



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau addresses the EU Parliament in Strasbourg in mid-February. The next evening he told an audience in Hamburg, Germany: "Increasing inequality has made citizens mistrust their governments." Adam Scotti photo

The Crack-Up: Can the West Get it Back Together Again?

Jeremy Kinsman

Writer's block occurs when an author doesn't know what to say, or can't make it up. We may be there now with the dystopian presidency of Donald Trump, Brexit in the UK and the rise of the far right in Europe, with elections this year in France, Germany and the Netherlands, with Vladimir Putin's Russia as a nosy neighbour. Our senior foreign affairs writer, himself a former Canadian ambassador to Russia and the EU, tries to make sense of a world order that seems to be coming apart.

"The Crack-Up" was an essay F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in 1936 for *Esquire* magazine, to which he had regularly supplied short stories. His creative talent had gone dry but he needed money. The editor, Arnold Gingrich, told him just to write about why he couldn't write.

In Russia's crazy topsy-turvy 1990s, when each day seemed to be more astonishing than the one before, the fertile Russian creative imagination couldn't compete. Writers of screenplays and narrative fiction were on empty, realizing no one could "make this stuff up."

Poor American writers today. Who could have imagined the election of the most preposterous public figure of our time,

who launched his candidacy by claiming President Barack Obama was born in Kenya, and who wooed disgruntled white blue-collar citizens with incendiary falsehoods and crude attacks on opponents, including the charge that the Democratic nominee would soon be indicted and “locked up”? Candidate Donald Trump’s base of agitated working-class supporters believed he was just “telling it like it is.” But President Trump continues to invent facts and events while denouncing fact-checking from legitimate media he calls “the enemy of the people.”

The bizarre election was the first to be consumed by “fake news.” Teenage hackers in Macedonia posted on a tolerant Facebook imaginary reports from false sites pretending such now well-known fables as Hillary Clinton and John Podesta’s “pedophile ring” run from a Washington pizzeria, and her imminent demise from a brain tumour. Millions of credible Americans on “alternative” right-wing news sites gobbled up the lies, rewarding the teenagers with Google click-money from advertising.

We continue to reel from a dark Russian connection. Convinced the Russian government hacked into Democratic Party e-mails and exposed embarrassing messages to support the Putin-admiring Trump’s candidacy, U.S. intelligence agencies broke with the new president.

As he termed his own intelligence agencies “very un-American,” confidence from U.S. allies plummeted. The dive deepened when Trump’s main strategic adviser, Stephen Bannon—who formerly ran the “alternative right” website Breitbart—labelled the Trump administration as “populist nationalist,” deriding liberal internationalism that has underpinned international economic, monetary, humanitarian, and civil cooperation since the Second World War, thereby premising U.S. defection from operating principles shared with Canada and democratic Europe.

Faint hope endures that the reality-distorting president and fact-denying “America-firsters” will be moderated,

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including by U.S. institutions. The new U.S. national security team, vastly improved by the appointment of credible and brainy Lt. General H.R. McMaster to replace the conspiratorial and loopy Michael Flynn—fired after three weeks on the job—is trying to soothe the nerves of allies, especially in Europe, jarred by Trump’s description of NATO as “obsolete” and his rooting for the break-up of the European Union.

But the picture is of democracy discredited, America in a kind of vindictive retreat, and the EU in disarray.

None of it began yesterday, especially in Europe, where the European Union struggles against decades-old right-wing national political insurgencies whose resentments against the established order are encouraged by Donald Trump.

What happened to the European dream, constructed on the ruins left by the war driven by the last wave of “populist nationalism”?

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After the post-war 30-year economic “miracle” stagnated, making their deep social benefits unaffordable, national politicians in the EU scapegoated the bureaucracy in “Brussels.” Anti-EU sentiment began to grow.

Waves of refugees and economic migrants deepened resentment. Drawn to European prosperity, they are not

“immigrants” in the Canadian sense of being recruited, prepared, and welcomed. EU countries had declared themselves as “zero-immigration” almost 40 years ago but respected international covenants to accept refugees. However, because they hadn’t asked them to come and because the refugees were vastly less prepared to adapt to an unfamiliar established culture than are recruited settlement immigrants, Europeans pushed back against challenges to local identities posed by the newcomers’ religious and cultural practices.

Nativist political parties in EU countries conflated an anti-newcomer message with resentment of “Brussels” and added resentment at forces of globalization they argued exported their jobs to lower-cost locales while enriching only a tiny minority at home. Jihadist terrorists darkened public fears as the horrendous wars in the Middle East spewed more desperate people to a European sanctuary.

