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“Let Us ‘Take Back Control’ of Our Borders”: the Tragi-Comedy of Britain’s Sovereignist Brexit Adventure¹

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Abstract

This communication reviews succinctly the causes and consequences of the Brexit referendum held in June 2016. Among other things, it points out the role played by the issue of immigration during the referendum campaign and the call to re-establish control over Britain’s border with the European Union. The communication also sets out the fallacious arguments used by the Leave campaign about the advantages of quitting the European Union, as well as the plain ignorance and insouciance with which the “Brexiters” set about what they were doing. It ends by noting that even by mid-2023, Brexit was still not finally “done”, and that its impact on the UK economy has clearly been revealed as negative. The communication concludes with a short reflection on the weaknesses of using a referendum to carry out such fundamental policy change.

Key words: Brexit, immigration, trade negotiations, borders, participatory politics, public policy.

Introduction

Britain was always a reluctant partner. It joined the EEC² late, in 1973. It did not enter the exchange rate mechanism (ERM) of the European monetary system in 1979, and then did so at the worst of times in 1990, when German unification put great strains on the system. When the pound was ejected from the ERM in September 1992, it was a political disaster for the Conservative government at the time, and a key moment in the rise of Euroscepticism... especially as Britain subsequently experienced a long boom compared to other European countries, which lasted until the global financial crisis (GFC, 2007-2009). Not surprisingly, Britain chose not to join the euro, nor indeed the Schengen area, and it was always sceptical about social Europe.

After the GFC and the ensuing Great Recession, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition elected in 2010 embarked on a strong policy of austerity, cutting welfare transfers and spending on many public services in order to reduce the post-crisis government deficit. This fiscal consolidation brought Britain’s public deficit down from about 10% to 5% of GDP over five years. It squeezed growth which was flat until late 2013, and imposed hardship on many.

At the same time, migration into the United Kingdom continued to grow strongly. Unlike France and other EU countries, Britain adopted an open-door policy for migrants from Eastern Europe with the big enlargement of the EU in 2004, partly as a means of holding down wage inflation. As a result, hundreds of thousands of “Polish plumbers”, nurses, doctors, hospitality workers, agricultural

¹ This is the text of a communication given at the study day on *Borders* organised by the *Département des Langues* of the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, held at the Sorbonne on 1 June 2023. The title of the communication given in French was: « *Reprenons le contrôle de nos frontières* » : *l’aventure Brexit comme tragi-comédie souverainiste*.

² The EEC – European Economic Community – preceded the EU. It was launched in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome, and was superseded by the European Union following signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The EEC was also often known as the Common Market, promoting trade in goods between countries, and for many Eurosceptics, this is what Britain had always signed up for – not the emergence of supra-state organisation.

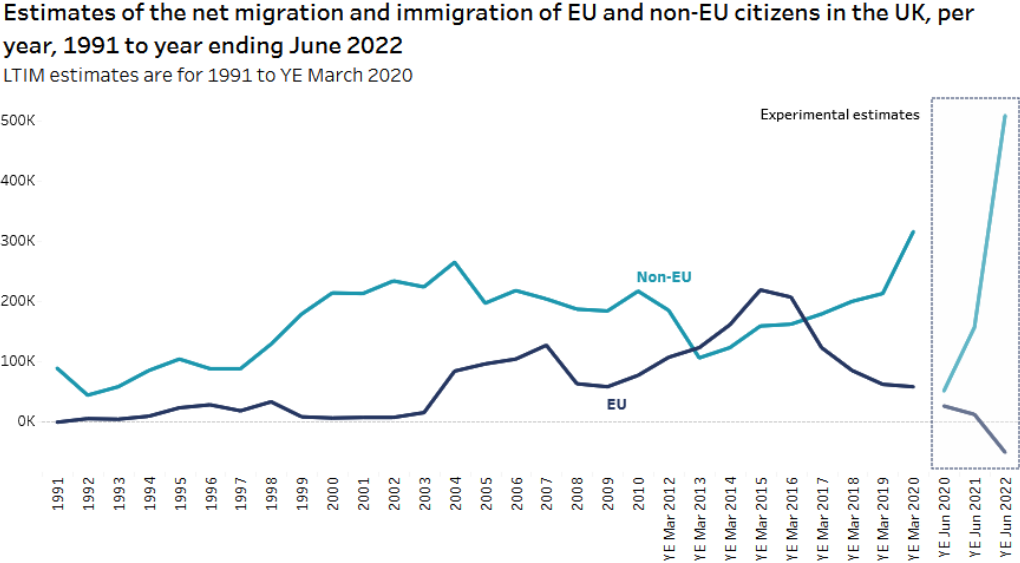
workers, entrepreneurs, etc. came to the United Kingdom (UK) from Eastern Europe, and continued to do so following the Great Recession (see Figure 1).

