

Brexit: initial reflections

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At around four-thirty on the morning of 24 June 2016, the media began to announce that the British people had voted to leave the European Union. As the final results came in, it emerged that the pro-Brexit campaign had garnered 51.9 per cent of the votes cast and prevailed by a margin of 1,269,501 votes. For the first time in its history, a member state had voted to quit the EU.

The outcome of the referendum reflected the confluence of several long-term and more contingent factors. In part, it represented the culmination of a longstanding tension in British politics between, on the one hand, London's relative effectiveness in shaping European integration to match its own preferences and, on the other, political diffidence when it came to trumpeting such success. This paradox, in turn, resulted from longstanding intraparty divisions over Britain's relationship with the EU, which have hamstrung such attempts as there have been to make a positive case for British EU membership. The media found it more worthwhile to pour a stream of anti-EU invective into the resulting vacuum rather than critically engage with the issue, let alone highlight the benefits of membership. Consequently, public opinion remained lukewarm at best, treated to a diet of more or less combative and Eurosceptic political rhetoric, much of which disguised a far different reality.

The result was also a consequence of the referendum campaign itself. The strategy pursued by Prime Minister David Cameron—of adopting a critical stance towards the EU, promising a referendum, and ultimately campaigning for continued membership—failed. In particular, his gamble on the outcome of his much-vaunted renegotiation proved reckless. In contrast, the Leave camp ran an effective campaign, highlighting key themes that resonated with a public increasingly disinclined to trust their leading politicians.

The referendum represented a turning-point in British politics. Debates about it polarized the country in the weeks before 23 June, and on the day itself, a high turnout testified to the mobilization that had been achieved. Yet the outcome revealed a country profoundly divided by class, by wealth, by education and by geography.

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Crafting an exit from the EU that takes account of this complexity and garners the support of a significant proportion of the population will be no easy task. And at the time of writing there remain doubts that the referendum will actually lead to a British exit. Some senior politicians, and a number of campaign groups, have committed themselves to trying to prevent such an outcome.

In what follows, we cast an initial eye over the referendum and its outcome. A first section examines the historical relationship between the UK and the EU, illustrating the way in which party politics accounts for the paradox of relative effectiveness coexisting with relative hostility. This in turn explains the absence of any attempt systematically to convince the British people of the benefits of EU membership—a shortcoming which created the background conditions for the referendum. The second section looks at the policies towards the EU pursued under the coalition government in power between 2010 and 2015. In the third section, we examine the attempt by Cameron to renegotiate the terms of UK EU membership, before moving on to analyse the referendum campaign. The fifth section looks at initial data on the outcome of the referendum, and a final part briefly considers what may now transpire.

Britain and European integration 1973–2010

Since the UK joined the European Community in 1973, its attitudes towards membership have been marked by a striking paradox. On the one hand, Britain is routinely described as an awkward or recalcitrant partner, a member state that has opted out of key elements of integration and demonstrated at best half-hearted enthusiasm for even those parts in which it has participated. On the other, the record of British EU membership has been one of effectively shaping the development of European integration to suit its own interests.¹

Awkward . . .

The notion of Britain as an ‘awkward partner’ was popularized by Stephen George in his textbook first published in 1990.² This awkwardness has a lengthy heritage, predating membership of the Community. When the governments of France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands formed the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), Britain chose to remain aloof. In 1957, the same six states established the European Economic Community (EEC). Again, Britain was invited to join. Again, London declined. By the early 1960s, economic growth in the six EEC member states had begun to outstrip that of the UK, and so Britain twice sought entry. Both applications were vetoed by Charles de Gaulle, and it was not until after his departure from office that the Conservative government of Edward Heath finally achieved British membership.

¹ Anand Menon and John-Paul Salter, ‘Britain’s influence in the EU’, *NIESR Review*, no. 236, May 2016, pp. 7–13.

² Stephen George, *An awkward partner: Britain in the European Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Accession to the EEC did not lay British reservations to rest. The signatures on the treaty had barely dried when, in January 1975, the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson called a referendum on the terms of membership. Four years later Margaret Thatcher entered Downing Street and immediately demanded that Britain's budgetary settlement be reopened. In 1984, following years of belligerent rhetoric ('I want my money back') and bad-tempered bargaining, she secured a rebate on Britain's contributions to the Community budget. In 1988, the tone of her speech at that altar of pro-European thought, the College of Europe in Bruges, caused consternation as she underlined her preference for cooperation among sovereign states over control by supranational institutions.

Mrs Thatcher's political demise (itself prompted by struggles within her party over Europe) failed to resolve the 'Europe issue' that was coming to dominate British politics. The UK found itself almost alone among member states in opposing further economic and political integration, and its recalcitrance greatly hampered the drafting of the Maastricht Treaty. John Major insisted on the deletion of the word 'federal', as well as on British opt-outs from economic and monetary union and the Social Chapter, as conditions for his signature. The 1992 general election reduced the Conservative majority in parliament from around 100 to just 21, and in consequence the government's policies towards the EU became the object of a ceaseless guerrilla war fought by Conservative Eurosceptics enraged by the Maastricht Treaty and energized by its (initial) rejection at the hands of the Danish people.

Consequently, Britain continued to act as a brake on the ambitions of its European partners. In 1994 Major vetoed the nomination of Jean-Luc Dehaene to succeed Jacques Delors as Commission president, arguing that he was too federalist—only to see the job go to the similarly inclined Jacques Santer. Subsequently, in retaliation against a failure on the part of the EU to lift a ban on the export of British beef following the BSE scandal, he launched a policy of non-cooperation. Ministers and officials continued to attend meetings, but constantly raised the issue of beef exports while blocking anything requiring unanimous agreement—even if these had been British initiatives in the first place.³

From 1997, Tony Blair, particularly, and Gordon Brown enjoyed large parliamentary majorities, and were far less hostile towards the EU than had been some of their Conservative predecessors. Policy under New Labour reflected this, in that, despite the occasionally caustic tone in which British political leaders were wont to lecture their continental colleagues, and the bitterness that surrounded the Iraq War of 2003, relations with EU partners were not marked by the ill-tempered contestation of the Thatcher years. That being said, the UK still proved a reluctant participant in negotiations over an EU constitution, and when it came to signing the Lisbon Treaty that finally emerged in 2009, Brown, harried by domestic opponents of the treaty, announced he was 'too busy' to attend personally, and a second ceremony had to be specially arranged for him.

³ Stephen Wall, *A stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 115–57.

. . . yet effective

At the political level, then, British attitudes have been characterized by wariness at best and on occasion outright hostility towards European integration. Yet, away from the media spotlight, the story of routine British engagement with the EU and its predecessor incarnations is very different. Many critics of British policies have tended to confuse expressed enthusiasm with an ability to shape outcomes proactively.⁴

For all the problems that have beset political relations between London and Brussels, the former has proved remarkably successful when it comes to this ability. This paradox is perhaps best exemplified by Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech. As we have seen, it achieved notoriety⁵ for its acerbic criticism of the centralizing tendencies of the European Community. Yet this was due in no small part to the way in which it was spun by her spokesman, Bernard Ingham, who ensured that the British press picked up the Prime Minister's claim that she had 'not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level'.⁶

What was less remarked upon—both at the time and subsequently—was the substantive agenda she laid out. Thatcher elucidated three principles on which European integration should be based. First, it should be intergovernmental—entailing 'willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states'. Second, it should encourage enterprise by 'getting rid of barriers [and] by making it possible for companies to operate on a European scale'. Crucially, though, the removal of barriers should not extend to physical frontiers, as 'it is a matter of plain common sense that we cannot totally abolish frontier controls if we are also to protect our citizens'. Finally, while NATO remained the ultimate guarantor of European security, European states should do more to ensure their own security.

