

ECONOMIC UNION, BREXIT AND DEMOCRACY: LESSON FOR AFRICA

Ogoma, Daniel Ebum

Directorate of University Wide Courses, Landmark University, Pmb 1001, Omu-Aran, Kwara State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Since the Britain's exit from the Economic Union, a move that started in 2016 and concluded in 2017, there have been comments and arguments on why the country did so. Most of the comments are based on economic interests as to whether or not it is to the benefit of Britain and her citizens. Few comments on politics about Brexit have been on its implications on democracy, with most concluding that it shows the deficiency of democracy. The objective of the paper is to show that Brexit is a victory for democracy, and that African leaders should learn from the conduct of the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron, if they intend to be democrats. The paper traces the evolution and development of the EU, how Britain became its member, her exit and its political implications, especially on democracy and Africa. The paper adopts secondary method of data collection and the analysis is done qualitatively.

Keywords: *EU, Brexit, Democracy, Referendum*

Background and the evolution of the Economic Union

The European Union is usually seen as a regional economic organization of some countries in the continent of Europe with the main aim of promoting economic integration among member states. However, the organization is also political in the conduct of her affairs, especially with its political organs and institutions such as the European Commission, the Parliament, the Court of Justice, the European Council, the Court of Auditors and the European Central Bank, the EU looks both economic and political. According to Brian Christopher Jones (2016) "These institutions form a system of government, not merely an economic alliance." The EU cannot but be political because, it is an association of states formed mainly to achieve economic good. In achieving this, political wills and tools are to be involved.

The European Economic Community (EEC) was formed following several treaties that include the Treaty of Paris in 1951 signed by her founding members. Paul Henri Spaak, at the Messina

Conference, was given the task to make final preparation for the establishment of the Union, and by 1956 he submitted his report. On March 25th, 1957, at the Treaty of Rome, the EEC was formed by six independent states in Europe. The founding members are: France, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg and the (then) West Germany. Two basic conditions, as laid down in *The Treaty of Accession 1972(Encyclopedia)* must be met before a state can join the Union; First, it must be from the European continent and second, it must obtain agreement from all the member states. As mentioned earlier, it was formed originally to promote economic integration among member states in the continent of Europe, but also and more importantly, according to the *Schuman Project*,(1972)“to make war unthinkable and materially impossible.”

The EEC incorporated other institutions like the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) at the Merger Treaty of Brussels in 1965. This treaty allowed for the free movement of goods, capital, services and people within the EEC. In 1993, at the Maastricht Treaty, the EEC metamorphosed into the European Community, a name that it had been known with even before the treaty. The Lisbon Treaty of 1993 finally transformed the EEC into the European Union.

The EU was, and still a powerful organization. On many matters, the decisions of the Union are binding on the twenty-eight member states, thereby having negative impacts on the sovereignty of its national governments. According to Ian Hurd (2014;253): “The European Union (EU) has taken an enormous share of the sovereignty powers of “international organization” and “sovereign state.” This is unlike what obtains in many other international organizations like the United Nations and the African Union.

Britain’s membership of the EEC

Reasons have been put forward as to why Britain joined the EEC at the time she did. Since the EEC was perceived by many as an organization with only economic pursuit, it is believed that it was this that was the driving force that propelled Britain to join the organization. According to Alan Sked (2016) the EEC in the 1960s and 1970s was not a strong body that could influence real economic growth in Europe for its members, and the rate of economic growth in the member states was not better than that of Britain. For him, if Britain witnessed economic growth, it was owed to Thatcherism, and not the EEC. He says:

If growth rates in Western Europe were 3.5% in the 1950s and 4.5% in the 1960s, British growth rates were in any case not very far behind and often ahead. In 1959, when Macmillan took office, the real annual growth rate of British GDP, according to the Office of National Statistics, was almost 6%. It was again almost 6% when de Gaulle vetoed Britain's first application to join the EEC in 1963. In 1973, when we entered, our annual national growth rate in real terms was a record 7.4%. The present Chancellor would die for such a figure. So the economic basket case argument doesn't work.(Sked, 2016)

The real reason, according to Sked why Britain joined the organization was therefore political. It was to subvert the domination of France in the EEC and this was backed by the America. Harold Macmillan's close links with the likes of Jean Monnet, John Foster Dulles, David Bruce and George Ball, all of whom are sympathetic to the American foreign policies, according to Alan Sked, influenced Britain's desire and decision to join the EEC, more than the economic reasons.

