

Brexit and Reflections on Free Speech

By David Hearne, Centre for Brexit Studies

4th July 2018

Today involved a trip to Stoke-on-Trent where I was invited to speak to the North Staffordshire Pensioners Convention. Public engagement is an important part of our work as a Centre and we are always particularly keen to engage with those whose voices are not heard as loudly as others. We have already visited Stoke on our roadshows so I was particularly keen to see what kind of responses the audience would have for me. Stoke is one of the areas of the UK that voted most heavily to leave the European Union in 2016 and, as is well known, older adults were the age group with the highest propensity to vote Leave.

Upon arrival (after I was very kindly given a lift from the station by a member of the Pensioners Convention), we were confronted with a protest. I had been due to share a platform with a local Labour MP who was very pro-remain, alongside a local UKIP member who was an ardent leaver. The organisers had apparently decided to “un-invite” the speaker from UKIP due to complaints from their membership over some of his public statements in favour of certain racist organisations.

The protest was clearly quite well supported – there were at least 10 protesters outside, and they maintained a presence for over 2 hours. What was particularly interesting was the perception that their freedom of speech was being thwarted. This is perplexing because, of course, those running a private event (even if they decide to open it to members of the public) are entitled to invite (or not) whoever they wish to speak. That the Conservative Party decline to allow Jeremy Corbyn the right to speak at their annual conference is not a denial of his freedom of speech.

Nevertheless, I felt that this chimed with a whole set of concerns that have conspired to make the subject of Brexit so toxic (and that of immigration even moreso) – namely people feel that their voices are not being heard. Indeed, many appear to feel not just that they are not being heard but that their voices are being actively suppressed. This has particular salience in areas like Stoke where the centres of political and economic power feel distant and aloof. The biggest cheer of the day came for a fellow panellist’s (rather negative) depiction of politicians – the fact that he was sat next to a Labour MP at the time notwithstanding!

As ever with such things, listening and responding to the questions of the audience was far more interesting and enlightening than the talk itself. A number of questions dealt with popular misconceptions – most of which either originated or have been repeated in the press – including the desire of the German car industry to continue selling into the British market and the ability of the British state to strike trade deals overseas. This raises an important issue: the audience was intelligent and engaged. Nevertheless, there is a serious lack of high quality, honest sources of information for the engaged general reader. Most interesting of all, however, was the emotional nature of the questioning.

For some participants this appeared to take the form of an emotional connection to a particular position or agenda. One participant began his line of questioning with the statement that, “As one of the 17 million plus who voted Leave...” and went on to demonstrate a clear emotional attachment to the position when presented evidence that contradicted his initial statements. Others were much more upfront about their emotional connection to a particular policy position. For example, a participant began by saying, “I do appreciate what you’re saying but I voted based on my emotions. The day after the vote, I just felt somehow free”. It was this sense of freedom that was so important to her.

It is interesting that something that is fundamentally technocratic should engender such a strong emotional response. This is something that has become apparent across voters from a wide variety of different perspectives. Indeed, it is not just Leave voters who feel this way. Discussions with many who voted Remain indicate an equally strong emotional attachment to the European Union. Many speak of a sense of their identity being “taken away”. It is difficult to see how two such positions can be reconciled in public discourse: both groups appear to have a sense of identity that is almost orthogonal to the other.