

“BREXIT MEANS BREXIT”, BUT BREXIT IS VERY COMPLICATED!

On 23 June 2016, the UK voted in a referendum to leave the European Union. Today, the UK Government invoked Article 50 of the Treaty of Rome giving notice that it wishes to leave the EU. The vote clearly has far-reaching implications for the UK's relationship with the EU. But the UK is also a multi-national state and the vote has also upset the internal equilibrium and may even lead to the break-up of the UK.

This blog attempts to explain what happened in the referendum, why it happened, and its implications. With the rise of populist and anti-immigrant parties in many European countries and the election of Donald Trump in the US, it is important to try to understand these developments. Whilst there are common processes at work, it is important not to over-generalise and to recognise the differences between countries.

The vote

The vote in the UK to leave the EU was close (52% to 48% on a 72% turnout) and uneven. England and Wales voted roughly 53/47 to leave. Northern Ireland voted 56/44 to remain. All 32 local authority areas in Scotland voted to remain, giving an overall majority of 62/38 to remain. Within England, London and some of the large cities (such as Leeds and Manchester) voted to remain, whilst others (notably Birmingham) voted to leave. Almost everywhere else in England voted to leave.

The vote also divided the country by class (in particular educational background) and age. The leave vote was made up disproportionately of older and less educated voters; the remain vote the young and better educated.

The leave vote may be attributed to a number of factors. From the late 1980s, Euroscepticism began to rise in the Conservative Party (traditionally the more Europhile of the two main parties), and then crystallised in opposition within the parliamentary party to the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s. Concern about immigration began to take hold after large numbers of EU migrants arrived from the accession states – the UK, along with Sweden and Ireland, having allowed immediate freedom of movement in 2004. Some areas (notably agricultural areas) did experience large increases in population, and especially after public expenditure cuts took hold after 2010, immigration became a convenient scapegoat for pressures on public services and housing. (Ironically, the health service depends on immigrants to function at all.) There are now an estimated 3.2 million people living in the UK who are citizens of another European country, about 5% of the total population. In contrast with patterns of migration in the post-war years, EU migrants are distributed throughout the UK including in areas with no previous history of international migration.

The UK Independence Party, whilst never able to breakthrough in UK Parliamentary elections (its one MP resigned from the party last week), was able to influence the terms of debate. Initially, most popular in the rural south, it began to win favour in de-industrialising areas represented by the Labour Party. In other words, Brexit spoke to the people who had not benefited from globalisation and felt abandoned by the Labour Party. It seems that many people who felt that they had little to lose, were

willing to accept (or simply did not believe) the predictions of economic doom forecast by most economists should the UK leave the EU.

The idea of “taking back control” (from Brussels) resonated widely and also reflected a form of English nationalism, which is regarded with distaste by the liberal middle class because of its association with outright racist parties such as the British National Party. There is some resentment in England that the Celtic nations now each has its own Parliament or Assembly, but England does not.

The Conservative Party leadership did not expect to win an overall majority in the 2015 general election, and felt able to include a commitment to a referendum in its manifesto in an attempt to neutralise UKIP, in the expectation that it would be vetoed by its likely coalition partners, the strongly Europhile Liberal Democrats. However, it did win an overall majority (on 37% of the vote!), and the rest, as they say, is history.

Brexit means “Hard Brexit”

A central problem with Brexit, is that there was no prospectus, other than leaving the EU. So in the referendum campaign, Brexit could be taken to mean whatever anyone wanted it to mean. For example, it might have meant staying in the European Economic Area, like Norway; or EFTA, like Switzerland – a so-called “soft Brexit”. However, not long after Theresa May took over as Prime Minister after David Cameron resigned having lost the referendum, it became clear that Conservative politicians that had actually campaigned to remain in the EU, now embraced a “hard” Brexit, with a particular determination to end the free movement of people.

The UK Government has still to articulate any clear vision of what it would like its relationship with the EU to be (beyond ending freedom of movement). Some Conservative MPs appear to relish the prospect of a failure to reach an agreement with the EU, meaning that the UK would have to trade with the EU on highly disadvantageous World Trade terms. The attraction of this seemingly perverse proposition appears to be that it would give impetus to further deregulating the labour market to retain competitiveness. Meanwhile, opposition to Brexit is fragmented and subject to the accusation from the rightwing press and some MPs that the “will of the people” has been expressed and cannot be resisted.