Although delivered in characteristically uncompromising language, Thatcher's vision was to a significant extent shared by her successors. Both John Major and Tony Blair shared her concern with retaining member-state control, opening markets, decreasing regulation, maintaining national borders and strengthening European defence capabilities.

As striking as the broad continuity of substantive policy objectives is the success British leaders enjoyed in pursuing these ambitions.⁷ In both institutional and substantive policy terms—notably the continuing development of the single market and the creation of minimal EU defence capabilities—it is arguably the UK, out of all the member states involved in the negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty, that has succeeded most effectively in shaping a Europe congruent with

⁴ Anand Menon and Vincent Wright, 'The paradoxes of "failure": British EU policy making in comparative perspective', *Public Policy and Administration* 13: 46, 1998, p. 59.

⁵ It spawned the creation of the eponymous Bruges Group, dedicated to 'the intellectual battle against European integration'.

⁶ See Wall, *A stranger in Europe*, pp. 78–80.

⁷ Simon Usherwood, 'Bruges as a lodestone of British opposition to the European Union', *Collegium*, no. 29, 2004, pp. 5–16.

its own preferences.⁸ The same influence can be perceived in areas not touched on by Mrs Thatcher herself. Britain was an early advocate of enlargement, and later became a driving force behind the extension of membership to central and eastern Europe. It has also been influential in the development of the concerted European actions on climate change and animal welfare.

Equally important has been the way in which British political leaders have managed to secure opt-outs from areas in which they had no interest. Protocol 25 of the Maastricht Treaty exempted the UK (along with Denmark) from participation in the euro. Britain is not a member of the Schengen area, and obtained an exception from some aspects of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Finally, under protocol 36 of the Lisbon Treaty, London secured the right to opt in or out of EU legislation in the areas of justice and home affairs. To a significant extent, the EU's awkward partner carved out a privileged position for itself.

Parties and politics

The apparent contradiction between political ambivalence and private influence is explicable in terms of domestic politics: the tensions between (and indeed within) British political parties, and the shifting mood of public opinion. In turn, these created the long-term conditions which led first to the pressure for a referendum, and then—in part, at least—to the outcome.

The attitudes of political parties have fluctuated in the decades since the UK joined the EEC. The Conservatives initially adopted a pragmatic approach, realizing that membership could support Britain's economic recovery by opening access to new industrial markets, and so halt its declining status as a world power. The Labour Party, for its part, was deeply sceptical: Hugh Gaitskell famously characterized the notion of Britain joining a federalizing Europe as 'the end of a thousand years of history'. Later, Harold Wilson managed to broker a compromise position—grudgingly supportive of membership, but critical of the terms obtained by Heath on entry—but this barely masked the divisions in the parliamentary party. During the referendum campaign of 1975, the suspension of cabinet unity allowed prominent Labour figures to oppose him publicly, while outside parliament the more left-wing grassroots membership was shifting towards Euro-scepticism.

These positions were reversed in the years following the Bruges speech. Mrs Thatcher successfully tapped into a discourse stressing the incompatibility of supranational authority and national democracy, which had been evident at least since Gaitskell's comments in 1962. This message now resonated with a growing Eurosceptic element within her own party, and following her ouster Major inherited a party openly divided between those for whom European integration represented an unacceptable intrusion into parliamentary sovereignty and others, more relaxed about sovereignty, who saw membership as vital for Britain's long-term

⁸ Menon and Salter, 'Britain's influence in the EU', pp. 8–9.

future.⁹ For Labour, meanwhile, the trauma of the split of 1981 leading to the formation of the Social Democratic Party, and a fear of being led from the hard left, pushed the party towards the centre ground. As Thatcher was condemning Europe's hunger for power, Jacques Delors's speech to the Trades Union Congress called on it to protect and strengthen workers' rights. This helped the party shed its opposition to Europe, and through the successive tenures of Neil Kinnock, John Smith and Tony Blair, Labour gradually forged a new acceptance of EC/EU membership.¹⁰

Changing party positions shaped, and were themselves shaped by, the shifting tide of public opinion. Just before the 1975 referendum, a Gallup poll found that 41 per cent would vote to leave the EEC; this dropped to 22 per cent when people were then asked whether renegotiated terms of membership would alter their attitudes.¹¹ An academic study of the first referendum noted that the verdict was 'unequivocal but it was also unenthusiastic', and that support for membership was 'not wide nor did it run deep'.¹² Indeed, by March 1979, a MORI poll found that 60 per cent would now vote to leave the EEC—just four years after two-thirds of voters had backed staying in. Yet as Prime Minister Thatcher engaged successfully with the EC in the mid-1980s, and the Labour Party too began to move in a more pro-EC direction, opinion shifted. In 1987 the polls stood at 47 per cent in favour of membership to 39 per cent against. This trend was broadly maintained throughout the 1990s, albeit with dips in support, often brought about by periodic instances of tension between Britain and the EU: for example, following the lead of Major's policy of non-cooperation, and of a now critical press, public opinion turned against Europe during the BSE crisis of 1996.

By the last years of the twentieth century, both parties had adopted carefully calculated public positions on the EU in response to both internal divisions and lukewarm public approval. New Labour, which in opposition had ruthlessly capitalized on the Major government's handling of European policy, softened its approach upon its election in 1997. Mindful of the harm Europe had caused both the Conservatives and his own party in the 1980s, Blair implemented a policy of 'utilitarian supranationalism',¹³ engaging in constructive diplomacy with the EU while consciously downplaying its salience in the public arena. The Conservative Party, during its long period in opposition, learnt first to marginalize its Euro-sceptic group, and subsequently to avoid attacking Labour's European policy.

Labour's strategy was predicated on a belief that relations with the EU could be handled at an elite level, and were not an issue of which the average voter

⁹ See Anthony Forster, *Euro-scepticism and British politics* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰ Julie Smith, 'A missed opportunity? New Labour's European policy, 1997–2005', *International Affairs* 81: 4, July 2005, pp. 703–22.

¹¹ Roger Mortimore, 'Polling history: 40 years of British views on 'in or out' of Europe', *The Conversation*, June 2016, <http://theconversation.com/polling-history-40-years-of-british-views-on-in-or-out-of-europe-61250>. (Unless otherwise stated at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 4 Oct. 2016.)

¹² David Butler and Uwe Kitzinger, *The 1975 referendum*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 280.

¹³ Simon Bulmer, 'New Labour, new European policy? Blair, Brown and utilitarian supranationalism', *Parliamentary Affairs* 61: 4, 2008, pp. 597–620. See also Oliver Daddow, 'Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and the Euro-sceptic tradition in Britain', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15: 2, 2013, pp. 210–27.

should develop a critical awareness—but this had consequences for the way the media covered the EU. The British press had maintained a largely supportive tone towards European integration up until the 1980s, when the position shifted towards ‘destructive dissent’ and scaremongering became commonplace.¹⁴ Now, with only lukewarm public approval for, or interest in, European integration, and the parties seemingly colluding to keep it off the political agenda, the media found even less reason to engage constructively in detailed analysis—or actively to shape a positive narrative about the benefits of integration. A vicious circle resulted, linking cautious parties, a scathing press and an ambivalent public, leaving the way open for critics—in the parties, sections of the media and elsewhere—to gain traction.

