

CONCOURS D'ENTREE  
EN 4<sup>ème</sup> ANNEE

Epreuve d'Anglais

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## How Brexit damaged Britain's democracy - What would Walter say? *The Economist*, April 1<sup>st</sup> 2017

*Our outgoing columnist laments the condition of the British state*



TO CALL Britain's referendum on Brexit a great act of democracy is both to describe it and to **debase** the word "democracy". Campaigners traded not hard facts last June but insults to the electorate's intelligence. Remainers foresaw immediate economic Armageddon outside the EU, while Leavers insinuated that millions of scary Muslims would move to Britain if the country stayed in the club. Aspersion were cast on opponents' motives and character. Dodgy statistics were shoved through letterboxes and plastered on the sides of buses. On the big day turnout was mediocre for such an epoch-making decision: the 52% who backed Brexit constituted just 37% of eligible voters.

A low-rent, **bilious** referendum has begotten low-rent, bilious politics. It has **cowed** the House of Commons, the "despotic and final" authority of the British system, in the words of Walter Bagehot, the Victorian constitutionalist and former editor of *The Economist* whose name dignifies this column. MPs are paid to be representatives, not delegates, obeying their own judgment over the roiling opinions of their constituents. But the force of the referendum, a McCarthyite mood in the Brexiteer press and a prime minister whose original support for Remain seems **more baffling** by the week combined to neuter the legislature. Hundreds of parliamentarians filed, dead-eyed, through the **lobbies** granting Theresa May the untrammelled power to conduct and conclude exit talks most of them believe will do Britain harm. The referendum has tamed an institution meant to be constructively feral.

Parliament's **spinelessness** is matched only by its marginalisation. In his book, "The English Constitution", Walter Bagehot described the "nearly complete fusion" of executive and legislature as a foundation of the British political system. ("To belong to a debating society adhering to an executive...is not an object to stir a noble ambition," he noted.) Mrs May's Great Repeal Bill, the coming legislation putting European laws on British books, offends this tradition. Its "Henry VIII" clauses would enable the prime minister to fiddle unilaterally with the tide of rules as it washes into Britain's environmental, employment, legal and tax regimes.

Ordinarily the opposition might be relied on to stand up to this sort of thing. But Jeremy Corbyn is no ordinary opposition leader. Only he could convene an "emergency" rally

outside Parliament to protest against the triggering of Article 50 and then fail to turn up, while simultaneously whipping his own MPs to support it. If Mr Corbyn causes the prime minister

any worry it is that she might forget his name in an interview. At this rate, domestic scrutiny of the government's negotiations with the EU will be patchy and, freshly Brexited, Britain will not face a serious choice at the 2020 election.

The elision of Brexit and the national interest has curdled British politics. "ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE", bellowed the right-wing *Daily Mail*, when judges ruled that Mrs May had to consult Parliament on launching the talks. More than that, it goes against the Westminster system's way of doing things: unlike, say, France or America, Britain mostly keeps the tribalism and ceremony of the state (the "dignified" parts of the constitution, as Walter Bagehot put it) separate from the practical functioning of government (its "efficient" parts). Brexit has forced them together.

To follow some of the coverage of British politics you would think that the Scots, now closing in on a second independence referendum, all hated the English and adored the EU; that the old cared nothing about the prospects of the young; that the young were all vacuous virtue-signallers; that Remainers were snobby metropolitans who can state their bank balances only to the nearest thousand pounds and that Leavers were knuckle-dragging racists. It is odd to live in a country whose very name—the United Kingdom—sounds increasingly sarcastic.

This Britain feels quite unlike the one that hosted the Olympics with such cheer five years ago. These two moments, London 2012 and Article 50, 2017, bookend your columnist's time covering its politics. Now he is moving on, to a new beat in Berlin. He leaves as prone to gloom about Britain as he was to optimism when he started. The meanness of its politics, the struggling condition of its public services, the coming economic and diplomatic turmoil, the unrealistic expectations of Brexit among voters—it all bodes poorly. To be sure, "**muddling through**" is something Britain is good at and will no doubt manage, one way or another. But the country deserves better. Things did not have to be this way.

