

A look back at Brexit

By David Hearne, Researcher, Centre for Brexit Studies

Whilst Brexit is by no stretch of the imagination “[done](#)“, the framework within which the UK’s new relationship with its nearest and most important neighbour will evolve over the next few years is now set. I fully expect to see substantial changes in the medium term, probably from the mid-2020s onwards but for now there is at least a degree of clarity.

There will, of course, be ample time to reflect on what comes next and to cogitate upon what the short, medium and longer-term ramifications of Brexit are, once more data become available. Here, however, I’d like to take the opportunity to look back rather than forward.

In particular, I want to return to the fateful referendum result and the period leading up to it. So much of the rhetoric around Brexit is couched in hindsight, which is inevitably 20/20. Moreover, in general those with a proclivity to vote remain rather than leave are much more vocal. Those “leavers” who do speak out are – probably inevitably – atypical.

This is frustrating. There is a great deal of rhetoric suggesting that Britain was never “truly committed” to the “European project”, with opt-outs from Maastricht given as evidence. Similarly, “De Gaulle was right” is widely asserted.

Frankly, that’s hogwash. It is certainly true that the UK *government* had deep reservations about many of the changes the Maastricht treaty brought (notably around the social chapter). It’s also true that many *people* in the UK were deeply sceptical about treaty changes and “ever closer union”.

They were hardly unusual in that regard. Referenda in Europe have seen treaty changes rejected multiple times. Who can forget the debacle of the failed EU constitution in 2005? It was not British voters who delivered the coup de grace but those ardent Europeans – the French.

Look back prior to the 2016 referendum and this scepticism was the rule rather than the exception. From the perspective of 2021, that seems impossible. After all, polls overwhelmingly show that no EU nation wants to follow the UK out of the bloc and a majority of British voters now clearly view Brexit as a mistake.

How quickly we forget: by the middle of the last decade, British voters did appear amongst the most Eurosceptic in the EU, but were far from outliers in this regard. It is by no means guaranteed that had referenda been held elsewhere that the results would have differed from the British one.

Moreover, whilst in geopolitical terms there is a huge gulf in outcome between a 52-48 result one way and a 48-52 result the other, in terms of the “popularity” of EU membership from the perspective of a population the difference is minimal. A situation in which over 40% of a country’s populace vote to leave is hardly a ringing endorsement!

This is not to criticise the EU: national leaders all-too-frequently use European legislation as an excuse for having to take unpopular actions and regularly bash the bloc. The British were amongst the worst, but were hardly the only ones to do so. The lesson here is that the UK is not exceptional. It sits towards one end of a spectrum, but this notion of British (or, indeed, English) exceptionalism needs to be rejected and that applies both to those who think the UK is uniquely great and to those who single out its population as uniquely “bad Europeans”.

Which brings me rather neatly onto another fallacious argument that I hear all-too-regularly: that Brexit is a result of imperial nostalgia. This is palpable nonsense and it is telling that nostalgia for Empire is almost never raised by “leavers” themselves. Indeed, it is overwhelmingly “remainers” who express concern over the UK’s place in the world.

The fallacy here is to conflate those in *government* (who are unrepresentative of the typical leave-voter) with the *people* who voted. The UK’s political leaders do, indeed, regularly invoke the language of Empire, talking of a “buccaneering” Britannia who implicitly rules the waves. Whether this is genuine or affected, I cannot say.

What I can assert with more confidence is that this is not typical of the average “leave” voter. The British Empire is a purely abstract notion to the typical leave voter. Whilst we might be lamentably ignorant about its crimes, military adventurism is extremely unpopular post-Iraq and most would recoil at the notion of taking over a territory and refusing its inhabitants a vote on how it is run.

Again, whilst they might express admiration at perceived past “achievements”, Empire does not intrude on the everyday thoughts of your average leave voter. And why should it? Like most, they are concerned with making ends meet, healthcare, education and other priorities.

Leave voters are, on average, less likely to have attended university and more likely to be in a poorer socio-economic group than remain voters. They are hardly the beneficiaries of the plunder of an empire that ceased to exist over half a century ago. No surprise that it barely intrudes on their consciousness, unlike those in government (who are disproportionately wealthy and, in the case of the current incumbents, considerably more right-wing than the median voter).

If one is looking for a “national myth” around which leave voters can coalesce, the British Empire is the wrong place. It is, instead, perceptions of the Second World War that shapes political consciousness. The myth here is a Britain that stands alone but refuses to buckle – assaulted on all sides by a more powerful and implacably hostile enemy.

Few of the generation that actually experienced World War Two remain alive – those that voted grew up instead in its shadow. Beliefs are shaped not by lived experience but by what might best be termed propaganda. Little wonder that many reacted so strongly to the notion of control being “imposed” by a hostile “Europe”. Empire might not be referenced in common language (including around Brexit), but the “Blitz Spirit” certainly is.

So how does this frame perceptions of what Brexit should actually mean? My own experience from interviewing leavers is that, far from beliefs that Britain should be particularly powerful or influential, the phrase that comes up most often is “we just want to be a ‘normal’

country". This is difficult or impossible to square with alleged Empire nostalgia.

Instead, it appears to have most in common with American isolationism. There is a desire for self-sufficiency and a wish to go one's own way. Whether such a move is feasible or desirable in the modern world is another question entirely, but we cannot begin to address the issues raised by Brexit (and this is true for all of Europe) until we properly understand the impulses that drove people to vote for it.