Britain's journey to the EEC started on 30th July, 1961 when Britain, under the leadership of Harold Macmillan, alongside Ireland and Denmark, applied for membership. But for Britain, the other two (Denmark and Ireland) memberships probably could have been faster. One necessary condition for joining the EEC was that every other member without one, must agree. France, under their powerful and influential President, Charles De Gaulle, was opposed to the membership of Britain. De Gaulle could read the intention of Harold and his link with America. He was to later block Britain's admission into the EEC, regarding Britain as an American's Trojan horse, (Michael White; 2016). De Gaulle was said to have questioned Britain for seeking membership of the Union when her economy was even better than those of the EEC states. For this reason, De Gaulle vetoed Britain's membership throughout the time he was in power.

De Gaulle left power in 1969 and was succeeded by Georges Pompidou. Harold Macmillan was also succeeded by Edward Heath. Following the decision of the EEC members to enlarge the organization's membership at the referendum passed by 68% in April 1972, Britain applied for membership again in October 1972. The British leader was able to convince the Parliament on the need to join the EEC once again and the move was supported by 81.3% votes. On January 1st, 1973, Britain joined the Union. But, Heath, being a Conservative, was not keen about the European project. Harold Wilson, on June 5th, 1975, (Jan-Henrik Meyer, 1975) had to conduct a

referendum on whether or not Britain should continue her membership of the Union and, in a turnout of 65%, 67.23, and 66 out of 68 counting areas, massively voted to stay.

In other words, even though referendum was not conducted at the point of entry into the Union, Britain gave her citizens the opportunity to have their say in a policy that would affect their lives.

Conceptual Framework

Democracy

Democracy is widely recognized as the best system of government because all other systems are bad. A major challenge with the concepts however is the meaning. It is a word that has been variously and differently defined. Different and conflicting principles are in operation in many of the so-called democratic governments and states. This makes it difficult to define. This must have prompted Heywood (2007; 72) to submit that if “a term that can mean anything to anyone is in danger of meaning nothing at all.” The author however defines democracy as: “a system of decision-making based on the principle of majority rule.” For Phillis Shively (2012; 152), after describing democracy as a “range of things rather than a single thing”, states that: “A democracy is a regime in which all fully qualified citizens vote at regular interval to choose from among alternative candidates, the people who will be in charge of setting the state’s policies.”

In spite of the diversity of definitions of the concept, most scholars tend to agree that the word was first used among the Greek people of Athens. Their government was said to be democratic because, the ‘people’ made, implemented and interpreted their laws and formulated their policies. According to Pericles on the Athenian democracy, cited by Thucydides (1975)

Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the

kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people's feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect. (Thucydides, 1975)

The Athenian democracy was classical and direct in the sense that all qualified citizens met and discussed matters affecting them. This was aided by some factors such as slavery, geography, population and the meaning of citizenship. What obtains in many countries that lay claim to democracy in the modern time is the representative democracy. This is a political machinery in which citizens vote or choose leaders to represent, promote and protect their interests in government. Heater, D. (1964; 134) noted that democracy, whichever way is seen or defined, is a way of life, and that democracy suggests five basic principles of equality, sovereignty, respect for human life and dignity, liberty and rule of law. Democracy is based on the assumption that sovereignty resides with the people and that their representatives are both responsible and accountable to them. Central to any democracy therefore are the concepts of responsibility and accountability. Democracy allows the citizens of a state to have certain control over those who govern them so as to prevent tyranny. Among the measures of control over the servant-leaders of the state are public opinion, initiative, re-call and referendum.