### **Go for a constitutional**

The best antidotes are apolitical. Far from Westminster there exists a country more mosaic-like than the raw divisions of its politics allow. A quarter of voters in Islington and Edinburgh opted for Leave; as many residents of Boston, the Lincolnshire town that backed Brexit most keenly, voted to stay in the EU. Millions of pensioners were for Remain. Millions of youngsters wanted out.

Beyond the headlines and TV studios, Britain's everyday impressions are mostly those of a homely and mingled place, not a bitter and binary one. The blare of pop songs on shop radios, the church bell across the marshes. The shared shrugs and sighs after a train has waited too long at a station for some misery-unleashing fault not to have materialised. The saris, shiny suits and waxed jackets, the hipster moustaches and old-school mullets. The emergence from a car park or railway station to be confronted with a scene of architectural horror—or unprepossessing and unexpected gorgeousness.

## **I – VOCABULARY (4 points)**

**For each of the following words (highlighted in the article), choose the best synonym or definition for the word as it used in the context of the article:**

**1. DEBASE**

- a. misunderstand
- b. underline
- c. reinforce
- d. cheapen

**2. BILIOUS**

- a. divisive
- b. unwanted
- c. unrepresentative
- d. ill-tempered

**3. COWED**

- a. encouraged
- b. milked
- c. subdued
- d. divided

**4. MORE BAFFLING**

- a. weaker
- b. more uncertain
- c. more puzzling
- d. more ridiculous

**5. LOBBIES**

- a. pressure groups
- b. boardrooms
- c. hallways
- d. voting areas

**6. SPINELESSNESS**

- a. lack of clout
- b. lack of character
- c. lack of support
- d. lack of confidence

**7. MUDDLING THROUGH**

- a. making progress
- b. overcoming difficulties
- c. bringing people together
- d. getting by

**8. GO FOR A CONSTITUTIONAL**

- a. uphold the constitution
- b. rewrite the constitution
- c. go for a walk
- d. go and visit a constituency

**II – COMPREHENSION (6 points)**

**Choose the best response in the context of the article:**

**1. The referendum on Brexit**

- a. was anti-democratic
- b. was supported by 52% of the British voting population
- c. was an insult to the electorate's intelligence
- d. diminished parliament's stature

**2. The Great Repeal Bill**

- a. will abolish all European legislation directly affecting Britain
- b. will transfer existing European legislation into British law
- c. was initially enacted by Henry VIII
- d. is an example of the “nearly complete fusion” of executive and legislature

### **3. According to the writer, Jeremy Corbyn**

- a. will probably not be a candidate in the 2020 election
- b. called for a protest against the triggering of Article 50 and criticized Labour MPs who were in favour of it
- c. will scrutinize carefully the government's negotiations with the EU
- d. is an extraordinary opposition leader

### **4. The Daily Mail's headline infers that**

- a. members of Parliament have betrayed the voters who elected them
- b. the government should not have to consult Parliament about launching Brexit
- c. the government would have betrayed the people's wishes if they had not consulted parliament
- d. the newspaper considers politicians are enemies of the people if Brexit is considered to be in the national interest

### **5. The writer of the article**

- a. began writing for the Economist in 2012
- b. remains totally pessimistic about Britain's future
- c. feels upbeat about working in Germany
- d. sees a certain inevitability about the current situation in Britain

### **6. The 'everyday impressions' in the last paragraph of the article**

- a. confirm the media's portrayal of Britain
- b. contradict the media's portrayal of Britain
- c. underline the cultural and racial divisions within Britain that led to Brexit
- d. are intended to show that Britain belongs in Europe

## **III WRITTEN EXPRESSION (10 points)**

Discuss the use of the referendum as an instrument of democracy.

(about 300 words)