

# Brexit, identity and a global future

*By David Hearne, Researcher, Centre for Brexit Studies*

One of the more interesting phenomena of recent years has been a resurgence in nationalism. Brexit is a manifestation of this: the belief that decisions should, as a matter of principle, be taken at the level of the nation-state.

Scottish nationalism, which looks set to deliver an independent Scotland and, as a consequence, the break-up of the UK, is another manifestation of this, albeit at a very different level. In this case, it is not Brussels but Westminster that is the external target.

Once again, the fundamental principle is that decisions that affect Scots should be made in Scotland. Catalonian nationalism and movements for regional secession in parts of Italy are of course further examples of the same thing. Bavaria also exhibits extremely strong identity (although the politics is quite different and there appears little appetite for any form of secession).

Many of the governments around the world that have been labelled “populist” are more truthfully “nationalist” in character. The Hungarian and Polish governments are good examples of this. Very often, nationalism comes with a dose of anti-immigrant sentiment (or at least opposition to the “wrong kind” of immigrant) and an appeal to “traditional” social values. Certainly we see this in Hungary and elsewhere in Europe[\[1\]](#).

The same phenomenon is true (albeit to a lesser extent, if polling evidence is to be believed) in the UK. Certainly, a desire to curb immigration was a prominent part of the campaign to leave the EU. Although this was predominantly painted as a question of pressure on public services[\[2\]](#), talk of Turkey joining the EU and “millions” of Turks moving to the UK (however false) could have come straight out of the far-right playbook anywhere on the continent.

However, nationalism is not always accompanied by hostility to immigration. It doesn’t appear true in the Scottish case or in Catalonia[\[3\]](#). Nevertheless, the nature of nationalism means that it is

necessarily defined against an “other”: after all, in order to have an “in group”, there must be an “out group”.

In the Scottish and Catalan cases, this is pretty clearly the English and Spanish respectively. In the case of Brexit (at least insofar as the English portion of the vote is concerned), it is clear that continental Europeans are the “other” against which “we” are juxtaposed.

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Yet what determines which “in group” we belong to? The answer typically lies in some vague notion of “shared history” (often as much mythical as real) and common culture. Language is an important factor but hardly the only one. After all, the Swiss lack a common language and the US and UK are divided by one!

Moreover, the “in group” can change over time. English, Welsh and Scottish have increasingly supplanted British as identities. The German identity didn’t really exist in any modern sense prior to 1871. What about Cornish (an important national identity for a surprisingly large subset of people living in Cornwall, according to the census[\[4\]](#))?

Such identities can exist along other vectors than the national. I know from personal experience that in some of the territories of the former Ottoman Empire, religion is a stronger marker of identity than national affiliation. Sometimes the two coexist (often unhappily). Iran is perceived as a *Shi'a* state (in contrast to its *Sunni* counterparts in the Gulf), yet its distinctive identity also springs from differences of language and a past at the centre of multiple empires.

None of this is entirely healthy in my view. Drawing lines around ourselves – who is “in” and who is “out” is profoundly unhelpful. Covid has shown us to be prisoners of this manner of thinking.

We are all equally human: we are all susceptible to this disease. Nationality does not confer immunity, yet our approach to tackling it is mired in the politics of national identity. If we are to successfully deal with this disease then it is imperative that we do so together and we see this in the current ugly spats over vaccine allocation.

The same is true of the many other – perhaps existential – threats that humanity faces. Climate change, environmental degradation, future

pandemics (which could be far more deadly than this one) and the ever-growing challenge of anti-biotic resistance all require concerted global action.

There are lessons here for a post-Brexit Britain, whether as one nation or as several. There's a clear need for further cooperation with both the EU and further afield. If Britain is to craft a role for itself in a post-Brexit world it must be as a bridge.

That means close, cordial, relationships with our nearest neighbours. It also means a focus on reducing trade barriers – including our own. Finally, we need to recognise the importance of openness to people. We should welcome those who have a contribution to make – and those who perhaps arrive with potential, either as students or otherwise – with open arms. Only then will we truly be able to facilitate those global links that remain so crucial for all of us.

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[1] The conflation of preserving national identity with a reduction in immigration is striking: the AfD in Germany, the FN in France, *Lega* in Italy, *True Finns* (since rebranded), Sweden Democrats, the Dutch PVV and FvD as well as large segments of the Republican Party in the USA.

[2] Interestingly, although EU migration as a whole has been a net positive to the exchequer, issues of resource allocation in public expenditure (as well as the steady shrinking of large parts of the state under the guise of “austerity”) meant that for certain communities changes in population composition might well have put pressure on certain services, notably schools.

[3] The Swedish case is complex but significant portions of the Swedish population appear to exhibit nationalist tendencies alongside a less hostile attitude towards migration.

[4] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicityandnationalidentityinenglandandwales/2012-12-11>

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*These issues were also discussed yesterday at the Centre for Brexit Studies latest online event ‘State of the Union: The End of the UK?’. The event was hosted by Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director at the Centre for Brexit Studies, with contributions from four industry experts, Professor Katy Hayward, Jay Rowe, Professor Richard Wyn Jones and Professor Michael Danson. The footage from the event is now available to watch [here](#).*