Meanwhile, over the course of the 1990s, Euroscepticism inspired the creation of groupings outside the main parties. In 1991 a new party committed to ending British participation in European integration, the Anti-Federalist League, was created, and this was followed in 1994 by the emergence of the Referendum Party with the sole purpose of pressing for a vote on EU membership. The former changed its name to the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and took up the call for a popular vote on membership.

From coalition to referendum

This was the historical context within which David Cameron engaged with the EU as a political issue. As leader of the opposition, he had gained first-hand experience of intraparty divisions over Europe, and of the difficulties inherent in his stated intention to stop his own party ‘banging on about Europe’. To secure election as party leader, he pledged to pull the Conservatives out of the European People’s Party in the European Parliament. He fulfilled this promise in 2009, and allied the Conservatives with a new grouping of right-wing Eurosceptic parties.

After entering Downing Street, the Prime Minister immediately faced demands from within his own ranks to promise a referendum on EU membership.¹⁵ The coalition agreement signed with the Liberal Democrats guaranteed that there would be no more transfers of sovereign powers to the EU until the next election. In a further attempt to block pressure for a popular vote on membership, Cameron adopted an idea from the Liberal Democrat manifesto and introduced a ‘referendum lock’ in the European Union Act of 2011.¹⁶ Yet in the same year, although a motion calling for a straightforward ‘in/out’ referendum was defeated in the Commons by 483 to 111, 81 Conservative MPs supported it.

Developments within the EU itself further tightened the constraints on the Prime Minister, as the Union sought closer integration to deal with the protracted

¹⁴ Oliver Daddow, ‘The UK media and “Europe”: from permissive consensus to destructive dissent’, *International Affairs* 88: 6, Nov. 2012, p. 1221. See also Nicholas Startin, ‘Have we reached a tipping point? The mainstreaming of Euroscepticism in the UK’, *International Political Science Review* 36: 3, 2015, pp. 311–23.

¹⁵ Tim Oliver, ‘To be or not to be in Europe: is that the question?’, *International Affairs* 91: 1, Jan. 2015, p. 77.

¹⁶ Ben Wellings and Emma Vines, ‘Populism and sovereignty: the EU Act and the in–out referendum, 2010–2015’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 69: 4, 2016, pp. 309–26.

eurozone crisis. The economic collapse of parts of the EU helped to undermine the notion that, for all its flaws, EU membership was probably positive for the British economy. Conservative Eurosceptics were complaining loudly that the (relatively) healthy British economy was ‘shackled to a corpse’. As importantly, the crisis again placed Britain at loggerheads with its partners. At a summit in December 2011, Cameron refused to sign a new treaty on the euro. While his advisers successfully managed to portray his actions as a veto, he was unable to prevent his partners from agreeing a new treaty among themselves. Yet while delighting Conservative Eurosceptics, the Prime Minister failed to satiate their desire for more. As former Conservative Chancellor Kenneth Clarke put it: ‘If you want to go feeding crocodiles then you’d better not run out of buns.’

By 2013 the Prime Minister had indeed run out of buns. For all his concessions, the Eurosceptics maintained their campaign for a referendum, and support for UKIP was rising. Consequently, in January that year Cameron made a long-trailed speech in the London offices of Bloomberg in which he promised, if elected in 2015, to establish a ‘new settlement’ for Britain in the EU, following which he would call an in/out referendum on EU membership.

During the final two years of the parliament, the risk he was taking became abundantly clear. In January 2014, 95 Conservative backbenchers signed a letter calling for parliament to be able to block and repeal EU laws via the repeal of the 1972 European Communities Act. Meanwhile support for UKIP continued to rise, with the party winning the European Parliament elections of 2014 with almost 27.5 per cent of the vote (the first time in modern history that a national election had been won by neither Labour nor the Conservatives). That August, Conservative MP Douglas Carswell triggered a by-election in Clacton-on-Sea by defecting from the Conservatives, arguing that the Prime Minister was not serious about achieving the kind of change that was needed in the EU. The following October, Carswell secured the biggest increase in vote share for any political party in any British by-election when he recaptured his seat. The triumph of Mark Reckless—who had similarly defected to UKIP in September—in Rochester and Strood on 20 November merely intensified speculation that more of his former Conservative colleagues might be willing to jump ship to join Nigel Farage’s self-proclaimed ‘insurrection’. A referendum was on the cards, and Euroscepticism was on the rise.¹⁷

Renegotiation

The Prime Minister’s referendum pledge, did, however, help him achieve one objective. In May 2015, and contrary to the predictions of the majority of pollsters, the Conservative Party secured an overall majority at the general election. Equally, however, this meant that Cameron now had to deliver on his promise to provide a new settlement for Britain and a referendum on the outcome of this process.

¹⁷ Julie Smith, ‘Europe: the Coalition’s poisoned chalice’, in A. Seldon and M. Finn, eds, *The coalition effect 2010–2015* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

In his Bloomberg speech the Prime Minister had outlined several areas in which he would seek reform. In the run-up to the general election, this list had been fleshed out and amended to include competitiveness, growth and the single market; increasing the role of national parliaments in EU decision-making; a British opt-out from the notion of 'ever closer union'; and respect for the interests of non-euro member states, even if the euro group proceeded with further integration. Crucially, the government also stressed its desire to address the 'problem' of intra-EU migration, particularly the rights of EU migrants to claim social security benefits in the UK.

The increasing emphasis placed on immigration, and particularly the ability of EU migrants to claim state support, reflected the growing pressure coming to bear on the Prime Minister and, not least, the success that UKIP had enjoyed in linking the issue with that of EU membership. Migration had not appeared on David Cameron's initial list of desiderata; he mentioned neither migrants nor benefits in his Bloomberg speech. Subsequently, however, he was forced to revise his demands in this area.

In an article in the *Daily Telegraph* in March 2014, Cameron referred to the need to build the EU around 'the right to work, not the right to claim', stressing the need to prevent 'vast migrations' when new countries joined the EU.¹⁸ By the time of his major immigration speech in November that year, he had significantly ratcheted up his demands, specifically in terms of the ability of EU migrants to claim benefits in Britain.¹⁹ Subsequently a four-year waiting period before EU migrants could claim those benefits was laid out in the Conservative Party general election manifesto.²⁰

Whether that waiting period in particular was an electoral sop, intended to be bargained away during negotiations over the formation of the second coalition government that most people expected, we cannot know for sure. Whatever the case, the unexpected Conservative victory meant that David Cameron now had to deliver on the increasingly ambitious promises he had made.