Referendum

Unfortunately, some of the so-called most democratic states in the world such as the United States of America, at the central level, do not have a place for referendum in their constitutions. According to Phillips Shively (2012; 237), one reason for the non-recognition of referendum by some states is that: voters do not have the time or resources to inform themselves about the intricacies of a bill. In a sense, that is what their politicians are hired for.

Heywood, (2007) states that: "A referendum is a vote in which the electorate can express a view on a particular issue of public policy. It is typically used not to replace representative institutions, but to supplement them." For M. Magstadt (2006; 637): "Referendum is a vote through which citizens may directly repeal an action taken by their legislature."

Referendum is like election where people chose among the alternative candidates. Unlike election, however, in referendum, the citizens vote only "yes" or "no." Still, unlike election, the

citizens vote for or against a public policy but not candidates. It sometimes happens that the representatives of the people lose contact with them and they are unable to gauge the mind of the people on certain issue of public concern. A law may be made or a policy formulated which the people are not in support of. When such is done and people protest against such a law or policy, a responsible democratic government may decide to throw up the matter to the people so as to directly hear from them. If the majority vote against such a law or policy, their decision will be respected and the law or policy will be reversed. This is what informed the view of Magstadt, (2006) as earlier pointed out.

Referendum and the Brexit

Brexit can be broken down into two words: Britain and exit. Brexit is the term that is used to describe the pulling out of Britain from the EU, a move that started in June 2016 and completed in 2017. Alex Hunt and Brian Wheeler (2017) state that Brexit “ is a word that has become used as a shorthand way of saying the UK leaving the EU-merging the words Britain and exit to get Brexit, in a same way as a possible Greek exit from the euro was dubbed Grexit in the past.”There are different opinions as to whether or not Britain will be better after her exit from the Union or not. Most scholars and commentators have concerned their debate on this issue from the economic standpoint. This is not the interest of this paper. Rather, it is to show its place in democracy.

On June 23rd, the Prime Minister of Britain, David Cameron approved the conduct of a referendum to decide whether or not Britain should continue her membership of the EU. Before then, there had been some agitations in some quarters that Britain should leave the Union. The minority Tory Party was the brain behind this agitation. The party called for a leave in the Union, insisting that the EU policy on free movement into the member states of citizens is inimical to Britain and her citizens. But their real argument was that the EU eroded the sovereignty of Britain.

The British Parliament had voted in favour of Britain to stay in the EU but the agitation did not stop. It was then the idea of a referendum was mooted, after all, in 1975, the same was done in which majority drew their support for continuity in the EU. Following the vote in the parliament, Cameron and other members who are on the side of ‘stay’, had thought they have no problem in

throwing their support for a referendum which would finally lay the matter to rest. The referendum was conducted and the result was declared by 51.9% in favour of 'leave' and 49.1% to 'stay'. The referendum brought Britain's membership of the EU to a close, leaving the Union with 27 members.

Immediately after the declaration of the result of the referendum, there were amidst reactions. The first was from the Prime Minister, Cameron who must have been surprised by the outcome of the referendum. On June 24th, 2016, just hours after the declaration of the result, he tendered his resignation letter to the parliament. His resignation was to take effect in October 2016. This would have been probably shorter but it was to give the parliament time to choose his successor to office. The new American government led by President, Donald Trump, urged Britain to stay in the EU, not minding the impact of the Britain stay in the Union has on its sovereignty, voice of the people and democracy. This call by the America on Britain to stay in the EU has been described by Brian Christopher (2016) as being hypocritical. According to him: "Urging Britain to remain in the European Union only based on economic argument is at best shortsighted and at worst strikingly hypocritical." The reason for this position, and which this paper also shares is that, America is one of the countries in the world that is said to be promoting democracy, a "government of the people, by the people and for the people", according to Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg declaration in 1865, yet, when the people have spoken through a referendum, is not satisfied with the will of the majority.