In the meantime, Euroscepticism continued to gain ground within the Conservative Party, and especially with the emergence of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) to the right of the Tories.

To face this challenge, Prime Minister David Cameron launched a high-stakes gamble in January 2013 when he announced that a straight “in-out” referendum would take place in the coming years, once Britain had renegotiated its terms of membership with the European Union.

Negotiations then followed, although given the complexity of the EU Treaties, institutions and laws, which reflect long-term historic compromises between nation-states as well as accumulated EU jurisprudence over many decades, the outcome was rather limited. Britain obtained some concessions on welfare benefits accorded to EU migrants’ families returning to their home countries, an opt-out on the EU’s historic mission of creating an “ever-closer union” and some guarantees for the place of countries that remained outside the Eurozone. But this was far from the profound changes Cameron had said he was looking for when he announced there would be a referendum.

Figure 1: net migration to the United Kingdom



Source: The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, based on ONS data, available at: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/> [29 March 2023].

After successfully winning the general election in 2015, David Cameron returned to Downing Street with a Conservative majority in the House of Commons, so the Conservatives were no longer in need of staying in a Coalition with the pro-European Liberal Democrats. Cameron therefore had to honour his word to hold a referendum – at some point. 2015 was also the year of major challenges to the EU, in terms of tackling the Greek debt crisis, and absorbing more than one million Syrian refugees.

To get the referendum out of the way, and betting that voters would support the status quo, as they had done in a previous referendum in 1975 (when two-thirds of votes voted to remain in the EEC),

David Cameron announced in early 2016, that a “consultative” referendum would be held on 23 June 2016. And he said he would campaign to remain in the EU.

In the event, the Remain campaign was poor. It failed to generate any enthusiasm about Britain being in the EU and only stressed the dangers of leaving. This became labelled as “Project Fear” by Eurosceptics – all doom and gloom, about the exaggerated consequences of voting Leave.

The Leave campaign by contrast was far more successful in selling hope and peddling fear of migration. Boris Johnson, having decided for opportunistic reasons to challenge his high-school rival, Cameron, was a highly effective tribune in arguing the case for “taking back control” of the British people. With other members of the official Leave campaign, he travelled the country in a big red bus, promising to take money sent to the EU and give it to Britain’s National Health Service; though this was a fraudulent figure as it did not include all monies the UK got back from the EU.

Figure 2: Boris Johnson and the red bus of the official Leave campaign



Source: <https://yorkmix.com/13-pictures-boris-johnson-campaigns-in-york-against-out-of-control-eu/> [7 August 2023].

The official Leave campaign also promoted the entirely false claim that “Turkey is joining the EU”, implying that many of its 76 million population could come to Britain (Figure 3).

The anti-immigration card was also very strongly played by the right-wing, overtly populist UKIP leader Nigel Farage, most notably with his “Breaking Point” poster (Figure 4).

Figure 3: one of the many false claims of the official Leave campaign



Source: <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/politics/post-brexit-fta-could-give-turks-special-status-when-uk-implements-new-migration-rules-194486/> [7 August 2023].

Figure 4: Nigel Farage’s anti-immigration pitch



Source: Adam Taylor, “[The uncomfortable question: Was the Brexit voted based on racism?](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 25 June 2016, [29 March 2023].

The Surprise Result...

To the evident surprise of David Cameron and the government, Boris Johnson and other prominent Leavers, including Nigel Farage, the vote to leave the EU won the referendum, by nearly 52% against 48%, on a voter turnout of 72% (see Figure 5): this was equivalent to 37.44% of registered voters.

Figure 5: the referendum question and results

Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?		
Results		
Choice	Votes	%
Leave	17,410,742	51.89%
Remain	16,141,241	48.11%
Valid votes	33,551,983	99.92%
Invalid or blank votes	25,359	0.08%
Total votes	33,577,342	100.00%
Registered voters/turnout	46,500,001	72.21%

Source: [Wikipedia](#).

With no plan...

Most fatefully, it was clear that no one had in any way planned what would happen if Britain voted to leave. The only “adult in the room” seemed to be the Governor of the Bank of England. On the morning after the vote, he announced that the Bank and the Treasury had prepared measures to stabilise financial markets with the necessary provisions of liquidity in sterling or foreign currencies.

