

Comment: *The Sun* on the Taoiseach

‘Shut your gob’, ‘Grow up’, *The Sun* instructed the Taoiseach on Saturday November 18, 2017. (Owned by Rupert Murdoch, *The Sun* has a daily circulation of about 2 million and is famous for its hectoring headlines.) Mr Varadkar had criticized the progress of the negotiations for the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union, particularly as regards the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland. He should stop ‘disrespecting 17.4 million voters’, so *The Sun* splutters: ‘his arrogance stems from a delusion that he can — single-handedly — stop Brexit’.

Well, 17, 410, 742 voted to leave, right enough. On the other hand, 16, 141,241 voted to remain. Moreover, on the 72% turn out, in fact only 37% of the registered UK electorate of 46, 501, 241 voted to leave. People abstain for all sorts of reasons. They might be sick, it might be raining, they may just have forgotten. In this particular case, people did not bother most likely because they assumed, as partisans of leaving say they themselves did, that the vote would go in favour of remaining.

They didn’t run the same page in the Irish version of *The Sun*. Perhaps this was for fear of losing Irish readers — which would have been to miss long practised Irish humour with the patronizing antics of the Brits. No, the likeliest thing, unhappily, is that *The Sun* was not addressing any one in the Republic but just stoking up old-fashioned music-hall anti-Irish xenophobia amongst their readers. Also, sales in Belfast no doubt tickled Democratic Unionist Party members — Arlene Foster made similar remarks about Mr Varadkar.

Until recently, of course, the very idea of national plebiscites was regarded in British politics as ‘unconstitutional’. In May 1945 Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister, proposed holding a referendum over extending the life of the wartime Coalition until victory was won over Japan (which was to come much earlier than expected, as the President of the United States authorized nuclear bombs). Clement Attlee, leader of Churchill’s Coalition partners, refused: ‘I could not consent to the introduction into our national life of a device so alien to all our traditions as the referendum, which has only too often been the instrument of Nazism and Fascism’.

Thirty years on, in March 1975, when the Labour administration planned one, Margaret Thatcher quoted Attlee: referendums are ‘a device of dictators and demagogues’, mentioning Napoleon, Mussolini and Hitler.

There have been three UK-wide national referendums. One, to please the Liberal Democrats in David Cameron's Coalition, was for Britain to change to a different voting system. No change, on a low turn out.

The other two, funnily enough, have been principally to deal with splits over the UK's relationship with Europe in Labour and Conservative ranks respectively.

In the October 1974 general election Harold Wilson promised a yes/no referendum, following renegotiation of membership of the European Community. He wanted to deal with significant splits within the Labour party, the membership of which had voted 2:1 in favour of withdrawal. This referendum went in favour of remaining, as the Prime Minister wanted: only Shetland and the Outer Hebrides voted against.

In 2013 the Conservatives planned to hold a remain/leave referendum, following renegotiation of powers between the UK and the EU. Their Liberal Democrat coalition partners opposed it. They attempted to pass the required legislation as a Private Member's Bill but this was denied by the House of Lords. Following the 2015 general election, however, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, committed the new government to holding the referendum. It took place on 23 June 2016. Of the 382 voting areas, 263 returned majority votes in favour of 'Leave' whilst 119 returned majority votes in favour of 'Remain', including every area in Scotland and all but five of the London boroughs. This time the Prime Minister lost and resigned.

The Taoiseach was only saying what is obvious: six months on, even as the trade relationship between the UK and the EU is being negotiated, the Irish border issue is unresolved. Insulting the Taoiseach is not a good move at any stage of the negotiations. Like all 27 EU countries, Ireland will have a veto over the Brexit trade deal. It is to be hoped that in chucking this abuse at the Taoiseach *The Sun* does not speak for many of the 17.4 million.

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