

# Jerusalem Letters

## **Nationalism and the Future of Western Freedom**

By Yoram Hazony, September 6, 2016

*This is the beginning of an essay of mine published this week at Mosaic Magazine. To read the entire essay, [click here](#).*

Britain's June 23 referendum on independence was the most important vote in a democratic nation in a generation. Many Americans assume that events in Western Europe can't have that kind of significance, and in fact the U.S. media paid scant attention to the upheaval taking place in the UK right up until the official returns showing an impending British exit (or "Brexit") from the European Union.

But in the aftermath, all this changed. The fear, outrage, and despair that Britain's vote for independence provoked in elite opinion in Europe and in many circles in the United States points to a political event of massive proportions. Even before the vote, a campaign orchestrated by the Cameron government sought to play upon the sense of trepidation that had become evident among a portion of the electorate. The government's message, Douglas Murray wrote, was "unmistakable":

With Brexit, the country [would] be taking a leap into the unknown with the possibility of becoming a basket case and causing a world war. Memories of the mid-1970s were conjured up: the three-day work week, the uncollected rubbish, the unburied dead.

And that was the *Tories* speaking. In the aftermath of the vote, much the same message could be heard from all sides of the political establishment in tones that were, if anything, even more hysterical.

But the principal revelation here—and the phenomenon to keep our eyes on—is not only the fact that, for many both in the UK and elsewhere, the prospect of British independence is genuinely an object of dread. It is also the fact that the possible re-emergence of a free and independent Britain has rallied profound admiration and enthusiasm among countless others. The fissure between these powerfully held and irreconcilable views was there earlier. But Brexit has turned the floodlights on it, exposing, so that all can readily see, the deepest fault line in the politics of Western nations today. It is along this line that the bitterest and most fateful political battles in our time are likely to be fought.

What is this all about? Many commentators have pointed to the Brexit vote, and this year's American presidential campaign, as contests between policies favoring economic "globalization" and those informed by a more protectionist and insular "nationalism." And there is much to be said for this characterization. But what divides the emerging camps also runs quite a bit deeper than is suggested by framing things in terms of one set of economic and foreign-policy preferences against another: What we are seeing is the beginning of a struggle over the character of the international political order itself.

For 350 years, Western peoples have lived in a world in which national independence and self-determination were seen as foundational principles. Indeed, these things were held to be among the most precious human possessions, and the basis of all of our freedoms. Since World War II, however, these intuitions have been gradually attenuated and finally even discredited, especially among academics and intellectuals, media opinion-makers, and business and political elites. Today, many in the West have

come to regard an intense personal loyalty to the national state and its right to chart an independent course as something not only unnecessary but morally suspect. They no longer see national loyalties and traditions as necessarily providing a sound basis for determining the laws we live by, for regulating the economy or making decisions about defense and security, for establishing public norms concerning religion or education, or for deciding who gets to live in what part of the world.

But those who have made this transition in fundamental political orientation have done so without making sure that everyone else was on board. Millions of people, especially outside the centers of elite opinion, still hold fast to the old understanding that the independence and self-determination of one's nation hold the key to a life of honor and freedom. These are people who believe that no one ever consulted them about giving up on the freedom of their nation to protect its people, their interests, and their traditions. And when people think they weren't consulted about giving up such precious commodities, they are apt to respond in dramatic, harsh, and often violent ways.

This means that the clash of fundamental political assumptions we are watching unfold is already much more extreme than has been fully understood. As what is at stake comes better into focus, political parties will realign. Entire countries will realign. The Brexit vote is only the first shot fired in a protracted conflict that will play itself out throughout the West and elsewhere.

*To read the rest of the essay at Mosaic Magazine [click here](#).*