Brexit Identities

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Prior to the Brexit referendum, British opinion on the EU was relatively fluid. Poll results indicate quite large swings in opinion even over shorter periods[1]. In 1975, the UK voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Communities (principally the European Economic Community) and those institutions have fluctuated dramatically in popularity over the decades ever since (through renaming and reorganisation). In contrast, since the referendum took place, attitudes have hardened dramatically.

Whilst there have always been those who cared passionately about the EU – either positively or, more normally, negatively – it was rather a long way down on the list of things that was important to most Britons. The EU was seen as a largely arcane question, with the state of the economy, the NHS, the police, schools and immigration. Indeed, it is deeply ironic that at the 2006 Conservative Party Conference, David Cameron explicitly stated, "While parents worried about childcare, getting the kids to school, balancing work and family life – we were banging on about Europe."[2] He was right: the state of Britain's relationship with the EU was a debate that a minority of political individuals obsessed about. Most of us had far more prosaic concerns.

Times have changed. In fact, I would argue that the reason for this shift is quite fundamental. For a substantial number of Britons, one's attitudes towards EU membership has become bound up in one's identity. Just as one might identify oneself as simultaneously English and a Brummie (sometimes alongside other markers of identity – e.g. one's religious upbringing), today one identifies also as a Leaver or a Remainer. This level of political tribalism is not something I have witnessed within my lifetime in the UK.

Of course, I am not for one moment trying to suggest that for most of us these new and emerging identities are hugely important. Nor do I think that they have displaced existing identities for most. Nevertheless, for a substantial minority, they have become important facets of who we are and how we see ourselves. Indeed, I suggest that whilst Brexit has reinforced nationalism within the UK (English,

Scottish and Irish), the more profound change has been on the Remain side. After all, those who voted Leave have not changed their identity in the decade prior to the referendum.

In contrast, it is a deep irony that Brexit has achieved something that the most ardent of pro-Europeans never could: a sense of European *national* identity. The waving of EU flags on the streets of London during the various anti-Brexit protests that have taken place is indicative of this. This forming of a new European identity is being done in the crucible of Brexit. Some of the progenitors, naturally, are nationals of other EU member states who have chosen to make the UK their home (whether permanently or for a shorter period).

Most, however, are British nationals who feel as though Brexit is depriving them of their rights as European citizens and, fundamentally, is denying part of who they *are*. The same process can be witnessed through the astonishingly successful petition to revoke Article 50. Whilst, no doubt, fear or expediency might play a role for a small minority of signatories, for most the questions are likely to be more fundamental.

Think for a moment what the petition implies. It is vastly more profound than simply asking for a second referendum. It suggests that a substantial portion of the population see leaving the EU as so cataclysmic that they are willing to forego what has hitherto been considered a democratic pre-requisite to reversing the notification of intention to leave under the Article 50 process. This is quite fundamental: through the actions of its critics, the EU has succeeded in becoming a part of peoples' identity.

This is all the more remarkable because the past decade-and-a-half have seen a number of problematic reverses for the EU. Far from becoming more centralised, power has leeched away from the centre back to national capitals. The centre is unable to discipline its recalcitrant member Hungary, and there is a real risk that member states might choose to ignore requirements from Brussels that they don't like. The Eurozone is a sore that continues to fester – largely due to an inability to countenance increased centralisation. The concern that German taxpayers might subsidise Italian ones suggests that the aforementioned taxpayers still see themselves primarily as

German rather than European. The same cannot be said of some of those on the streets of London.

For a technocratic institution that has faced a barrage of criticism (some warranted, some not) over the past decade this is a striking turnaround. Are we seeing the emergence of a nascent European *demos* in a subset of the British population? Is a new community being imagined?{Anderson, 1983 #160}[3] I don't know and wouldn't be prepared to speculate. All I can say, is that something truly remarkable is happening and that, as a result, the cleavage between Leavers and Remainers is unlikely to narrow any time soon.

[1] https://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/if-there-was-a-referendum-on-britains-membership-of-the-eu-how-would-you-vote-2/

[2] http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=314

[3] Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso.