

Making the best case for Brexit – Japan Times 19.03.18

BY [DAVID HOWELL](#)

LONDON - But is it worth all the trouble? That was the question about the whole upheaval of Brexit (the decision to go a separate way from the European Union) put to Britain's chief finance minister, Philip Hammond, in a recent interview.

His answer was that the British people had decided on withdrawal in a referendum and that was what the government was therefore doing. It was, he implied, "the will of the people" and that was that.

Unfortunately, this answer falls well short of what is required on two counts. The first — a lesser but not unimportant point — is that it is not "the British people" who have decided, it is a majority of the British people, which is a very different thing .

Majorities, at least in free societies, have to take account of minority views — in this case the views of the 48 percent who voted to remain in the EU.

Moreover, "the will of the people" — the phrase which some insist on using — can mean anything that those who hold power interpret it to mean.

It is the mantra by which the former communist dictators of Eastern Europe ruled, cynically calling their countries people's democracies. And it comes down to us from the chilling political tradition of Rousseau, Nietzsche and others, who believed that a nation's heroic will could be distilled and mobilized to justify any kind of repression of those who disagreed, and any kind of sacrifice in the name of the people.

But there is a second and much more serious reason why this is an inadequate answer to the question. If the British nation is to be taken along this new route, involving a fundamental change of direction and complex negotiations to get there, then there needs to be a truly inspiring and positive case for the decision.

It is not enough to say that the majority decided on it, or simply assert that it is the people's will. The government must believe it is the right course in

the long-term U.K. interest and persuade a deeply divided nation accordingly.

That means setting out the real reasons why, in the view of the nation's leaders, the whole Brexit process is indeed worth it and makes sense for the U.K. in the context of history and world development, even if there is a short-term price to pay in terms of dislocation and readjustment.

Such a case can indeed be made for moving on from, and disassociating from, the current EU model — at least partly — even though many may disagree with this course. But it requires a breadth of view and a power of explanation and narrative which have frankly been missing so far from the debate so far.

It begins with the quite difficult and novel notion that the digital era and the cyber revolution have changed the terms upon which nations relate to each other.

It is a paradox that the technological whirlwind of today promotes simultaneously both lofty globalization and intense localization. National sovereignties are swept up in the impersonal forces of hype-connectivity and information flows across all frontiers, yet in response people feel empowered more than ever to assert their own local identity and establish their own roots. The one phenomenon triggers the other.