Figure 6: Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England, reassuring the markets on the morning after the referendum



Source: Jill Treanor, “[Mark Carney to live broadcast statement to soothe market anxieties](#)”, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2016 [29 March 2023].

By contrast, Britain's politicians were largely surprised by the result and did not know what to do. During the campaign, various leading figures of the Leave campaign made numerous bold statements about Britain "holding all the cards" in future negotiations with the EU (Michael Gove), about how it would be possible to "negotiate the easiest trade deal in history" with the EU (Liam Fox), or that it would mainly be a matter of going to Berlin and not Brussels to ensure a good deal (David Davis).

Only slowly did it sink in what "taking back control" of borders might mean, and for David Cameron – the prime minister who had gambled on the referendum – the challenge meant quitting immediately: on the morning of Friday 24 June, he announced his resignation.

"Cakeism"

In many ways, the British position was based for a long time on "cakeism", of having one's cake and eating it, as Boris Johnson noted to *The Sun* tabloid in the autumn of 2016. When Theresa May, David Cameron's successor as Tory party leader and new Prime Minister, finally set out Britain's official objectives in the negotiations in January 2017, she stated clearly that the UK wanted a special relationship with the EU, but that the UK would leave the Single Market, the Customs Union, EU laws and the jurisprudence of the European Courts, and all other EU institutions, including Euratom.

Listening to Theresa May, Michel Barnier, the EU's chief negotiator on Brexit said he was "stupefied" by the "number of doors [she] shut, one after the other" ([Financial Times, May 6, 2021](#)). Yet, this was really the only road to take, given that stopping migration from the EU was an essential issue of the referendum. As the four freedoms – freedom of movement for goods, services, capital and people – are inextricably tied together in the Single Market (SM), the new British government had no choice but to leave the Single Market. The same is true about Britain's rejection of EU law and jurisprudence, and monetary contributions to the budget, which were important issues during the referendum. Access to the SM necessarily implies following EU laws and jurisprudence. It also entails paying contributions to the EU budget.

Similarly, the stated desire to "take back control" of its trade treaties meant that the UK had no option but to leave the EU's Customs Union, and all trade deals the EU has with the rest of the world.

"Trying to get the egg out of the omelette"

In practice, reaching the new Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which was concluded *in extremis* on 24 December 2020 (i.e. just before the UK left all economic arrangements of the EU, like the Single Market) turned out to be very difficult... and Britain found itself in a poor negotiating position throughout the whole process.

This was to no small extent because the major frontline politicians involved in the negotiations just did not know really how the EU works, what the Treaties mean and how they are applied. While they had wild hopes that Britain would strike out on a new path to "sunlit uplands" and be free from Brussels red tape, there was little or no understanding that such laws and regulations were actually designed to facilitate "frictionless trade" and easy cross-border travel. The picture of David Davies and the British team arriving in Brussels in June 2017, empty-handed to begin the Brexit negotiations, speaks volumes about the insouciance of the "Brexiters" (a wordplay on buccaneer and musketeer) in dealing with the real world (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: The start of negotiations with Brussels in June 2017



Source Jennifer Rankin, "[Day two of Brexit talks – and the UK looks as unprepared as ever](#)", *The Guardian*, 17 June 2017

Yet as Pascal Lamy, a former Eurocrat and Director General of the World Trade Organisation had warned, leaving the EU would be like trying to “get the egg out of the omelette”. And so it has turned out. Not surprisingly, Brussels and the EU had the initiative in organising and guiding the negotiations, insisting that the “divorce” needed to be settled first before a new TCA could be negotiated. In itself, the divorce included tough negotiations over Britain’s remaining financial obligations to the EU, the question of residency rights of British and EU citizens living in each other’s jurisdictions, as well as guarantees for keeping opening the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Still settling the Northern Ireland border and other issues

In the event, reaching some sort of deal on Northern Ireland has been very challenging and is not yet totally done. An initial compromise was agreed by Boris Johnson in the autumn of 2019, when he was Prime Minister. This involved customs checks of goods moving from the rest of Britain to Northern Ireland, especially for goods likely to move into the Republic of Ireland and hence enter the Single Market. In other ways too, the economy of Northern Ireland would remain in the Single Market, and so continue to be subject to EU laws, including certain controls on state aid, etc.

Boris Johnson went on to argue that these arrangements and the broader deal he had negotiated with the EU were “oven-ready” and the basis for “getting Brexit done”, and this largely helped him win a significant Parliamentary majority in the elections of December 2019.

