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Stuart's political diary

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This column is being written in the aftermath of possibly the most significant political event of my generation, possibly longer. A strange combination of shock and confusion has blanketed Britain after the shock result of Britain's European Union (EU) referendum. Now, towards the end of August, there is a strange anticipation without actual action – almost a political echo of the 'phoney war' in Europe at the start of the last world war.

Something is looming, but what, when and to what end we have yet to discover. The only clear realization appears to be an almost universal absence of any clear idea about what happens next. In my Edinburgh clinic, where a significant proportion of clients are EU visitors for work or study, there is a sense of trepidation, anger and disbelief that the people south of the border may have just fired the starting-gun on the entire UK leaving the European Union. Conspiracy theories richly decorate client narratives, with perhaps the most common one starring Boris Johnston as the buffoon sent as foreign minister to wreck the chances of 'Brexit' happening by a shrewd but panicked Theresa May. One might perhaps consider this in terms of the denial stage of mourning the EU's passing. Others have moved straight to anger, and many are swinging between fond 'memories' of Europe and caustic damnation of it, blaming it for its own death. Whatever your position on the referendum decision, there would appear to be little doubt that just as the financial markets abhor uncertainty, so many therapy clients are equally unsettled by such profound, yet undefined change.

Meanwhile, the UK Conservative Party is desperately attempting to reinvent itself, using the prolonged chaos reigning in Britain's Labour Party as a welcome distraction. It is deeply ironic that the party that initiated the EU referendum, which has historically reacted to European issues like a superhero to Kryptonite, has now reformed and entrenched itself, while the official opposition (Labour) appears to be savaging itself. Behind this smokescreen, austerity appears to be en route to be jettisoned, while it's great champion, former Chancellor Osborne, has already been ejected from influence and power by the new Conservative Prime Minister.

Away from 11 Downing Street, Sky News has reported Osborne to be charging £50,000 per night in the USA on the lucrative dinner-speech circuit. The obvious

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question – 'If it is OK to jettison austerity now, did we ever really need it?' – is still only a whisper, and doesn't seem to have reached the tabloids or their readers. The effects of austerity can perhaps be seen in the *Independent* (Khan, 2016) showing how health care failures in poorer areas in England cost the NHS $4.8 billion a year, with the main cost being excessive admission to Accident & Emergency of patients let down by preventative and routine care. These figures, which represent the period of April 2014 to April 2015, show the real cost of service cuts and austerity, a topic now sadly eclipsed by Brexit.

The Labour Party is essentially divided between the Parliamentary Labour Party, which is 'New Labour' dominated (or the Tony Blairite wing of the party), and the wider Labour Party membership, which is far more left wing and neo-socialist. A strange situation presents itself where the MPs who represent Labour are arguably not politically in agreement with those who elected them. The resultant family dynamic is toxic at best, and reminds the author of a particularly fractious group therapy where half the family side 'with mum', and the other siblings 'support Dad'. The continued infighting has created the unlikely scenario of the Conservatives who made Brexit possible having an impromptu honeymoon, while the Labour opposition, who should have been making hay, are instead sowing their fields with salt.

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party initially hoped that the massive Scottish remain vote, and its contrast to English and Welsh Brexit voting, would present an opportunity for a new independence referendum. The 'phoney war' has, however, undermined this, and until actual Brexit commences and the 'war becomes hot', there is little mileage for the nationalists. Wisely, perhaps, they are keeping their powder dry for just such an event. Meanwhile, Brexit has at least provided cover for the Scottish government's humiliating defeat in the courts over their proposed 'Named Person Scheme'. The scheme, which would have meant every child in Scotland would have a 'named person' to whom to turn with abuse or neglect type issues, was supposed to tackle abuse, but was feared to be an Orwellian Big Brother-style spy in every family. The courts finally decided that it was indeed in breach of human rights, namely the right of privacy. Not having the debate yet also helps take the emphasis away from the growing 'Scottish deficit', largely due to poor oil tax receipts, with the world oil market failing to recover, partly because of cheap fracking gas, and partly because of an excess of Middle Eastern oil on the market.

On the professional front, perhaps the most noticeable legislation to come out of government is the tightening of child abuse reporting, which is now being consulted upon by organizations including the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). Designed to protect abuse victims, the new legislation would make it mandatory for health care professionals to report suspected abuse, and would be a tightening-up of existing Children's Act-based legislation. As with any reporting issue, the devil will be in the detail, with concern already being voiced by organizations, including the Psychotherapy and Counselling Union and the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy, about this intrusion into the therapeutic space by the state. The balance of need to protect versus such intrusion, which of course risks deterring perpetrators from coming forward to try to initial personal change, is one that now risks being defined in law, rather than remaining within the realm of professional judgement.

Finally, it would be remiss not to mention the recently concluded Olympic games. According to Sky News (Prenderville, 2016), the Great British team has gone from its lowest ever medal haul in Atlanta in 1996 to a record 'away-from-home' tally of medals this year in Rio. In large part this is due to massive National Lottery investment, recently £274 million over four years. Prenderville points out that, in effect, this equates to £4 million per medal. Of course, as a 'feel good' investment, success at the Olympics helps to raise the spirits of the country, and is great for offsetting the emotional fear of, say, Brexit or austerity. However, it is perhaps worth sparing a thought for the fact that National Lottery funding is supposed to be 'for good causes', the implication being charities, community projects and other schemes to improve life for British citizens. Rather than big ticket and highly visible schemes like the Olympics, giving the 'well-being' of citizens a quick 'mood boost', £274 million could have provided rather a substantial life-saving boost to food banks, for example, or homeless shelters. The image of the 75 bottles of champagne reportedly enjoyed by British athletes flying back to Britain on their gold-nosed jet, toasting their £4 million medals, contrasts awfully with benefit-sanctioned ordinary people queuing at a food bank to try and feed their families in the wake of ex-Chancellor George Osborne's austerity.

Notes on contributor

Stuart Morgan-Ayrs has been in clinical practice since 1993, currently in Scotland. With a range of post-qualification training, including an MSc in Psychology, he is a Fellow of the Royal Scottish Society of Arts, the Royal Society of Public Health, and the Institute of Health Promotion and Education, and an associate fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine. He can be contacted via his blog and website – www.psychoanalysis.center.

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