Comments are many on the democratic nature of the 2016 Britain's referendum to the extent that some are calling on the parliament not to invoke the article 50 of the EU that would finally prepare the ground for the final exit of Britain. Example of those are the article posted by Carole Cadwalladr (2017) Professor Mary Kaldor, (2016). For Cadwalladr, the outcome of the referendum was nothing but robbery. Kaldor could not understand how democratic the referendum was simply because she did not expect the result. But then, the people have spoken. Another similar reaction to the result was that a second referendum should be conducted. The claims are that the masses were deceived, and that the turnout for the exercise (72%) was low. It was claimed that after the referendum, a survey was carried out by one Professor Adrian Low of the Staffordshire University, and was reported that 11 out of 13 polls wanted a new referendum

when they were asked the simple “would you like to the same way again?” from those that voted ‘leave’ and they responded that they would vote to remain.

These lines of reasoning make mockery of the arguers and not democracy, contrary to the view of Manjeet Ramgotra (2017) that:

The dysfunction of our democratic structures has come to the fore in these awkward referendum and election results. We no longer agree on the foundations on which democracy is built. We are debating the ground rules, the procedures according to which we as a people make decisions and elect rulers. Our consensus on these rules that legitimate our political structures and institutions is crumbling. Many are afraid for we risk losing our democratic system and liberal values. Ramgotra(2017)

Let us note that it was through referendum that Britain stayed in the EU for those years. If the 1975 referendum was right, what was wrong with the 2016 referendum? It should also be noted that there was no complaint of irregularities in the process of the referendum. It is ridiculous that people who did not complain about the process are now complaining about the result simply because it did not go the way they wanted it. While the leaders of ‘leave’ vote lost in the parliament, they went about the streets, mobilizing people in their favour when they knew that a referendum was coming up, but when the leaders of ‘stay’ won, they became so relaxed that they did not intensify their campaign.

Lessons for African Leaders

Brexit is significant to countries in the developing world and their leaders. For one, it is a democracy in its best. People are elected into public offices to do the wills of the people who elected them. Representatives are public servants who present and promote the interests of the people they represent even when the wills of the people are conflicting with their own personal wills. They are therefore supposed to be in close touch with the people to know what they want. What the British referendum has shown is that, the members of the parliament are far away from the people and did not know what they wanted. Otherwise, the voting pattern and result of the referendum would have been in tandem with the result of the voting of the parliament. When the representatives of the people betray the people they represent, referendum of this nature enables the people to repeal the decision of the parliament. The result of the referendum also shows

reason in the claims of the likes of Jean J. Rousseau (1762) that the will of the people cannot be represented. According to him:

The moment the people is legitimately assembled as a sovereign body, the jurisdiction of the government wholly lapses, the executive power is suspended, and the person of the meanest citizen is as sacred and inviolable as that of the first magistrate: for the presence of the person represented, representatives no longer exist. Sovereignty, for the same reason, makes it inalienable, cannot be represented: it lies in the general will, and will does not admit representation; it is either the same, or other; there is no intermediate possibility. The deputies of the people, therefore, are not and cannot be its representatives. (Book III)

This position is no doubt an extreme view but then, it has been demonstrated.

David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, clearly, by his resignation letter to the parliament in less than a day after the referendum, demonstrated that he did not like the outcome of the referendum. He was no doubt in support of the ‘stay’ campaign but then, the people voted to the contrary. What he did as a democratic was to calmly accept the result and accept the wills of the majority. The lesson from Cameron to African leaders is that the decisions of the people must always be respected, irrespective of the superior knowledge the leaders may possess. No matter how greatly performed they may think they have done for the people, if they are rejected at the poll, the results must be accepted. This is the real meaning of the government of the people.

Sensitive matters that have direct impact on the people should also be subjected to the inputs of the people and allow them to make their contributions. This will bring government closer to the people and make it to be the government of the people. When such policy fails, the people will be collectively responsible, and not the government. For instance, if Britons suffer more after leaving the Union, nobody will blame the government for it.

Maybe it is high time African states started evaluating their membership of some international organizations. The costs and benefits of the membership of some international organizations should interest the citizens of the states. For instance, it can be asked if Nigeria has benefitted

more than what she has contributed to the African Union or the Economic Community of West African (ECOWAS).

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