In practice, however, the deal was far from ready. At the end of January 2020, Britain formally left the EU, but negotiations dragged on throughout the year – and during the Covid pandemic – on reaching a final agreement for when the UK would exit all EU economic arrangements. At one point during this

tortuous process, the government even declared to Parliament that concerning Northern Ireland, it would “break the law” in very specific circumstances.

And when the UK did finally leave the economic arrangements of the EU at the start of 2021, Britain effectively delayed implementing the details of the TCA concerning the movement of goods to Northern Ireland and customs checks there.

Figure 8: Johnson campaigning in 2019 on the basis of “oven ready” Brexit



Picture source: James Melville, [“Oven Ready Brexit? Boris never turned the cooker on”](#), *The London Economic*, 3 September 2020.

Indeed, Brexit has had direct consequences for challenging the peace between Protestants and Catholics in the Province: with rioting taking place in 2021 by so-called “Loyalists” to the British Crown. Moreover, the main Protestant political party – the Democratic Unionist Party – has withdrawn from the power-sharing agreement with Northern Ireland’s Catholic politicians, so that there has been no local government in the Province since early 2022.

It is possible that the so-called Windsor Framework agreed on 27 February 2023 between the UK and the EU may finally settle the ongoing difficulties of goods moving to Northern Ireland. The agreement establishes “green” and “red” lanes to reduce customs checks on goods only destined for Northern Ireland. It also introduces a “Stormont brake” which allows the Assembly of Northern Ireland to temporarily stop changes in new EU regulations affecting Northern Ireland.

So far however the Windsor Framework has not been accepted by the DUP. Moreover, on 28 March 2023, MI5 (Britain’s counter-espionage service) said it had raised the terrorism threat level in Northern Ireland to “severe”, following the shooting of a senior police officer in February 2023, for which *New IRA* has claimed responsibility.³ While the situation at present remains calm, Brexit has made peace in Northern Ireland more brittle.

³ Jamie Grierson, [“Northern Ireland terrorism threat level rises to ‘severe’”](#), *The Guardian*, 28 March 2023.

Strained links with Scotland and diverging identities

In the 2016 referendum, 62% of votes in Scotland were cast to remain in the EU. The fact that Scotland is now stuck outside the EU, on the back of a largely English nationalist vote, has only made relations between these two nations of the United Kingdom more difficult.

At present, it seems unlikely that Scotland will obtain independence from the rest of the UK any time soon. Scotland's own referendum on staying in the UK in 2014 was difficult for many people. Brexit itself has shown how hard breaking long-standing ties with partners can be. In the event of Scotland leaving the UK and joining the EU, this would entail a hard border between Scotland and England, and ultimately a change of currency. These would be very difficult and painful things to bring about.

In commenting on the upcoming Scottish referendum in 2014, the Canadian political scientist and politician Michael Ignatieff wrote scathingly about "the moral sin of separatism" which forces citizens with complex identities to choose between them and "watch being ripped apart – one portion of themselves flung on one side of a border, a damaged remnant on the other".⁴ Scottish separatism from the UK would likely be miserable for all but the most strident nationalists.

Similarly, many British nationals now have to live with their European identities – and citizenship rights – stripped from them. Opinion polls suggest that this is a sense of loss that is more important for younger people – than for the older, baby-boom generation who voted Brexit. To many young people, the possibilities of living elsewhere in Europe and having a European future are now closed to them. Along with the economic ructions of Brexit, such identity issues also suggest that it may take a long time for Britain to "move on". Brexit is now over for the rest of Europe, but it still plays a role in British politics.

Sidelining Parliament

Another, almost incredible aspect of the Brexit process was the repeated attempts by the May and Johnson governments to sideline Parliament in getting Brexit done. Early on in this process, it took a ruling by Britain's Supreme Court judges in November 2017 to oblige the government to put to Parliament its proposal to launch the official process of leaving the EU. This ruling, which did nothing other than uphold the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty, was met by howls of populist anger by Brexiteers and the Brexit press, with the *Daily Mail* infamously accusing judges of being "Enemies of the People".

Two years later, in the autumn of 2019, the Johnson government took matters one step further when it suspended – "prorogued" – Parliament as it tried to push through Brexit as yet another extended deadline for leaving the EU loomed. Again, the Supreme Court ruled that this was illegal.

The irony that the Brexiteers were seeking to avoid Parliamentary oversight of Brexit, while hailing Brexit as a reassertion of British Parliamentary sovereignty, was plain for all to see.