He had, in fact, got off to a good start. Well before the commencement of formal negotiations, significant progress was made in securing reform. The EU had already embraced much of the Prime Minister's competitiveness agenda. The Commission's REFIT (Regulatory Fitness and Performance) programme had led to the withdrawal of almost 300 legislative proposals. In respect of 'ever closer union', the conclusions of the European Council meeting of 26–27 June 2014 had gone a significant way towards addressing British concerns.²¹ Even in the area of free movement, a European Court of Justice ruling in November 2014 reaffirmed

¹⁸ Tim Ross, 'David Cameron: my seven targets for a new EU', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 March 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/eureferendum/10700610/David-Cameron-my-seven-targets-for-a-new-EU.html>.

¹⁹ The text of the Prime Minister's speech was published in the *Spectator*, 28 Nov. 2014: see <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2014/11/david-camersons-immigration-speech-full-text/>.

²⁰ Conservative Party manifesto 2015, *Strong leadership, a clear economic plan: a brighter, more secure future*, <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/manifesto2015/ConservativeManifesto2015.pdf>, p. 30.

²¹ European Council conclusions, 26–27 June 2014, p. 11, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/143478.pdf.

the right of member states not to pay benefits to EU migrants who were not seeking work.

The problem, as ever, lay in the disjunction between the reality of Britain's place in the EU and the political discourse regarding that relationship. In a context where critical comment was the norm, speaking well of the EU, or of its direction of travel, was not politically expedient. Consequently, prior to his renegotiation, Cameron failed to make the point that the UK already enjoyed a special status as a result of, *inter alia*, its influence in the single market and its opt-out from the single currency, the Schengen zone, and EU justice and home affairs legislation.

Rather than challenging the sceptics in his own party, the Prime Minister had pandered to them, to the point of claiming that he would reconsider his support for British membership if his renegotiation demands were not met. Small wonder, then, that shifts in the Union that suited the UK were hardly mentioned. An awful lot was going to rest on the outcome of the renegotiation.

In the event that outcome was, in the words of an *Open Europe* analysis, neither transformative nor trivial.²² A single member state was hardly going to be able to bring about a fundamental transformation of the EU, particularly when politics across the continent meant that formal changes to the treaty, meaning ratification and possibly referendums in a number of member states, were simply not on the cards.

Yet the Prime Minister certainly did not come away empty-handed from the crucial summit of 18–19 February 2016. In key areas, his partners made significant concessions. On ever closer union, they agreed to write a British exemption into the treaties at a future date. On the single currency, Cameron secured a guarantee that non-euro states would not have to fund euro bailouts, and would be reimbursed for any central EU funds used to prop up the euro. There was also an undertaking that non-euro states could refer concerns about discrimination against them to the European Council. A new 'red card' procedure meant that legislative proposals by the Commission could be blocked by 55 per cent of the EU's national parliaments. Even in the area of free movement, where many observers had expressed doubts that any real progress was possible, Cameron secured the ability to restrict payments of in-work benefits, and to index link child support payments to the conditions of the member state in which the child lived.

One can argue about whether or not these changes would have had much in the way of practical value. Economists, for instance, insisted that the changes to migrant worker benefits would have little or no impact on the numbers of EU citizens coming to the UK. However, this is to miss the point: for the renegotiation was, at heart, a political exercise, and it is in political terms that its impact must be assessed. And here the outcome was less positive, not least because of the ambitious promises that had been made. The renegotiation did not produce the wholesale new settlement the Prime Minister had pledged. Promises from the

²² Stephen Booth and Raoul Ruparel, 'What did the UK achieve in its EU renegotiation?', *Open Europe*, Feb. 2016, https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://openeurope.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/160221_OE_responds_to_deal.pdf.

Conservative Party manifesto related to restricting the ability to send child benefit abroad and making workers from other member states ineligible for welfare payments were not kept, at least not in their entirety. Promises of future treaty change to enshrine Britain's opt-out from ever closer union were not the same as the 'full-on treaty change' Cameron had once promised.

A survey carried out between November and December 2015 found a high proportion of Tory MPs waiting on the outcome of the renegotiation to decide how to vote in the referendum.²³ And here the Prime Minister failed to achieve his objective. In the weeks leading up to the summit, officials were confidently briefing that only 'around 40 or 50' Conservative MPs were likely to defect and throw their support behind Brexit. In the event, 138 Conservative MPs ultimately swung behind the campaign to leave the EU.

The relative lack of political support was as nothing compared to the outraged reaction of the Eurosceptic press. 'Call that a Deal, Dave?' bellowed the *Daily Mail*. Perhaps more disappointingly and certainly more surprisingly for the No. 10 team, *The Times* was also roundly critical of the 'fudge' that the Prime Minister had achieved. This mattered, because studies of public opinion had come to the conclusion that a majority of voters were willing to remain within a reformed EU.²⁴ It was crucial, therefore, that the Prime Minister convince the electorate that his reform initiative had been successful—all the more given that he had left himself with no choice but to argue that the deal was so good it had transformed him from a potential Brexiter to a convinced Remainer. As the campaign itself unfolded, the unconvincing nature of this claim was to have a significant impact.

The referendum campaign

While the organizations that were to be prominent in the referendum were launched in 2015, the campaign itself really got started only after the Prime Minister returned from the Brussels European Council in February and announced his intention to hold a referendum on 23 June.

Britain Stronger in Europe, the main pro-Remain campaign organization (hereafter referred to as StrongerIn), was a cross-party group led by Will Straw. Its strategy was closely modelled on the campaigns run against Scottish independence and by the Conservatives for the general election. In keeping with the technique associated with Cameron's election guru Lynton Crosby, the focus was placed squarely on a small number of key messages, foremost among which was economic security. By the time the organization was launched on 12 October 2015, it had settled on the message that Britain would be 'stronger, safer and better off'

²³ Survey carried out by 'The UK in a Changing Europe'. See 'A third of MPs still undecided which way they will vote in the UK's EU referendum, new poll shows', 1 Feb. 2016, <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/a-third-of-mps-still-undecided-which-way-they-will-vote-in-the-uks-eu-referendum-new-poll-shows/>.

²⁴ Matthew Goodwin and Caitlin Milazzo, 'Britain, the European Union and the referendum: what drives Euroscepticism?', briefing paper (London: Chatham House, Dec. 2015), p. 4, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/20151209EuroscepticismGoodwinMilazzo.pdf>.

in the EU, and that leaving represented a 'leap in the dark'. The campaign deliberately attempted to win the economic argument early. A mere 24 hours after the Prime Minister's statement, the CEOs of a third of FTSE 100 companies signed a letter in *The Times* arguing against Brexit.

If the Remain camp had a fairly coherent organizational structure, the Leave side was much less organized. VoteLeave was formed in October 2015, led by Matthew Elliot (a lobbyist and founder of the Taxpayers' Alliance) and Dominic Cummings (who had served as a special adviser to Michael Gove). Leave.EU had been co-founded in July 2015 by businessman and UKIP donor Arron Banks and property entrepreneur Richard Tice. Originally called 'The Know', its constituency differed from that of VoteLeave, particularly after it gained the support of UKIP leader Nigel Farage.

Divisions in the Conservative Party over Europe meant that prominent figures were always going to feature in both camps. On the Remain side were Cameron, Chancellor George Osborne and several other high-profile cabinet ministers. However, the Prime Minister's position was, as we have seen, compromised as a result of the renegotiation. While more was achieved than could reasonably have been expected of this kind of unilateral renegotiation, David Cameron's pirouette from potential Brexiter to committed campaigner for Remain lacked credibility. Indeed, this was made all the more obvious by the Remain camp's subsequent failure to mention the renegotiation or the proposals for reforming the EU—indicating to the electorate that even they had little confidence in the agreement holding after the referendum.

