

Goodbye to Brexit

By Bethan Tolley, Communications Officer, Centre for Brexit Studies

Saturday marked five years to the day since then Prime Minister David Cameron stepped outside his front door and called the EU Referendum. In that time we've had three Prime Ministers, two general elections, countless protests, tweets and hashtags and the actual Brexit just weeks ago. It's safe to say that things have never been quite the same since that moment.

Things will change for me quite a lot too in the next month or so, as this week marks my final week at the Centre for Brexit Studies. Although I am looking forward to a new challenge, it will be strange to not be wrapped up in somewhat of a Brexit bubble anymore.

When I first accepted my current role, I couldn't get over how niche it seemed. I've worked in the Communications industry for several years, but the combination of what I'm essentially good at with one of my main passions – politics – I couldn't quite believe my luck. I was so invested in the Brexit vote and back in 2016, I spent every spare moment thinking about what could happen.

At the time, I worked in a busy newsroom and half of us were convinced that the UK would vote to leave the European Union, and the other half thought that we wouldn't seeing as the 'Brits don't like change'. But many of these people also didn't think that Donald Trump would become President, so perhaps there really was a huge amount of uncertainty and feeling like we didn't truly know our neighbours, and our friends over the pond, until 2016.

I've worked at the Centre for Brexit Studies during possibly the biggest moments in politics for a generation. From Theresa May to Boris Johnson, from Donald Trump to Joe Biden, from Brexit fatigue to a global pandemic...it's been interesting to say the least. But from our YouTube videos and Podcasts to our social media and events, if there is anything I have really learned about Brexit over the last couple of years, it's the impact that the EU Referendum has had on the way that we are with each other.

As much of a success our online events have been in the past year, the only thing that is missing from time to time is a lively audience. Back in pre-Covid times, when we could, you know, actually be in a room all together, our events could, at times, kick off quite the debate and the room would be completely divided by 'remainers' and 'leavers'. They would often shout over each other, disagree, sometimes downright argue – and this was at 8am on a weekday morning! Prior to the referendum, I thought it was rude to ask someone who they voted for at the last election, as I was taught growing up that it is a very personal thing to discuss. After June 2016, it's like it became normal to not only ask such an evasive question, but to also argue and shout at each other in the streets about it.

The pure emotion behind the Brexit vote is the thing that will stay with me for years to come. We sometimes get a rude comment here and there on Twitter, some moan about our work and say we're too left wing. The next week, we get called too right wing. This job has really taught me that you can never please everyone, all of the time. A lot like the actual Brexit deal. I was over the moon that we got a deal, but there's lots of aspects of the deal that I don't like at all. The truth is, I'll never be happy with the fact that the UK did vote to leave the EU. But, I also have to accept it and move on.

And it's the 'moving on' part which is the hardest for so many of us. We've been totally consumed by the pandemic in the last year, naturally. But there was a time when Brexit was on the tip of every other persons tongue, and once upon a time before masks, hand sanitizer and the freedom to go to the pub, this did indeed consume us all too. For me, I had never seen the UK so divided before, and I doubt I ever will again. Although many of us have forgotten all about Brexit and have other things to focus on, the wounds that the referendum has left on each and every one of us won't be fixed for a long time to come.

Brexit, in my eyes, has caused more hate and divide in the UK than the good it could ever possibly bring. In 20 years' time, we may see that the UK leaving the EU was the best thing we ever did, and I'll sit back and thank all the leave voters who made the decision. But even if it does turn out to be a good thing, it won't take away the total pain and destruction that it has, at times, caused over the past five years. There's so many people who have lived and breathed the decision for

almost half a decade, and I do wonder if it's something that we, as a nation, will ever really 'get over'.

The Brexit vote divided us, broke up relationships, tested friendships and I even know families who have never quite forgiven each other for being on opposite sides of the fence. It has changed British politics, and has made the possible eventual break-up of the UK even more likely. It has changed the way we view voting, which is possibly a good thing. And a lot like the pandemic, life will never be quite the same again. In fact, the way I view my life now is 1994-2016 (BB – Before Brexit) and 2016-2020 (What on earth?!) and 2020-Present (AB – After Brexit).

I hope that in the years to come, the businesses that have been so impacted by the UK leaving the EU regain their strength and are able to trade as well as they can. I hope that the friendships and family relationships that have been tested, can eventually return to normal. And I hope that in 40 years' time, I can look back and go 'Christ, remember all that Brexit malark!' without needing to reach for the closest glass of wine.

This job has allowed me a real insight into how people react to things, and how passionate people really are. And although at times I haven't agreed with all the arguments and opinions, this job has also given me the opportunity to see the good in people. All the people whose livelihoods don't depend on the EU, genuinely caring for their friends and neighbours, whose lives and income do. The people who just want the best for the future generations. Raising money, helping each other out, being there for one another. Although Brexit has divided us, it has in lots of ways also brought us together, taught us more about politics and what we should care about from current and future governments.

Perhaps in the future, after seeing how much a single vote can impact all of our lives, maybe we will, as a nation, be a bit more kind to each other, accept that we're not always going to see eye to eye, and learn to forgive and forget.

Although I won't necessarily miss trying to get my head around Brexit lingo and trade jargon, I will always be grateful to have had an opportunity to meet people from all walks of life and all voting

backgrounds. In years to come, I'll be able to say that for a period of my life, I was involved in something that changed the UK forever.