Never-ending Brexit

Britain may have left the EU, but it cannot leave the European continent. Its geography means that it has to continue to engage with its partners. The new geopolitics of war in Europe and heightened

⁴ Michael Ignatieff, "[A secessionist lust for power that tears lives asunder](#)", *The Financial Times*, 27 June 2014.

tensions with China, also mean that the EU has a real interest in cooperating with the UK on security and defence matters.

The new, more pragmatic approach of the Sunak government, coming into office after the short-lived calamity of the Truss government in the autumn of 2022, means that relations will hopefully now improve. The signing of the Windsor Framework is an important first step, and may unlock the UK re-entering the EU's Horizon research funding, which should strengthen Europe's scientific and technological capabilities. However here too, the UK government was reluctant to conclude the deal to revive scientific cooperation, so necessary to both parties. The Windsor Framework also opened the door to cooperation on financial regulation, which comes at a time when global banking is once again showing signs of considerable strain. But what will come of this remains to be seen.

In March 2023, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and President Macron also signed a new deal to stop illegal immigration across the Channel. This should help improve bilateral relations too – at the expense of refugees.

But numerous other questions remain unresolved, including most notably the path the UK may take during the years ahead. For free-market Brexiters on the right, Brexit was and still is about freeing the UK from Brussels regulations, and Britain's so-called Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill (REUL Bill) was a blunt attempt to bring this about. When the Bill was first tabled, its aim was to retain, modify or simply drop some 4,000 regulations linked to EU laws, by the end of 2023. This included using a simple "sunset clause" by which much regulation would just cease to exist, leading to significant legal voids and possible chaos in many areas. Finally, however, amendments proposed by the House of Lords in the spring of 2023 significantly changed the logic of the Bill by removing this sunset clause and focusing instead on regulations to be changed.

Similar caution about pushing ahead with the Brexit process also emerged in August 2023 when the government announced that it was indefinitely postponing the implementation of Britain's own quality mark to replace the EU's "CE" label for goods, and that it was yet again postponing the implementation of checks on food products coming into the UK from the EU, due to fears that these would compound inflationary pressures in the UK economy.

Such back-peddling on the Brexit agenda seeks to limit the negative impact of leaving the EU, which the Office of Budget Responsibility, for example, has estimated constitutes a 4% loss to British GDP, which in turn means a cut in government tax revenue of some £100 billion. Specifically, there is now clear evidence that leaving the Single Market has impacted Britain's trade with the EU strongly, making it particularly difficult, if not impossible, for small business to export to their closest market. All of this compounds the very poor productivity record of the UK economy which goes back to the GFC.

Conclusions

For Britain's Brexiteers on the right, the prospects of "sunlight uplands" that formed part of their campaign to re-establish the UK's borders with the EU still remain far off, and the more pragmatic approach by the Sunak government to discarding EU regulations grates with them. For supporters of Brexit on the left, they are faced with a new relationship that is being run by the Conservatives, in which the concerns of working people – or regions – left behind are not so important. Indeed, if the Conservatives seek to deregulate the UK economy and the labour market, exiting the EU will carry a high price for "left-behind Britain". Brexit will very much become the wrong answer to the right

economic and political questions raised by Britain's neoliberal policies going back to Margaret Thatcher, and to the austerity after the GFC in particular.

On the whole, from an economic point of view, Brexit so far seems to have been a failed experiment. Just as most economists warned at the time, it was hard really to see what the advantages of Brexit would be. The recreation of legal borders has made trade more difficult and paperwork more expensive: the Brexiteer dreams of leaving the EU and the Single Market yet having "frictionless" trade with the Union have been revealed as a fantasy. The contradictions of opening up Britain to the world – of creating a "Global Britain" – while greatly making trade with local partners and friends far more difficult always seemed like an oxymoron.

From a political point of view, the disinformation about Brexit sold by Boris Johnson, now revealed as a habitual liar, and the overtly racist message of Nigel Farage are clear manifestations of the national populism, and anti-establishment politics gripping all established democracies, in the face of globalisation and low-income growth for median-income and poor households. But Brexit has also shown the weaknesses of their case.

The organisation of a simple "in-out" referendum with a simple majority deciding such a monumental change for Britain's economy and society is also a clear example of what not to do in terms of trying to strengthen participatory democracy. Voters were angry at the years of austerity and unsettled by quite strong immigration into the UK for more than a decade. They were lied to by politicians, and on a small majority vote – which represented a minority of the electorate – they embarked on a complex sovereigntist adventure, which many today regret. The whole saga of the Brexit referendum, in which a minority of registered voters ultimately imposed root and branch economic and political change on the whole country (including two nations of the UK that voted to remain in the EU) is a case study of how not to pursue simplistic participatory democracy.