On the other side, Michael Gove had been heavily involved in VoteLeave since its formation, and on 22 February—in a move later derided as a piece of political opportunism—Boris Johnson declared for Leave. The Leave side exploited this 'blue on blue' dynamic, taking every opportunity to attack the government and its record, which both earned them extensive media coverage and contributed to the gradual erosion of trust in Cameron and Osborne. Thus, Osborne's budget led to the resignation of Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, because of its focus on benefiting higher-rate taxpayers. Over time, it became clear that part of the Leave strategy was to appeal to class divisions—hence revelations concerning Cameron's father and his use of offshore tax vehicles, unearthed during the Panama papers scandal, were used to undermine the credibility of those arguing that Brexit would harm the least well off in society.

Moreover, for all that Remain kicked off its formal campaign early, the Leave side had, as we have seen, effectively been campaigning since the parliamentary vote on Maastricht. In the subsequent years, campaigners had honed their attacks, bringing the idea of exit from the EU from the fringes to the mainstream of political acceptability.²⁵ Anti-European arguments provided 'the background hum of political discourse at Westminster and in the country'.²⁶ Little

²⁵ John Lanchester, 'Brexit blues', *London Review of Books*, 28 July 2016.

²⁶ Stephen Bush, 'Westminster has yet to come to terms with the consequences of Brexit', *New Statesman*, 2 July 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/07/westminster-has-yet-come-terms-consequences-brexit>.

wonder the Remain camp struggled to confront 20 years of negative newspaper stories.²⁷

In the early stages of the campaign, Cameron and Osborne had restrained their campaigning for fear of provoking a split in the party. Aggressive attacks on Gove and Johnson—such as a poster featuring Johnson in Nigel Farage’s pocket (modelled on the poster of Ed Miliband in Alex Salmond’s pocket that had proved so effective during the general election campaign)—were retracted. As one Downing Street source put it, there was ‘a sense that we were bringing knives to a gun battle’.²⁸ However, as time went on and Leave showed no signs of such mercy, StrongerIn gathered pace. On 6 April a booklet was sent to every home in the country setting out the (primarily economic) case for remaining in the EU, and twelve days later the Treasury published a study warning of the economic costs of Brexit.

The mood in the Remain camp was further bolstered by a series of apparent gaffes committed by their opponents. From a headline in the *Sunday Times* on 6 March that the ‘EU fuels terror and fascism’,²⁹ to claims published in the *Sun* three days later that the Queen supported Brexit,³⁰ to rumours that Johnson had tried to gag his staff rather than allow them to contradict his views on leaving the EU,³¹ the campaign to leave the EU appeared in disarray.

Initially observers had expected VoteLeave to differentiate itself from Leave. EU by focusing on issues such as sovereignty and the cost of membership, rather than immigration. Following its faltering performance in March, however, this strategy was revised. And the campaign was rewarded in late May when the Office for National Statistics revealed that in 2015 net migration had been 333,000—the second highest annual total on record. Johnson and Gove stressed that Brexit was the only way to reassert control over the country’s borders.

This new tactic had an immediate impact. Will Straw was forced to admit that a focus on immigration was ‘snuffing out our opportunity to talk about the economy’.³² The Remain camp had no credible retort, a situation exacerbated by the start of ‘purdah’ on 27 May, from which point civil servants and government departments could no longer campaign. The Leave camp had planned for this period carefully, and immediately launched a set of policy proposals—including the implementation of an Australian-style points system to control immigration—and prominent campaigners began to portray themselves almost as government ministers-in-waiting.

²⁷ On this point, see Oliver Daddow, ‘Project Fear is the legacy of decades of Euroscepticism: dare Cameron make a positive case for the EU?’, *LSE British Politics and Policy* blog, 14 March 2016, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/project-fear-is-the-legacy-of-decades-of-Euroscepticism-dare-cameron-make-a-positive-case-for-the-eu/>.

²⁸ Rafael Behr, ‘How Remain failed: the inside story of a doomed campaign’, *Guardian*, 5 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jul/05/how-remain-failed-inside-story-doomed-campaign>.

²⁹ ‘EU fuels terror and fascism, warns Gove’, *Sunday Times*, 6 March 2016, <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/Politics/article1675664.ece>.

³⁰ ‘Revealed: Queen backs Brexit’, *Sun*, 9 March 2016, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1078304/revealed-queen-backs-brexit-as-alleged-eu-bust-up-with-ex-deputy-pm-emerges/>.

³¹ ‘Boris Johnson: City Hall staff will not be gagged over EU referendum’, *Guardian*, 8 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/mar/08/boris-johnson-city-hall-staff-will-not-be-gagged-over-eu-referendum>.

³² Behr, ‘How Remain failed’.

The formal campaign lasted from 15 April to 23 June, during which Leave worked to neutralize the key elements of the Remain argument. The essentially negative message of the Remain camp (that Brexit would be costly and staying in was safer) left them open to accusations of scaremongering. Indeed, the negative predictions were so persistent that—as a poll shortly before the vote revealed—Remain voters expected the economy to worsen even if the UK voted to stay in the EU.³³ The steady focus on immigration made it hard for Remain campaigners to emphasize the economic arguments that had been so thoroughly rehearsed since February, while attempts to personalize the campaign by attacking Boris Johnson proved unsuccessful.

The Leave Camp, in contrast, were able to marshal a number of simple and powerful messages. Leave.EU led with ‘I want my country back’, while VoteLeave deployed ‘Take back control’. In contrast, Remain arguments appealing to economics, or lofty concepts such as ‘pooled sovereignty’ or ‘transnational cooperation’, came over as remote and arcane. Leave also worked to highlight the negativity of the Remain camp’s rhetoric, urging people not to trust politicians or establishment figures who warned of the dire consequences of Brexit. Leave were not afraid to support their simple messages with statements which were at best inaccurate and at worst factually incorrect—for example, the frequently cited line that the UK sent £350 million a week to the EU, and that this sum could be used instead to fund the NHS. As Lord (Andrew) Cooper put it, they had ‘the best tunes’.³⁴ In response to those who criticized such figures, Leave merely derided the messengers, with Michael Gove famously remarking on 3 June that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’.

In communicating these messages to the electorate the Leave camp had an ally in much of the the British media, which had come out in support of Brexit. Some of this was deliberately stoked by prominent campaigners—such as Boris Johnson’s shouting down of Michael Crick on live television—but largely it represented, as we have seen, the continuation of a long-running theme of Euroscepticism which had characterized the media’s engagement with Europe for decades. A study of press coverage found that 41 per cent of newspaper articles covering the referendum were pro-Leave, compared to 27 per cent in favour of Remain; six of the nine national newspapers leaned towards Brexit, with the strongest lines coming from the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*. Importantly, weighting the impact of the newspapers’ message by considering their reach and readership, the study also found that the most avowedly Remain publications—the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*—had the lowest reach, with the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* at the other end of the spectrum.³⁵

³³ YouGov survey with fieldwork conducted 9–10 June 2016. Full data available at https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/qj30lqsp2n/SundayTimesResults_160610_EURreferendum.pdf.

