

Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 12, Issue 4 (2016)

Special Section on the UK's EU Referendum

Foreword: 'Life Is Going to Be Different in the Future'

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Citation

David, M. and Drake, H. (2016). "Foreword: 'Life Is Going to Be Different in the Future'", *Journal of Contemporary European Research*. 12 (4), pp. 802-808.

First published at: www.jcer.net

Foreword: 'Life Is Going to Be Different in the Future'

The result of the EU referendum of June 2016 sent a shockwave through Europe as Europeans found that the British voting public had narrowly rejected continued membership of the European Union. As 2016 draws to a close, Theresa's May Government has given few clues as to what life will look like after the European Union becomes a club of 27 rather than 28. Whatever the rightness of the view that 'to provide a running commentary' (May 2016: 3-4) would be to undermine the negotiating position of the UK, a full five months after the referendum the future remains uncertain and the UK's already fractious relationship with Brussels is turbulent. The title of this foreword is taken verbatim from Prime Minister Theresa May's interview with Andrew Marr in early October 2016 (May 2016: 4), an interview conducted just a few months after May's predecessor disavowed any intention of seeing the United Kingdom through the consequences of their vote on the referendum – a referendum he himself had offered.

Well before campaigning for the referendum opened, as Editor-in-Chief of JCER, a journal focused on European research and as Chair of the University Association of Contemporary Europe Studies (UACES), owner and publisher of JCER, we felt a responsibility to ensure that a topical response to the results – whatever they might have been – was heard. In the first of a new initiative by JCER (to publish a special section on an issue of topicality for Europe and those who research it), this final issue of 2016 features a special section dedicated to delivering some understanding of the reasons for the EU referendum, the inherent processes, the politicking and the voting choices. These matters are explained in the commentaries that follow with much authority and certainty. Other aspects, the economic, political and social effects, the resultant relationships between the UK's constituent parts, Brussels and its European neighbours, are, inevitably, treated with some caution.

We will return to the contributions in a moment. First, however, given our wide European readership, it is worth capturing a sense of where the UK is in respect of its debate on the referendum and its impact. We write here in our capacities as both citizens (of the UK and the EU) and professional academics. What follows is food for critical thought above all else. We have not attempted to separate the personal from the political, and we do not engage anyone but ourselves in our reflections¹ Stepping outside our strictly-defined roles as editor, chair and dispassionate academic is as uncomfortable as it is liberating, and we do so explicitly to encourage debate in this journal, in the Association and in the wider academic communities that we all belong to.

'DIFFERENT' IS NOT ALWAYS GOOD

The nature and tone of the debate leading up to the actual casting of votes has rightly received its own share of attention. It has been a debate in which pre-existing divisions have been laid bare and new divisions have emerged. The European Union is not the only union that is in danger of disintegrating as the countries that make up the United Kingdom are faced with the complexity of ensuring their people's democratic choice is represented fairly in what will follow. Regard for either Union figured very little in the debate about the referendum itself and even where the UK's future was raised in the campaign period, fears of the consequences for the integrity of that particular Union were too often dismissed as unjustified scaremongering. In fact, voting patterns did reveal significant differences between the preferences of Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and England. The devolved nations and their administrations fell on different sides of the winning ticket, as some of the commentaries that follow detail. All have concerns to be part of what Prime Minister May has

called a 'UK approach' to negotiating Brexit; all have demands – some specific, some shared – for how the post-exit policymaking landscape gets carved up between Brussels, London and the regional capitals of the UK. Difference is not a sign of inevitable insurmountable division, of course. That said, the United Kingdom is currently looking like one of the more inaptly named states in world politics. Former UK Prime Minister David Cameron's granting of the referendum to settle the long-held differences between members of the Conservative Party has spectacularly failed, compromising the ability of this dominant party to heal wider divisions. The Labour Party is in an even more unenviable situation and is thereby compounding political deficiencies by failing to act as a reliable and effective Opposition. Having achieved its primary reason for existence, UKIP is struggling to reinvent itself. The Liberal Democrats are coping with their own negative legacy, although the negotiations over the terms of the British exit may yet afford them an opportunity to recover much of this lost ground. In short, there is visibly more to point to in the form of problems than solutions. More is said elsewhere in this special section of the politics of the countries of the UK as a consequence of the referendum.

