stick with our neighbours.

And what about immigration? It is, of course, the ultimate neighbour issue. Ultimately it will fall to the same principal – utilitarian or religious backed as it may be – that it is in your own best interest to treat your neighbour as yourself. As neighbours we should treat each other on good neighbour terms; it is, maybe, far too early to accept that all of Africa is to be treated identically as our European neighbours should be treated. But imagine Europe as a set of semi-detached houses in a suburban street facing refugees where all houses bar one have signs allowing lodgers or tenants on reasonable terms. The only house – neatly painted in red white and blue – that is different is ours, the UK’s. It says ‘No’ to immigrants. Just as houses in the UK used to in earlier days, the 1950s and 1960s. Those of us who can recall those days will remember the embarrassment that slowly dawned, forced on us by writers, journalists and filmmakers. We can recall how embarrassment turned to a sense of disgrace. We know how making a special case for our neatly painted house now will bring disgrace and who knows what else in time to come. On immigration we must act now jointly with Europeans *within* Europe as good neighbours in order that we may all ultimately act as good neighbours in a dangerous, troubled world.

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