³⁴ Andrew Cooper, ‘The Brexit vote is history. A closed or open Britain is the defining battle now’, *Guardian*, 4 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/04/post-referendum-politics-eu-vote>.

³⁵ David A. L. Levy, Billur Aslan and Diego Bironzo, *UK press coverage of the EU referendum* (Oxford: University of Oxford/Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Sept. 2016), http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/UK%20Press%20Coverage%20of%20the%20EU%20Referendum_o.pdf.

During all this, the Labour Party played an enigmatic role. Remain needed to attract Labour voters inherently suspicious of a Prime Minister whose policies had, in many cases, made them worse off. However, the Labour leadership was wary of cooperating with the government, believing that such collaboration during the Scottish referendum campaign was a factor in the catastrophic defeat it had suffered north of the border in the 2015 general election.

Indeed, Jeremy Corbyn's close allies reportedly 'sabotaged' Labour's campaign to keep the UK in the EU. The leader's office was at times hostile and would not share voter registration lists with StrongerIn. Corbyn refused to focus on or even plan for the referendum until after the local elections in May. Pro-EU lines were cut from his speeches (the phrase 'that's why I'm campaigning to remain in the EU' was reportedly a frequent victim of such editing³⁶), and events organized by the LabourIn group were avoided. Indeed, Corbyn's office even signed off on a visit to Turkey to discuss open borders, though opposition from within the party meant that this did not go ahead. The opposition leader's decision to take a holiday during the campaign also contrasted strongly with David Cameron's tireless campaigning.

The party itself was divided. Gordon Brown proposed that Corbyn should make a public appearance with former Labour leaders, but the latter refused to share a platform with Tony Blair—even when the former Prime Minister's 'participation' was downgraded to a statement read by someone else. Disagreements also centred on specifics. Corbyn, Brown and Hilary Benn attempted to explain the benefits of free movement, while others such as Yvette Cooper and Tom Watson spoke out in favour of a revision of the rules governing it. This then fed into a larger rift between the parliamentary party and the public: when out canvassing for Remain, Labour MPs found strong public discontent about immigration, but were unable to point to a single, clear party position on the issue. An event with shadow cabinet ministers and trade union leaders on 14 June was overshadowed by these internal divisions, and one StrongerIn staffer was quoted as saying that: '[We] understand that Labour needs to sort out its immigration policy. But the time to do it is not a week before polling day on live f—ing television.'³⁷

Corbyn rarely seemed convinced of the case for British membership of the EU. He criticized the EU as much as he praised it, and often contradicted the Remain camp's official messages. Despite polling evidence showing that a public appearance by Corbyn and Cameron would be the 'number one play' to reach Labour voters, and despite senior figures in the Remain campaign—including Brown—begging Corbyn to attend a rally with the Prime Minister, the Labour leader flatly refused to countenance it. One Corbyn aide was quoted as saying that the Labour leader couldn't 'stand there every week and wail away at you for Prime Minister's Questions and then get on stage with you'. As a result of all this, internal polling

³⁶ Paul Waugh, 'Jeremy Corbyn allies "sabotaged" Labour's in campaign on the EU referendum, critics claimed', *Huffpost Politics*, UK edn, 25 June 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/jeremy-corbyn-allies-sabotaged-labour-in-campaign-and-fuelled-brexit_uk_576eb1b5e4bd2571149bb1f.

³⁷ Behr, 'How Remain failed'.

weeks before the referendum showed that one in five Labour voters did not know the party's position on the referendum.³⁸

The Leave campaign, meanwhile, maintained the momentum it had begun to pick up in April. Boris Johnson proved the star of the show, capitalizing on his personal popularity and touring the country tirelessly. The Remain camp were simply unable to put up anyone to match his public appeal. The former London Mayor's closing words in the final debate made a massive impact, as he asserted that 23 June could be the UK's 'independence day'.

The outcome

For all the effectiveness of the Leave campaign, the result, when it was announced, came as something of a surprise to both sides. Throughout the campaign itself, prominent Remain campaigners had voiced their confidence about the outcome: Andrew Cooper, founder of Populus and Cameron's pollster, predicted that Remain would win by 10 per cent. In early February 2016 Lord Rose, chairman of StrongerIn, declared that Remain would win by a 'substantial margin'. Although by the beginning of March Leave and Remain were tied in the polls, and the consensus began to shift towards a very tight outcome, few people predicted a vote to Leave. Even Nigel Farage, moments after polls closed on 23 June, admitted: 'I think Remain will edge it, yes.'³⁹

The outcome was, as predicted, very close (51.9 per cent Leave to 48.1 per cent Remain), and in the weeks following the vote analysts pored over the figures. The closeness of the overall outcome suggested a country relatively evenly divided on the question of membership—exactly as the pre-referendum polls had suggested—but further examination of the data, using many different variables, added further depth to the picture.

The most obvious breakdown of voting patterns is geographic. Counting was carried out at the level of local authorities, and even as the results were coming in, it was apparent that the majority of the UK's authorities had voted to leave. But the map revealed stark divisions: all of Scotland voted Remain, but in England, every region apart from London voted Leave. The vote share in Wales almost exactly matched the overall national result (52.5 per cent Leave to 47.5 per cent Remain), while Northern Ireland came out in favour of Remain (at 55.8 per cent). Notwithstanding these overall results, it is interesting to note that a majority of authorities were within a 60–40 split in either direction, with only a few extreme outliers.⁴⁰

Equally significant divisions are apparent on other dimensions, such as average levels of educational attainment. The share of the Leave vote was highest in

³⁸ Tom McTague, Alex Spence and Edward-Isaac Dove, 'How David Cameron blew it: the behind-the-scenes story of a failed campaign to keep Britain in the European Union', *Politico*, 25 June 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/how-david-cameron-lost-brexiteu-referendum-prime-minister-campaign-remain-boris-craig-oliver-jim-messina-obama/>.

³⁹ 'Farage thinks Remain has carried referendum as vote are counted', *Daily Mail*, 23 June 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-3655449/Voters-set-to-polls-EU-referendum-day.html>.

⁴⁰ Full results can be found at <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7639>.

areas where average levels of schooling were low; conversely, all 20 of the 'most educated' authorities in the UK voted Remain. Not surprisingly, similar patterns were evident for occupational background: areas with large proportions of people in professional occupations registered strong Remain votes,⁴¹ as did those with higher levels of median hourly pay.⁴² Boston in Lincolnshire provided the Leave campaign's biggest victory—76 per cent voted for Brexit—and the median income here is less than £17,000, as compared with £27,000 across the 20 local authorities where support for EU membership was strongest.

The pre-election opinion polling had identified a clear generational division in perspectives on membership. In a sense this seemed oddly counter-intuitive, since many of the over-65s indicating a preference for *leaving* the EU could well have been among the ranks of Remain voters in 1975. Nonetheless, the results from the vote confirmed the polling: the Leave vote was higher in areas with large proportions of the population over 65, and lower where the population was younger. This, and the overlap with educational attainment, was most obviously seen in England's two ancient university cities: Oxford and Cambridge (both with large numbers of highly educated young people) voted heavily for Remain.