For those who voted to Remain and possibly for some of those who voted Leave, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the country is in a more parlous state than it was prior to June 2016. The full impact of leaving the EU will not be felt, of course, until the ties currently binding the UK have been undone in a process as yet to be determined. Even where certain outcomes might be thought to be coming into focus, doubt has been cast. For instance, in its November 2016 report, the Office for Budget Responsibility spoke of its 'judgement ... that over the time horizon of our forecast any likely Brexit outcome would lead to lower trade flows, lower investment and lower net inward migration than we would otherwise have seen, and hence lower potential output', saying this was 'consistent with most external studies' (Office for Budget Responsibility 2016). That staunch supporter of the Leave campaign, Iain Duncan Smith MP, was quick out of the blocks to dismiss such fears, adding to the by now familiar tendency to denigrate expertise by pointing out past forecasting failures by the OBR, a stance quickly picked up by sympathetic media outlets (Wallace and Ping Chan 2016).

The social, political and diplomatic signs are that there is much damage to repair. Socially, evidence of worrying divisions was exposed by the cleavages identified by voting patterns in the referendum (Curtice 2016). Again, such divisions do not inevitably lead to social fragmentation but the political and media reporting atmosphere before and after the referendum was sufficiently divisive to make many of these cleavages significant. Further, there are the many recorded instances of acts of prejudice, a sign of a growing casualisation, even normalisation of discriminatory language and behaviour and even hate acts (Lusher 2016). Serving as the most terrible of symbols of just how toxic the atmosphere in England at least had become is the murder of Jo Cox MP. Witnesses at the murder trial spoke of her now convicted killer shouting 'Britain First' and in his home, evidence was found of him keeping records of her support for the EU (Walker 2016). At the same time, no more hopeful symbol of British generosity exists than the 'not in her name' message that her family has championed ever since.

For those who consider that the United Kingdom stands for something positive in the world, the impact on the British reputation must be particularly painful. At the diplomatic level, the nature of the campaign and then the appointment of Boris Johnson to Foreign Secretary has not served the national interest well, as evidenced by the immediate reactions to that appointment (BBC 2016). Four months on and there is little sign of returning respect for Britain's diplomacy (Wesel 2016). Pragmatic considerations may well mean that the EU-27 are not able to give in to what might be understandable desires to punish the British. Such constraints, however, are not the same as a sign of friendly disposition. One has only to contrast the discourse in relation to President-Elect Trump ('the USA is our ally', 'he will be President, we must learn to do business with him')² with the

discourse in relation to Europe to understand that little care has been taken in recent months, even years, to build close relations, even if reflecting differences of opinion, with the UK's closest neighbours. Indeed, in the post-referendum environment, few opportunities to emphasise division, rather than heal it, have been lost, as signalled most recently by the response of European Council President, Donald Tusk, to British arguments that the EU was responsible for the uncertainty created by the EU referendum (Robinson 2016). Aside from the rather Dis-United Kingdom then, it is fair to say that political and media debate in the UK has spared little time for consideration of the UK's responsibility vis-à-vis fellow Europeans.

For scholars who have committed much of their professional life to learning and teaching about Europe and the European Union, who have witnessed the benefits EU membership brings to research, student mobility, transnational networks and social movements, to political debate and policy-making, this was more than unfortunate, not least because it was suggestive of our own failure to communicate a rounded picture of the European Union to relevant elites as well as the public more widely; and perhaps of a broader failure to be heard outside our own networks. This will undoubtedly be a source of introspection for all those who seek to connect their research to decision-making and public service.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND

The outlook is not all doom and gloom. As educators, we the authors can see a learning opportunity when it presents itself. Debates prior to and following the referendum itself have performed the important service of revealing the extent to which little is known about the EU and, arguably, even less understood. As the recent legal challenges (and reactions to them) to Theresa May's insistence on having the power to invoke Article 50 via Royal Prerogative (and therefore Executive power) have shown, there is even an imperfect understanding of the United Kingdom's constitutional set-up. Thus, whether in respect of the European Union or the politics of the United Kingdom, there is much to be taught – and learned. Even the distinctly contentious branding of the Lord Chief Justice and two other judges as 'enemies of the people' (Slack 2016) after they ruled Parliament must be part of the exit process (Perkins 2016) can be turned into a learning moment: when legal process and by extension the legal profession are framed as obstacles to 'getting on with it' - where 'it' is Brexit – it invites us to ask how best, going forward, to safeguard democracy and the values which, until now, most would have argued underpin the UK's societies. In the new political landscape that will eventually emerge, it will be vital that those in a position to do so ensure they have the necessary educational tools.

