

ONE MAN AND HIS DOG: A BREXIT STORY

Alf Mycroft slurped tea from a chipped mug and looked out of the grubby sitting room window at the mayhem beyond. It was early and the sun had yet to escape the hills that enclosed the ramshackle farmhouse like a protective hand. But it was far from dark. The light from a multitude of pop-up television studios saw to that. Not to mention the probing searchlight beams of the circling military helicopters. As the clatter of rotor blades sounded once again overhead, Alf's ancient border collie, Daisy, rumbled her annoyance, and he reached down absent-mindedly to scratch behind one cocked ear. The noise of the helicopter died away, allowing the muted hubbub from outside to intrude again; a fluttering amalgam of humming generators, shouty interviewers, evangelising politicians, chattering minions. The sound of a nation at fever pitch.

Alf shook his head and smiled, still not quite believing. Was it only a fortnight? Two weeks since the phone had dragged him from his dreams in the middle of the night? The call that had - at a stroke - changed his life; made him the most important person in the country. He would be the first to admit that he'd never been one for the politics. He'd paid a bit more attention to this Brexit business, because rumour was his farm subsidies could be on the line, but that was about it. Then, when the Commons vote ensured stalemate and no-one could agree on what happened next, he had lost interest altogether. The telly had been on the blink anyhow, so keeping it switched off hadn't felt like a great loss. Then came the call, followed by the visit of a young lady. She had sat him down and explained she was from the Electoral Commission, whatever that was. Then she had filled him in on what had been going on beyond the oasis that was Parsley Wood Farm.

When it became clear that Parliament could not agree on a way forward, she revealed, a Citizen's Assembly had been convened. This was a randomly selected body of a couple of hundred

representative voters presented with the pros and cons of Brexit and delegated - in full knowledge of the uncontaminated facts - to make recommendations to the electorate prior to another referendum. So far - so good. Then came the bombshell. With a view to keeping the costs down and speeding up the process, the government announced its intention to take things a step further. As the assembly members made up arguably the best informed of the electorate, why not just have the assembly vote on everyone's behalf? Uproar ensued - objections to the dilution of democracy foremost - but an enabling bill scraped through by a whisker, so it looked like everything was go.

In practice, however, the plan had proved unworkable. Once the assembly counted for more than simply providing recommendations, objections to its composition flooded in. First off, its random representative nature was questioned; statisticians queuing up to warn of how incredibly difficult it was - in reality - to get a truly representative and unbiased sample of anything. Then the smaller nations joined the fray, refusing to accept the outcome of any vote unless they were better represented in the assembly.

In the end, the plan was left dead in the water. That was when some bright spark came up with an idea that, at first, met with derision, but which - as time went on - became increasingly attractive for its simplicity and low cost. And with time now desperately short, it would be quick and easy to organise. Instead of narrowing the voting population down to a few hundred, why not go all the way and reduce it to just one, chosen arbitrarily so as to avoid issues of bias. But how to choose arbitrarily? It seemed as though all the old arguments would arise again, until someone conjured up a radical way out. Every government was forever obsessed with what Middle England thought of their policies. After all, they spent millions on focus groups trying to find out. So, why not choose someone, quite literally, from the Middle of England - or at least the middle of the UK?

This set in motion a whole new suite of arguments, this time focused upon where exactly the centre of the UK was located. A number of competing methods were adopted to determine this, all coming up with different results, leading to a handful of towns and villages throwing their hats into the ring as holders of the accolade. In the end, to settle the argument, it was decided that the best way forward was to identify the geographical point furthest from the sea, and zero in on the person who lived closest. GPS made this easy, and it wasn't long before an unassuming farm outside a small village in southernmost Derbyshire was awarded the distinction. Within the hour, the knocks on the door and the phone calls started. Alf Mycroft's life would never be the same again.

Now the forecast rain had started, sending interviewers and their prey scuttling for shelter. Outside the double security fence beyond the media village, Alf could see the crowds - banners waving, arms gesticulating - but could hear nothing. All the windows had been triple-glazed so that he couldn't be intimidated or influenced by anything from outside. At least the place would be a lot warmer when it was all over. For a moment he thought he heard the phone and turned away from the window, before realising it was just the pinging of the microwave. In fact, the phone had been cut off more than a week earlier. A shame really. He'd had some very tempting offers to vote one way or the other; even considered taking one or two up. Then the line had been cut and some Ministry wonk had told him straight that any evidence of outside influence on the way he voted would be viewed as fraud - maybe even treason - and make the whole thing null and void. Furthermore, he could find himself locked up for a very long time.

Alf headed into the shabby kitchen, Daisy in tow, opened the microwave and pulled out the meat pie. Taking a big bite, he swore as a stream of semi-molten gravy dribbled down his chin. He dumped the pie on the worktop, turned on the tap, and splashed his face with cold water. It helped, but a dull pain persisted. Gingerly

picking up the pie again, he nibbled more carefully at the pastry crust, and shuffled back into the sitting room. Crossing to the console installed at the foot of the stairs, he looked down at the two buttons. They had made it as difficult as possible for him to make a mistake. The big black button had the word 'In' embossed upon it in red; the corresponding white button embellished with 'Out'. He had until midnight to cast his vote, but the urge to get it over and done with was overwhelming. All he wanted now was peace and quiet; a return to life as it used to be; just himself, his dogs and his sheep. He raised one arm and stretched out a hand. For a moment, it hovered over one of the buttons, then the other, before he pulled it back. He swore quietly under his breath. He just couldn't make up his mind.

Taking another bite from the swiftly cooling pie, he munched thoughtfully, looking down with fondness at Daisy who sat quivering with anticipation at his side. Her enormous brown eyes held his, willing him to share. When no pie was forthcoming, she stood on her back legs, a front paw resting on the voting console, almost touching one of the buttons. Alf broke off a piece of pie and made to give it to the dog. Then he paused, a broad smile spreading slowly across his seasoned features as he looked at the button, then at Daisy's paw, then back at the button. Well, why not? If he couldn't decide, maybe he should take the lead from Daisy. He could certainly do worse. She was by far the brightest sheep dog he had ever owned. On her last legs now, right enough, but she had been Alf's trusted - only - companion for nigh on fifteen year; had even saved his life that time his leg was trapped under an overturned tractor.

Cupping the fragment of pie in his palm, Alf offered it to Daisy, who made short work of the tit-bit. Then he wiped his hand on a threadbare waistcoat, raised it with a flourish and brought it down with a grunt of satisfaction. The roar from outside - even through the triple glazing - was deafening.

THE END