Research carried out before the referendum illustrated all too clearly the potential for immigration to dominate the campaign and shape the outcome, given its rising salience in the minds of the public.⁴³ Subsequent studies, however, showed that the connection between immigration and voting patterns was slightly more complicated. For example, South Staffordshire recorded among the highest Leave votes (at 78 per cent), yet fewer than 1 per cent of its population was born on the continent. The correlation between levels of EU migration and Leave vote were only mild: Langella and Manning found a 10 per cent increase in the migrant share of the population between local authority areas was associated with only a 3.3 per cent increase in Leave vote.⁴⁴ This trend was repeated on a large scale: of the 20 areas in the UK with the lowest level of EU migration, 15 voted Leave; of the 20 with the highest, 18 voted Remain.⁴⁵ So it seems that exposure to large numbers of EU migrants actually pushed voters towards Remain. Instead, Leave votes were closely connected to the rate of change of EU migration: those areas which had seen a rapid increase in migrants arriving from the rest of Europe—such as Redditch or Lincoln—voted strongly for Leave.⁴⁶

An alternative approach to analysing the result was not to use aggregate demographic data on local authority areas, but essentially to repeat the pre-

⁴¹ Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath, 'The 2016 referendum, Brexit and the left behind: an aggregate-level analysis of the result', *Political Quarterly* 87: 3, 2016, pp. 323–32.

⁴² Stephen Clarke and Matthew Whittaker, 'The importance of place: explaining the characteristics underpinning the Brexit vote across different parts of the UK', *Resolution Foundation*, July 2016, <http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-important-of-place-explaining-the-characteristics-underpinning-the-brexit-vote-across-different-parts-of-the-uk/>.

⁴³ Goodwin and Milazzo, 'Britain, the European Union and the referendum', p. 4.

⁴⁴ Monica Langella and Alan Manning, 'Who voted Leave: the characteristics of individuals mattered, but so did those of local areas', *LSE British Politics and Policy* blog, 6 July 2016, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/explaining-the-vote-for-brexit/>.

⁴⁵ Goodwin and Heath, 'The 2016 referendum, Brexit and the left behind'.

⁴⁶ Clarke and Whittaker, 'The importance of place'.

referendum polling exercise. While perhaps methodologically more problematic, this nonetheless generated some interesting results. One such exercise was conducted by Lord Ashcroft's polling organization, which surveyed over 12,000 voters on the day of the referendum.⁴⁷ The first significant link identified in the data was between the way individuals had voted in the referendum and in the 2015 general election. The two groups of party voters most in favour of Leave were UKIP (96 per cent) and the Conservatives (58 per cent); conversely, around two-thirds of Labour and SNP voters (63 per cent and 64 per cent respectively) voted Remain, as did 70 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters and 75 per cent of Green voters.

A second set of questions examined voters' identities and attitudes. Of those who saw themselves as 'equally British and English' the vote was evenly split between Leave and Remain; but 79 per cent of those who identified as 'English only' voted Leave. At the other end of the scale, those who were 'British not English' voted—by 60 per cent to 40 per cent—for Remain. Next, those who saw causes such as multiculturalism, feminism, environmentalism and globalization as forces for good voted for Remain, while those who had negative perceptions of all of these voted by a large majority for Leave.

Perhaps the most interesting segment of the Ashcroft data was the study of the reasons given for voters' choices. For Leave voters, the decision was based on sovereignty: they agreed with the principle that the UK should be able to take its own decisions. Behind this came a desire to reduce immigration, and a fear that European integration was out of control. Remain voters, meanwhile, sidelined concerns about sovereignty and immigration in favour of practical economic issues: the most common reason given was that the risks (to the economy, jobs and prices) of leaving were too great. The second most prevalent reason was a pragmatic recognition that Britain already *had* a good deal—having opted out of the euro and of the Schengen area. The third revealed a fear of becoming more isolated at a global level following Brexit.

There are many ways, then, to explain why voters chose Leave, and it is probably too early to come to a definitive conclusion. For some, this is a story of economic and of material circumstances: Colantone and Stanig identified a strong statistical correlation between regions affected by the surge in Chinese imports over the last three decades and votes to leave the EU.⁴⁸ For others, the Leave vote was driven by an attitudinal positioning away from multiculturalism and perhaps—as Eric Kaufmann has argued—towards authoritarian beliefs.⁴⁹ In truth, these sets of explanations overlap to create an impression of a British public deeply divided along many axes.

⁴⁷ Lord Ashcroft's polling data can be found on his website at <http://lordashcrofthpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/#more-14746>.

⁴⁸ Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig, 'The real reason the UK voted for Brexit? Jobs lost to Chinese competition', *Washington Post*, 7 July 2016.

⁴⁹ Eric Kaufmann, 'BREXIT voters: NOT the left behind', Fabian Society, 24 June 2016, <http://www.fabians.org.uk/brexit-voters-not-the-left-behind/>.

Implications

While the referendum clearly had implications for British relations with the EU, its immediate impact was felt in domestic politics. David Cameron resigned as prime minister on the morning of 24 June, creating a constitutional problem until a new leader of the party could be found. This was duly achieved, in a surprisingly swift and bloodless process, with the result that Theresa May took over on 13 July. In the Labour Party, meanwhile, dozens of shadow ministers resigned in a mass demonstration of no confidence in Jeremy Corbyn, which in turn triggered a leadership contest from which he emerged victorious, albeit at the helm of a divided party.

The vote revealed the numerous divisions in the country with which the new Prime Minister will have to contend. It reaffirmed the importance of class, and showed how globalization might have benefited Britain as a whole, but had also left great swathes of the country behind. On top of this, decades of neglect by central government had crippled previously prosperous and thriving areas: in March 2016, *The Economist* had described Blackpool as a 'town they forgot to close down', a sad underside to Osborne's metropolitan revolution.⁵⁰ For people in these areas, the political establishment offered little, and the referendum gave them a chance to be heard. As one woman in Yorkshire put it, at one of the countless public events run across the country: 'I don't mind if we take an economic hit. Our lives have never been easy, after all. But it will be nice to see the rich folk down south suffer.'⁵¹ Dramatic falls in the value of the pound or national income meant little to people who were already struggling.

These trends were underlined in the data on turnout. Across the country, people who do not usually bother to turn out for general elections (why would they in safe Labour seats, where their votes hardly matter?) came out for Brexit. In the north-east, Gateshead saw Leave winning with almost 59 per cent of the vote on the basis of a 70.6 per cent turnout (as compared to 59 per cent in the general election). In nearby Hartlepool, Leave managed to gain 70 per cent of the vote on a 73 per cent turnout (as compared to 61 per cent in 2015). In short, the Leave win was in part an expression of voters' unwillingness to continue being ignored.

At the same time, 48 per cent of the British people voted to remain within the EU. There remains a vocal minority committed to preventing Brexit, ranging from the organizers of a petition that had raised some 4 million signatures within a couple of weeks of the referendum itself to the leadership of the Liberal Democrats. Owen Smith, erstwhile contender for the leadership of the Labour Party, promised to put pressure on the government to hold a second referendum before the future of Britain's relationship with the EU was settled. Senior academics have chimed in, arguing that it is simply too difficult to withdraw from the EU, given the sheer

⁵⁰ 'A coastal town they forgot to close down', *The Economist*, 19 March 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21695053-sad-underside-george-osbornes-metropolitan-revolution-coastal-town-they-forgot-close>.

⁵¹ Intervention at public event in Yorkshire. Author's recollection.

complexity of the process.⁵² Various legal challenges are also being mounted to attempt to force a parliamentary vote ahead of the triggering of article 50.