Aside from pointing us to places where gaps in knowledge must be filled, the referendum has raised the far more complex question of the responsibility of those in the public sector or whose job is to perform a public service to respond to blatant acts of misinformation, even lies and propaganda. Following a report by the Electoral Reform Society into the referendum that spoke of the failure to provide adequate debate and which identified a number of problems (Brett 2016), there have been calls to establish a 'truth commission' (Kildea 2016). Academics, politicians, civil servants and journalists have questions to ask of themselves of their role in this. For instance, is the academic required to be impartial in relation to important political debates and if so, what does impartiality look like in practice? The same question is true for the media. Much has understandably been made of the BBC's so-called 'false balance' as giving equal representation to both the Leave and Remain sides rather than giving appropriate weight to the various arguments.³ The question should not be divorced from the question of serving society.

Politicians, aside from the work that leaving the EU will entail, must also look to their profession. Learning begins with asking questions and there are numerous questions that should be asked by and of the political elites in the countries of the United Kingdom. Under what circumstances is it responsible to hold a referendum? Should there be consequences for those who are found to have lied, deliberately misled or misinformed the public? More immediately, there are, to be Rumsfeldian about it, some known unknowns that take priority, as our contributing authors make clear.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This section opens with a commentary from Helen Wallace that goes behind the scenes of the referendum itself, and thereby serves as opening contribution to this special section on the EU referendum. Offering insights, first, into how the British got to the point of being offered a second referendum on EU membership 41 years after the first, Wallace goes on to talk about the possible timetable for the British exit as well as the nature of it. In the commentary that follows Helen Wallace's piece, Michael Shackleton confronts the question of where the UK fits in the European Union in this twilight world between a vote for exit and an actual exit from the EU. In this 'neither insider nor outsider' commentary, Shackleton directs us to understand the realities of life for the UK in Brussels as it negotiates its way out of the Brussels village, a question that has occupied surprisingly few.⁴

The starting logic of the JCER Editors in commissioning this special section was to ensure that the perspectives and concerns of the English did not eclipse those of the other parts of the United Kingdom. Thus, this special section comprises articles in which Wales, the island of Ireland, and Scotland are firmly represented. The Northern Ireland and Scotland positions are relatively well known as a result of their respective majority votes to Remain. Both countries have mounted legal challenges in respect of a result that will reflect the majority Leave preferences of England and Wales. More puzzling and far less illuminated is the vote of Wales to Leave. In their piece for this section, Jo Hunt, Rachel Minto and Jayne Woolford of the Wales Governance Centre offer an insight into this and other issues. From Wales, we travel to the island of Ireland, in relation to which the special section offers two separate sets of thoughts. In each of their commentaries, Mary Murphy and Anthony Soares walk readers through the complexities of the island of Ireland's position, offering detailed understandings of precisely why and how this geographical space should and does command political attention in the context of an eventual British exit from the EU. The section then travels north and east to Scotland where Simon Smith considers the options available to Scotland as well as discussing the party political differences there.

The section ends with two works looking at relatively neglected areas, one neglected in scholarship, the other politically. Both constitute clarion calls for scholars of European research. Ben Rosamond identifies an absence of comprehensive theorising on disintegration rather than integration.⁵ In this early attempt to set out a meaningful research agenda, there is clear utility not only for scholars of European integration but for those working on regionalism the world over. The message of Brexit after all is that what is made can be unmade. Given the final word in this special section on the EU Referendum, Roberta Guerrina reminds us of the silence in the EU referendum debate in relation to equality issues - and of the consequences of that silence. Focusing on gender, hers is a cautionary tale about the effects of the long-term British political and media failure to acknowledge all that 'the EU ever did for us' and directs us to consider also the consequences of the removal of a layer of representation for under-represented groups and issues of equality.

Finally, as Editor-in-Chief of JCER and Chair of UACES, we would like to thank all those who contributed to this special section. The task of delivering insights relating to a still extremely fluid

and also contentious context should not be under-estimated and we are most grateful to all the authors for making time in their very pressured schedules to contribute. Simona Guerra and Kathryn Simpson, editors of JCER, must also be acknowledged for their work in seeking and securing many of the contributing authors.

ENDNOTES

¹ The views expressed here are those of the two authors and should not be treated as representative of JCER or UACES and its membership.

² See, for instance, Theresa May's (Press Association 2016) response to Trump's election.

³ See the excellent and comprehensive report edited by Jackson, Thorsen and Wring 2016, particularly Gaber's contribution.

⁴ Helen Wallace and Michael Shackleton are, respectively, UACES's honorary President and a UACES patron. The views they express here are theirs and should not be treated as representative of UACES and its membership.

⁵ Rosamund's piece here therefore makes a valuable contribution to an ongoing academic discussion about the 'disintegration' of the EU. See for example Webber (2014) and Oliver (2016).

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