

Brexit Strikes Back

Ferry Biedermann, Amsterdam

Brexit is back from never having been away. Over the last couple of weeks one news story after another has highlighted that, despite the pretence of the two main political parties, we're not in the post-Brexit era by a long stretch. Car makers want an early renegotiation of trade rules with the EU, higher inflation and lower growth have been connected to Brexit, migration is up, rather than down after Brexit and a majority in the polls now think that Brexit hasn't delivered, to name but a few of the headlines.

This new 'Brexitential' turn should not come as a surprise to anybody who has paid attention to UK and world politics. The proponents of 'let's just get on with things and leave this Brexit stuff behind us', have had an extraordinarily lucky run since the outbreak of Covid in 2019. First the pandemic and then the war in Ukraine, with its attendant focus on high energy prices and inflation, have obscured what remain the leading, and interconnected, political issues: Brexit and migration.

The turn away from these issues was never going to last and with the perceived waning of the pandemic and the, hoped for, stabilisation of the situation in Ukraine, there is more room again for the natural order of politics to reassert itself. The recent migration figures were always going to make a splash, and not only because of the Tories' high-profile 'stop the boats' pledge. Asylum seekers are only a small minority of those arriving in the UK, yet receive an extraordinary amount of opprobrium. That points at the underlying issue of both Brexit and the migration debate: the polarising and populist brand of politics that has only temporarily been dealt some setbacks in the UK and US but that is still driving the current political moves, and setting the mood.

The discussion on migration and its link to Brexit often descends very quickly into a shouting match between those alleging xenophobia and others hurling accusations against the out-of-touch liberal elites. Both the Conservatives and Labour have adopted the mantra that migration numbers are too high. But this does not take the sting out of the debate, it only makes it more polarised. With both main political parties being seen as anti-migration, the bias against it, and hence against migrants, can only increase. The optics of having the Prime Minister say that migration numbers are "too high" and the leader of the opposition saying that the government has "lost control of migration" can only serve to whip up anti-migration sentiment. Both parties only offer meaningless panaceas, the Conservatives vow ever tougher restrictions and expulsions, while Labour pretends it can reduce migration by filling more jobs with British-born workers. Both know that neither 'solution' is realistic.

With conflict, climate and economic pressures remaining high or growing around the world, the external drivers of migration are only likely to strengthen in the coming years. Greying populations, shifting labour markets and changing economies, mean that the demand for skilled and unskilled workers in Europe and the UK will remain high. So, on moral, humanitarian and foreign policy grounds, as well as for domestic social, economic and political reasons, a serious debate on migration should be crucial. But in the UK it cannot be held, partly because of the shut-down of the Brexit debate. And where Brexit is cited in the reactions to the recent migration figures, it risks veering into ugliness, with some pointing out that the UK has exchanged getting European immigrants (i.e., white, Christian) for non-European immigrants.

The benefits of EU membership to the UK labour market, as well as for the migration issue in general, should be set out without resorting to racist dogwhistles. Having access to a larger, more proximate and thus flexible labour pool, as well as being able to coordinate better with the UK's direct neighbours on the continent with regard to non-EU migration are already two clear

advantages. The EU provides plenty of safety valves as well as room for setting national policies to its members. Effects, if any, on, for example, the labour and housing markets could have been managed by more adequate, and progressive, policies in these areas. This is the case that Labour should be making, rather than pushing some intrinsically anti-migration pie-in-the-sky 'educated in Britain' non-solution. By all means, offer better education, salaries, prospects, etc. to UK youngsters and job-seekers but such policies should be a given, regardless of migration.

The difficulty of debating Brexit and the EU will always be that there appears to be plenty of contradictory evidence. Effects on economic growth, inflation, migration, the environment, even the situation in Northern Ireland, are, well, debatable. But so is climate change, for example, in the eyes of the fossil fuel industry. Just because an oil company funded research centre tries to sow doubt, it doesn't mean there isn't a consensus behind the science. Just because somebody writes a huge number on the side of a bus, it doesn't mean it's true. Would we call telling someone that gravity will cause death if they step off the roof of a tall building, 'project fear'?

At least Brexit is back via the backdoor, being cited as a contributing factor in a plethora of issues that is seen as affecting the UK adversely, and some other pressing issues are receding, even if ever so slightly. But it's dispiriting to see the two major political parties either being dominated by Brexiteers or too traumatised by the period 2016 to 2019 to dare broach the subject in an honest and open way. Yes, populists and ultra-nationalists are waiting in the wings and might once again pose an electoral challenge to both the Conservatives and Labour. The latter is still smarting from what it regards as its Brexit-related loss of so many Red Wall seats. The party is, despite or possibly because of the gains in local elections, unwilling to rock that particular boat again. This leaves the UK with a skewed, if not misleading, mainstream political debate on both migration and Brexit, creating a false narrative and unrealistic expectations. Any party and leader worth their salt should do their utmost to confront these issues head-on.