Moreover, although a majority of those who voted, voted to leave, there were clearly many variants of Leaver during the referendum debate. They ranged from the nativist, conservative types, primarily interested in significantly reducing migration, to the liberal cosmopolitans, who see Britain's future as being more, rather than less internationalist, and are far less concerned with pulling up the national drawbridge; and from those obsessed with deregulation and cutting Britain free of costly EU regulation to those who see the EU as a capitalist conspiracy aimed at undermining the rights of workers.

It is against this backdrop of conflicting perspectives and demands that the government approaches the task of bringing about a British exit from the EU in a way that carries sufficient domestic backing. Yet a striking feature of the Brexit saga has been that those responsible for the referendum itself, and for the victory of the Leave camp in the vote, were subsequently not in a position to decide on the implications of the result. Immediately prior to announcing his resignation, David Cameron had asserted on the threshold of 10 Downing Street that the 'British people have voted to leave the European Union and their will must be respected'. Following his resignation and the election of Theresa May as Conservative leader and prime minister, however, it soon became clear that the idea of leaving the EU was more complex than might at first sight appear. As the country headed towards its summer holidays, the only comment the new Prime Minister was willing to make over what the future held was the rather delphic 'Brexit means Brexit.'

Little surprise, then, that, after a lull over the summer, and as the cabinet gathered at Chequers for a brainstorming session on Brexit on 31 August, a plethora of competing proposals emerged as to how (and indeed whether⁵³) Brexit should occur.⁵⁴ These reveal a broad consensus that existing models or templates would not be sufficient: the Norwegian model, for example, would not allow for limits on free movement, and would make the UK a rule-taker.⁵⁵ Such a solution would also require the continued payment of EU budget contributions—yet polling shortly after the vote revealed strong public opposition to this prospect.⁵⁶ Meanwhile a solution which sees the UK trading with the EU under World Trade Organization rules, while simpler, might damage the UK economy badly.⁵⁷

⁵² Rachael Pells, 'UK will never leave EU because Brexit process is "too complex", says top academic', *Independent*, 29 Aug. 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/brexit-article-50-eu-referendum-uk-will-never-leave-says-top-academic-a7214926.html>.

⁵³ On 2 September an organization called Common Ground was launched whose first goal was to keep the UK in the EU. See <http://www.commongrounduk.com/press-release/>.

⁵⁴ See, for some prominent examples, Jean Pisani-Ferry, Norbert Röttgen, André Sapir, Paul Tucker and Guntram B. Wolff, *Europe after Brexit: a proposal for a continental partnership* (Brussels: Bruegel, 29 Aug. 2016), <http://bruegel.org/2016/08/europe-after-brexit-a-proposal-for-a-continental-partnership/>; Andrew Tyrie, 'Giving meaning to Brexit', briefing, *Open Europe*, Sept. 2016, https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://openeurope.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Giving_meaning_to_Brexit_Andrew_Tyrie.pdf.

⁵⁵ Pisani-Ferry et al., *Europe after Brexit*.

⁵⁶ YouGov survey with fieldwork conducted 31 July–1 Aug. 2016. Full data available at: https://d25d2506sf94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/k5uoh1qgsi/BrexitScenarios_160818.pdf.

⁵⁷ Tyrie, 'Giving meaning to Brexit'.

All such proposals contain their own problems. Not least, there is the need to appeal to as wide a cross-section of the electorate as possible. Continuing to adhere to EU law, as a 'continental partnership' implies,⁵⁸ would infuriate those who voted to leave on the basis of concerns about sovereignty. It remains to be seen how the new cabinet (despite the tough rhetoric on immigration that permeated the Conservative Party conference in Birmingham in early November) will handle the difficult trade-offs that may be necessary to balance continued membership of the single market and widespread opposition to the principle of freedom of movement. And then there is the question of how to deal with the territorial divisions cast into sharp relief by the vote. Theresa May has promised to consult with the devolved authorities, but at a certain point decisions will have to be made that contradict their interests, and the prospect of a second Scottish independence referendum will hang over the negotiations.

And, of course, there is a need to find a deal acceptable to Britain's European partners. While negotiations over the process of exit itself—under the now infamous article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty—can be determined on the basis of agreement by a qualified majority of member states, any deal regulating future relations between the UK and the EU will need to be agreed unanimously by the member states. Whether or not the latter are moved by a desire to punish Britain as a salutary warning to other would-be leavers, this will prove a difficult process, not least as domestic political pressures come to bear on the negotiators.

However the negotiations conclude, it is difficult to see how, given the complex issues to be dealt with, and the problems inherent in arriving at an outcome acceptable to all, talks on the future of the UK–EU relationship can be successfully completed within the two-year timetable set down under article 50. If the article 50 process runs its course without any agreement on a framework for these relations being reached, a disorderly Brexit will result, spawning negative consequences for both sides. Consequently, it has been suggested that a transitional arrangement will be necessary to structure the relationship while allowing sufficient time for the agreement of a permanent deal.⁵⁹ A lot, in short, remains to be resolved.

Conclusions

It is, as our title suggests, still too early to come to definitive conclusions about the referendum and its outcome, let alone its longer-term implications. The outcome itself was the result of many factors. Doubtless, numerous analyses and polls will investigate why people voted as they did, and the findings will supplement the aggregate-level data that are already being analysed. What is clear, however, is that the vote resulted in part from the way in which the issue of EU membership has been handled in the UK since its accession. The failure on the part of successive

⁵⁸ Pisani-Ferry et al., *Europe after Brexit*.

⁵⁹ Damian Chalmers and Anand Menon, 'Getting out quick and playing the long game', briefing, *Open Europe*, July 2016, p. 4, https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://openeurope.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/OE_Chalmers_Menon_July_2016.pdf.

governments to challenge Eurosceptic assertions laid the basis for the arguments successfully deployed by the Leave campaign. It allowed a Eurosceptic press free rein to criticize the EU at every opportunity. And it deprived the Remain camp of the opportunity to make a positive case for membership, forcing it to rely on warnings about the cost of Brexit rather than explanations of the benefits of membership.

The British government now faces the daunting task of both determining what kind of outcome might command sufficient domestic support and attempting to negotiate it with its European partners. The former will be difficult enough, given the profound divisions within British society that the vote has revealed.

Space constraints preclude a substantive discussion of the implications of the British decision for the EU itself. For optimists, the departure of the UK represents an opportunity to achieve progress in integration that the presence of the 'awkward partner' rendered impossible. More realistically, Brexit adds another pressing item to an already overflowing agenda, while presenting a daunting challenge in its own right. A meeting on 22 August 2016 of the leaders of the new 'Big Three'—France, Germany and Italy—illustrated this all too clearly. While defiant rhetoric about the future of European integration proved easy, the absence of specific proposals underlined the continued difficulty that member states will confront in attempting to turn declarations of loyalty to European integration and of intent to reinforce it post-Brexit into practical proposals acceptable to all member states.

It is clear that the referendum represented a turning-point in the history of both Britain and the EU. A rupture in Britain's relationship with the EU is only one aspect of the implications of a decision that will have impacts both on British and European politics and on the EU itself. It is also clear that these implications will take many years to play out, and that the Brexit saga is far from over.