Even though the UK Government has failed to articulate its vision, the Prime Minister has indicated that she will “trigger” Article 50 by the end of March. This means that the UK could be out of the EU in two years, but many people believe that the complexities of the negotiations will be such that negotiations will be extended by mutual agreement.

Scotland

The Brexit referendum has had the effect of reviving the possibility of Scottish independence, given that the country voted so clearly to remain in the EU.

The independence referendum of 2014 took place because the Scottish National Party (SNP) won an overall majority in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election. Although independence was defeated by 55% to 45%, it prompted a realignment in

Scottish politics. In the 2015 UK election the SNP won 56 out of 59 Scottish seats in the Westminster Parliament and went on to score 47% in the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections. The Scottish Parliament is elected on a form of proportional representation (similar to that used in German elections) and the SNP is a few seats short of an overall majority.

The SNP has displaced the once dominant Labour Party as the main social democratic party in Scotland, as the constitutional question has overlaid the traditional left-right divide. (It is vital to understand that the SNP is a “civic” nationalist party: Scottish “citizenship” is defined by residency, not by place of birth or ethnicity. Consequently, the Scottish Government has been vocal in defending the residency (and voting) rights of the 180,000 non-UK EU citizens who live in the country.) Meanwhile, the Conservatives have emerged as the main voice of unionism in Scotland and consequently edged ahead of Labour in the 2016 elections.

The SNP manifesto in 2016 stated that there should be another independence referendum should Scotland be taken out of the European Union against its will. This is precisely what is happening, and the Scottish Government yesterday secured a majority in the Scottish Parliament for a second independence referendum. The Green Party also voted for the independence referendum; the three unionist parties (the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats) voted against. However, to be legally binding, the referendum requires the acquiescence of the UK Government. Whilst the UK Government has not said that it would actually block a Scottish referendum it seems likely that it will seek to ensure that its timing is such that there would be no prospect of Scotland remaining in the EU: “Now is not the time,” has become Prime Minister May’s mantra.

It should be noted that Scottish independence is by no means a forgone conclusion whenever the UK Government endorses it. The opinion polls have not changed greatly since 2014. But when the last independence referendum began in 2011, independence enjoyed only 30% support. With a starting point of 45-48% support for independence, the SNP clearly believes it has a decent chance of winning.

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

Northern Ireland is in an especially difficult situation following Brexit for both practical and political reasons. It would clearly be very damaging for the Northern Ireland economy to have a “hard” border with the Republic of Ireland. The UK Government has indicated that it will avoid a “hard” border, but has not said how this would (or could) be achieved if ending the free movement of people is a central part of Brexit. To make matters still more complex, the UK and Ireland have been part of a common travel area since the formation of the Irish Free State (now the Republic) in 1922.

Moreover, the “peace process” instituted in 1998 as part of the Good Friday Agreement is very much linked to EU membership of both the Republic and the North. The largest unionist party campaigned for Brexit, whilst the nationalist parties campaigned to remain in the EU. Now Sinn Fein, the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland (and with a presence in the Republic as a populist anti-austerity party) has called for a referendum on Irish unification (i.e. outside the UK). In recent

elections the unionists lost their overall majority in the Northern Ireland Assembly for the first time, whilst Sinn Fein made gains. However, with the power sharing agreement having broken down (mostly due to matters unrelated to Brexit), there is no government in place in Northern Ireland. Mainstream politicians in the Republic are now openly discussing unification.

A note on the term “unionist”

The term “unionist” has been used since the latter part of the 19th century to describe someone or a party that supports the union of Great Britain with Ireland. In this period the Irish National Party supported “Home Rule” for Ireland, i.e. an Irish Parliament within the UK. Although legislation was passed before the First World War to establish such a Parliament it was suspended during the war. The 1916-22 War of Independence led to the breakaway of the predominantly Catholic Irish Free State (later Republic). Northern Ireland, with a Protestant majority remained part of the UK. The term unionist is still used to describe someone or a party that supports the union between Northern Ireland and the UK. The term unionist is now also applied to people and parties that support the continued union between the UK and Scotland. There is (virtually) no link between religion and support for or opposition to Scottish independence.

Mark Stephens and Richard Turkington, 29 March 2017