Recently, having struggled with a divisive euro crisis, the pressured EU has begun pasting a better collective act together on refugees, deporting hundreds of thousands of non-eligible economic migrants, cutting deals to keep war zone refugees closer to their region of origin, and trying to manage their more pluralist societies.

But in a surreal tsunami event, the British voted to exit the EU despite expert advice it would cost them dearly and could lose them Scotland to boot. The British had always been ambivalent about EU membership. De Gaulle believed they were incapable of choosing an EU vocation over their self-involved “special relationship”

with Washington. UK governments balked at the EU's principles of a more egalitarian "European social model" and at the political project's goal of "an ever-closer Union." EU membership for most Brits was about access to the world's biggest market, period.

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The referendum itself was a Conservative party political device to neutralize the growing appeal of the UK Independence Party that was eating into the Tories' right and rural flank. But the “Remain” fear-mongering campaign was incompetently managed with nothing positive to say about the EU itself. Meanwhile, the “Leave” side played to English emotions in a campaign as mendacious as any in memory. The Oxford Dictionary declared “post-truth” the new word of the year.

Most UK voters didn't—and still don't—expect to lose the UK's tariff-free and just-in-time access to the EU market for 44 per cent of British exports. In that such a consequent clean total exit—a “hard Brexit”—is unaffordable, logic favours a UK compromise toward Swiss-EU lines down the road. That Prime Minister Theresa May has seemed determined to drive to a much harder fate is due either to an opening negotiating stance or to what one British scholar friend calls the “North Korea-like” bubble she is said to inhabit.

As in the U.S., there was an echo chamber effect of only listening to those with whom you agree, and ignoring anything implying “expertise.” The credibility of authorities and experts who warned of the economic consequences had been undermined by a decade of lies about the invasion of Iraq and the 2008 financial meltdown that eroded trust for years to come.

The EU's 27 partners aren't going to reward May's venture, especially after her rush to be the first to pay homage to the anti-EU President Trump.

I doubt even the Brexit crisis will cause the EU to crack up. The EU, built to adapt to crisis, may well evolve into a looser, more flexible structure, but it will survive, including populist challenges in vital elections in France and Germany, as it did in the Netherlands on March 16, where the centre held with voters rejecting right-wing leader Geert Wilders' platform to ban Muslim immigrants and take the Dutch out of Europe in a “Nexit”. But in stagnating Italy, elections may prove to be a setback for the EU.

Russia, the resentful disrupter, may think it got what it wanted from this mess. But like Brexit, Russia is the dog that caught the bus. Russia went too far in interfering with the U.S. democratic process. Sooner or later, there will be a price to pay and it may cost Putin plenty.

But Russian hacking didn't elect Trump, who was blessed with an opponent easy to denigrate in the new age of lightning-fast false and fake news that an electorate with surprising pockets of civil deficiency chose to buy. The Democrats ran a terrible campaign without a positive message, and a weak messenger in Hillary Clinton, who had been too long on the national stage.

What is true is that Trump—and Brexit—did benefit electorally from a vast well of malaise about unfairness in the distribution of wealth. The salaries of working U.S. males have not increased in real terms in 40 years. In Los Angeles, a house went on the market in February for \$250 million.

Such obscene disparity has caused a ground-level revulsion against the globalized world order. Bernie Sanders won tens of millions of Americans to his call for redress. The issue is “fairness.” The question is whether governments can adjust in time.

Such disarray and dismay in the western “demos” leave Canada and our “sunny ways” kind of exposed. Justin Trudeau warned the EU that our jointly wrought CETA may be the last international trade agreement for years to come if we don't put our shoulders jointly to the task of defending and improving the liberal internationalist order from the Vulcans of populist nationalism.

In Hamburg, Trudeau told his German hosts: “Increasing inequality has made citizens distrust their governments. Distrust their employers. And we're watching that anxiety transform into anger on an almost daily basis. It follows that people's natural defence mechanism ... is to hunker down and recoil inward. To give into cynicism. To retreat from one another. But it's time for us, as leaders in politics and business, to step up.”

These words parallel Trump's channeling of distrust in his inaugural message but without his in-your-face nationalism—“From this day forward, it's going to be only America first—America first.”

With an artful Washington performance, Trudeau bought some time for Canada and the U.S. to sort out some vital neighbourhood issues between us.

But now that we can daily expect the unexpected, it will take more than eloquent words from remaining liberal internationalist partners to paste global confidence and cooperation back together. Otherwise, the screenplay for the next decade will again be unimaginable. **P**

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