**The majority vote as sacred cow.**

The least examined element of the entire Brexit imbroglio is its delivery vehicle - the binary referendum. Of course, the prevailing political system of much of the ‘developed’ world is based upon binary practices and majoritarianism is firmly at its core.  Achieving power is predicated on a majority and the majority vote is then the primary lever for maintaining it.

Almost without exception amongst media commentators, academics and political scientists the majority vote is unquestioned, let alone critically examined.

There are sporadic dissatisfactions expressed but all are predicated on an assumption that we are stuck with the majority vote as the only way of doing things.  No-one seeks or proposes an alternative. There is a solitary voice in the current UK frenzy articulating a well thought through and theoretically sound alternative - Peter Emerson of the de Borda Institute ([www.deborda.org](http://www.deborda.org)). He offers a suite of sophisticated methods which are inclusive, preferential, non-majoritarian and non-adversarial.

George Monbiot recognises Emerson’s innovation and logic in *Out of the Wreckage (2018)*:

*‘The political thinker Peter Emerson argues that instead of being confronted with raw binary decisions, voters in referendums should typically be given a choice of several options.’*  (P. 154)

Unfortunately, Monbiot fails to include essential elements of the process: (a) the ranking of an agreed set of options, and (b) the points-based counting system which achieves an outcome that reflects the collective will.  Only a sophisticated method such as this reflecting the range of opinion can access and articulate the popular will.

The declaration that ‘the people have spoken’ in the Brexit vote when only a subset (37%) participated and those that did are almost equally split in their opinions, is bewildering when examined dispassionately.  All that can be said is that those who voted disagreed. There was no discernment as to what was desired.

Why a slim majority should determine the outcome for all fails all tests of rationality, accountability and equity that are otherwise considered features of sophisticated, 21st century Western democracies. The idea that the 48% should meekly roll over and abandon their deeply held views because ‘this is democracy in action’ is bizarre and antediluvian.  We must ask whose interests does this archaic notion serve. I would say the same had the result been reversed.

Yet this deeply flawed and crude methodology is treated as sacrosanct, and seen as the very cornerstone of democratic practice, its very essence.  Questioning the method or its outcome is the closest thing we have to treason these days.

How does a critical lens come to be applied to this sacred cow or will that occur only after the current meltdown has reached catastrophic proportions?

In the Brexit pantomime thus far there has been a series of inconclusive, divisive and at times farcical majority votes in parliament, and it is intended to have more.  The relentless and hopeless search for a solution that cannot be discerned or achieved through a binary process continues.

(It is worth recalling that in its effort to remake itself in 2003, the House of Lords undertook five separate majority votes on different reconfigurations - and lost them all.)  We may be heading for a new parliamentary record.

Of course, some electoral systems are preferential.  In Ireland we rank order our candidates rather than plump for one only. This has worked well. However it hasn’t translated into the decision-making domain. There we remain fixated on ‘either-or’ as the only option.  It is noteworthy that the Irish Citizens’ Assembly, when deliberating on ‘the manner in which referenda are held’ in 2017, came to the following conclusion (amongst others):

*‘In respect of multi-option voting, 76% voted in favour of allowing more than two options on a ballot paper in a constitutional referendum.’*

However, It is unlikely that Ireland will abandon the binary referendum anytime soon. It has been the means of significant social change in recent years in relation to both same-sex marriage and abortion. It is important to note that these votes and campaigns were preceded by the highly inclusive, deliberative processes of the Assembly and its predecessor.  Nothing of this kind was utilised before the Brexit vote. We now know that on the contrary there was a scandalous rash of manipulation, fake news, false allegations and financial chicanery undermining and corrupting the process.

The potential for abuse in the majoritarian referendum has been amply demonstrated through Brexit - probably the most egregious of its recent manifestations.  Would Jo Cox MP still be alive if the Brexit methodology had been different? That consideration alone should be sufficient incentive to stimulate a discussion about the method itself. However, none has taken place.

It is true that there have been a few fleeting suggestions (Justine Greening MP, Profs Bogdanor & Bellamy) that there might be more than two options in a second referendum but almost no serious discussion in the media or elsewhere as to what method would be used to vote or to count.  It is always presented as some garbled extension of the majority vote. The idea of ranking preferences using a points system remains outside the grasp of the best political minds in these islands and beyond.

The Brexit debacle has been the most divisive event in British politics for at least a generation and is inexorably drifting towards a political and economic meltdown of disastrous consequences. The fact that it has not prompted a frantic search for a more inclusive, benign, democratic, pluralist and accountable system of decision-making surely ranks as a monstrous collective failure of responsibility and imagination.

In this instance the devout adherence to the majority vote as the *sine qua non* of democratic decision-making can best be compared to the Kool-Aid solution adopted at Jonestown in 1978 - akin to a collective political suicide pact.

More majoritarianism in a quintessentially non-binary context without engaging the public in deliberation is a recipe for divisiveness and societal fracturing which is well underway.