

Plebiscite Follies

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*And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Atë by his side come hot from Hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry "Havoc!" and let slip the dogs of war.*

Julius Caesar, [Act II, Scene I](#)

Yes. No. Stay. Go.

Brexit shows just how weak the plebiscite is as a policy making tool. Simple answers don't work for complex questions.

Hot from hell, [Atë](#), the Greek goddess of mischief, delusion, folly and ruin tempts men to folly and hubris, to their destruction.

Neither Boris Johnson nor Nigel Farage, having led the "leave" campaign, could say anything sensible about what's next.

A public servant who designed far-reaching constitutional, economic and social policy but never thought about the implications or a workable implementation plan would have failed.

Yet Johnson is lining up to snatch leadership (maybe his aim all along) and Farage has elevated himself beyond UKIP's wildest dreams.

The established parties are floundering. David Cameron started the folly and he is going even if his Party wants him to stay ("*anyone but Boris*"?). Jeremy Corbyn wants to stay but his parliamentary colleagues want him to go: fully a third of his front bench has deserted.

Cameron's folly was to erect a simple yes/no plebiscite to manage internal constituencies. But yes/no does not work with deeply complex policy issues, let alone vexed and divisive ones.

Brexit started out complex, but the injection of race, immigration and British [nativism](#) and false notions of independence made it worse. Both campaigns were built on lies and ambition: "Leave" on [myths](#), [emotion](#) and [hyperbole](#); "Remain" on [weak pleas to reason](#) and [shouty politics](#). The folly of the plebiscite let slip the dogs of war. The [regrets](#) tell us a lot about the folly that people are somehow spontaneously wise and thoughtful.

All this gives us a chance to reflect on a plebiscite of our own, the one promised by Tony Abbott to delay and defer a political decision, and adopted

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by Malcolm Turnbull to manage internal constituencies: another complex, vexed and divisive issue: same sex marriage.

There is a place for plebiscites in representative democracies. Some questions do not lend themselves to political resolution and are straightforward enough to be answered monosyllabically. "*Are you in favour of daylight saving?*" was asked of Queensland voters in 1992. It went down 54.5% to 45.5%. No-one resigned. The economy did not tank, and the clocks have not needed adjusting since.

In 1916 and again in 1917 the Hughes Government held [plebiscites on conscription](#), an issue that split the establishment and Cabinet, and was not therefore politically solvable. Hughes mismanaged the 1916 issue through his ingrained manipulative tendencies, riding rough over anti-conscription colleagues: four of his nine ministers quit. But even a loaded question went down 48.4% to 51.6%. The Labor Party split, and Hughes, now Nationalist Prime Minister, tried and failed again in 1917 with an even bigger margin against, and [egg on the PM's face](#).

[Same sex marriage](#). The divide is deep. Those opposed invoke theology, morals, social conservatism and tradition. Those in favour range from pragmatists to rights campaigners to lovers who personally want equality to social progressives.

The potential for division and hate campaigns has well aired. Any doubt that hatred and bigotry will figure in any plebiscite was laid to rest when a Christian group asked the Tasmanian government to [suspend anti-vilification laws](#) for the plebiscite. Not to mention [invocation](#) of absurdities like marriage to animals and institutionalised polyamory.

Brexit shows us that complex, emotional-laden questions are not suitable policy questions for plebiscites. Assuming that internal constituencies can be managed by involving "the people" is fraught with danger.

The same sex marriage plebiscite is a folly, potentially a dangerous one.

A complex issue, true, but amenable to resolution by politics and by good policy: same sex marriage is not naturally the stuff of a yes-no plebiscite.

Complex policy needs the finesse and contemplation of those who can grapple with myriad inter-connections. It should be the stuff of elected representatives, advised by a dispassionate public service.

Yet the Prime Minister and his Deputy have committed to a plebiscite.

Merely hoping the discourse will be civil is not enough. If re-elected they must learn from Brexit and from Hughes' failings. They must manage this hot-from-hell issue, contain the internal forces who would let slip the dogs of war, and overcome any predilections to hubris.