

## Does Brexit Mean Brexit?

Discussion published by Brian Girvin on Tuesday, April 2, 2019

*H-Nationalism is pleased to publish a further contribution to its ongoing 'Brexit, Nationalism and the Future of Europe' series, which discusses the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union and its impact on nationalism and the future of Europe in a multidisciplinary perspective. Please feel welcome to add to the discussion by posting a reply. Today's contribution 'Does Brexit Mean Brexit?' is by Brian Girvin, Professor of Politics at the University of Glasgow.*

It is less than three years since the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and two since the House of Commons voted to activate Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to give effect to the referendum decision. The period since June 2016 has been characterised by increasing political instability and division within the country. One Prime Minister has resigned and another is likely to go shortly. An MP was murdered and xenophobic attitudes have become widespread. Public opinion remains divided on the referendum result and on what should be done. A petition to revoke Article 50 has received over six million signatures, while a pro-European demonstration in London on March 23 attracted over one million participants. The government is in disarray after parliament voted on three occasions to reject Theresa May's withdrawal agreement with the EU. The Prime Minister continues to seek support for another vote. This outcome remains a possibility, though increasingly remote. Parliament has also played an active role in determining the outcome and taken control of the process from the government, though this has mainly involved neutralising May's objectives.

It is a political cliché that a week is a long time in politics. In the case of Brexit Britain, it seems that even an hour can be a very long time indeed. It is still not clear how or whether the UK will formally leave the European Union. The EU and the British government have agreed a short postponement to the original date for the UK to leave. This involves two considerations. If parliament provides the necessary support for the existing withdrawal agreement, the UK will leave by May 22. This outcome is possible but remains unlikely at the time of writing. The alternative is that parliament continues to block the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement. If there are no further initiatives the UK will leave on April 12 with no-deal. However, if the prime minister goes back to the EU before that date, a much longer postponement is likely, possibly up to two years. There are serious implications for

British politics if the latter course is followed. In the first place, the UK would have to take part in the European parliamentary elections on the May 23, despite having voted to leave the EU. Secondly, a postponement would exacerbate further the divide that is now at the heart of British politics.

Despite support from the EU for the withdrawal agreement, both Conservative and Labour parties are internally divided on the proposals. What Parliament has agreed on is that the UK will not leave the EU without a deal. This decision neutralises the intentions of some Leave supporters that a no deal is better than a bad deal (as they put it). While there is no majority for a no-deal, it is not clear that there is a majority for any positive option. The danger here is that failure to agree on a strategy supported by parliament could lead to a no-deal outcome by stealth or incompetence. The indicative votes that took place on March 26 failed to clarify the situation. Eight options were debated by MPs and every one was rejected by a majority. These included a no deal, negotiating a new customs union and a public vote to confirm any deal. MPs voted again on April 1 on four proposals but none of these were supported by a majority. As it stands the only real options are a no deal by default or the withdrawal agreement that has now been rejected three times.

Theresa May is now widely seen to have lost authority and legitimacy. In response, May has petulantly turned on parliament, blaming it for the delay in leaving and appealing to the public for support. There is a strong sense of desperation in this but very little evidence that the Prime Minister can persuade a majority in the House of Commons to support her position. Nor is the public likely to respond to her appeal. A March poll reported that only 11 per cent thought the withdrawal agreement was a good deal, while 46 per cent agreed that it was a bad or very bad deal.

Opposition to the agreement is strongest among Conservative party supporters. There is now a high level of uncertainty concerning the future. May attempted to break the political impasse by promising to resign as Prime Minister if the withdrawal agreement is supported by MPs. Conservatives with leadership ambitions, such as Boris Johnson, have shifted from opposition to support, but as the third vote on March 29 demonstrated there is no majority in parliament for the agreement. In so far as anything is clear, the likelihood is that the United Kingdom will leave the European Union by May 22, though given what has been happening one would be foolish to gamble on this. If nothing emerges from Cabinet discussions this week, the UK will leave without a deal on April 12.

For nearly three years the major point of discussion, controversy and confrontation has been about how the UK will actually leave. When Article 50 was activated, most

observers believed that the UK and the EU would come to mutually satisfactory arrangements to make the process as benign as possible for both parties. This proved to be much more difficult than British officials thought. Issues which had never been considered during the referendum campaign or subsequently became central to negotiations; in particular the status of Northern Ireland.

The decision to leave remains the most divisive issue in British politics, dividing parties, families, generations and regions. There is also a very important division in terms of nation and identity. Those who live in England and identify as English tend to be supportive of leaving the EU, while those who live in Scotland and identify as Scottish strongly support remain. Wales voted to leave, though Welsh nationalists have tended to support remaining in the EU. Divisions in Northern Ireland continue to reflect the ethno-religious divisions in the region: Unionists are generally in favour of leaving while nationalists are strongly in favour of remaining in the EU. The largest Northern Irish party the Democratic Unionist Party supports the Conservative government but remain opposed to any agreement that questions Northern Ireland's continuing status in the UK. The nationalist Sinn Fein refuses to take up its seats at Westminster, so the voice of Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland is not reflected in these debates. Consequently nationalist opinion is expressed by the government of the Irish Republic both officially and unofficially. This further heightens tensions within Northern Ireland and between Ireland and the UK generally.

If the process appears chaotic, this is because it is. Just over two years ago when article 50 was triggered there was considerable optimism in Britain that a satisfactory agreement would be negotiated. Theresa May spoke with considerable confidence about the future of the UK outside of Europe. So confident was she of her position that she established 'red-lines' for the negotiating process, which included exit from the customs union and an end to free movement of people. These views reflected a widespread opinion within the Conservative Party that leaving the EU would be easy and that the UK would be the main beneficiary of the process. This was grounded in the belief that UK diplomats were particularly skilled in promoting the national interest. The implicit assumption here was that the EU was divided on the consequences of Brexit and fearful that Brexit would infect the politics of other European states.

It did not turn out this way. May's red lines limited British tactics, removing the possibility of compromise early in the negotiations. The EU proved to be far more united than Leave supporters (or the UK government) had hoped. Indeed, the most

spectacular outcome has been the extent to which the 27 EU states have maintained a united position during the two years of negotiations. This, despite substantial disagreements among the EU states concerning tactics and strategy. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel was instrumental in securing the EU consensus. She was actively supported by the newly elected President of France Emmanuel Macron who, more than most appreciated the challenge to the EU that Brexit posed. Macron's election in 2017 undermined those on the right and left in Europe who believed that Brexit was the first step in dismantling the EU and that others would follow. While the EU is still the focus of criticism and hostility, there is little talk of France or Italy leaving the EU. Even Sinn Fein, a Eurosceptic nationalist party in Ireland, has become more conciliatory to Europe and actively opposes Brexit (if for clearly nationalist reasons). The instability in British politics convinced many in the EU that cooperation offered more to individual states than going it alone.

In addition, British diplomacy proved to be inept and defensive. The so-called red lines limited the effectiveness of the diplomats and undermined attempts at compromise. Many diplomats were disillusioned by the prospect of Leave. Political leaders such as David Davis, Liam Fox and Boris Johnson had little understanding of how the EU operated. Moreover they were disinclined to listen to expert advice in the civil service, driven as they were by an overly optimistic and ideological view of what could be achieved. During his tenure as Foreign Secretary, Johnson demoralised his staff, undermining much good will by engaging in populist grandstanding rather than careful negotiation. Furthermore, responsibility for leaving the EU was divided among various departments (some newly established for this purpose), but they did not necessarily share a common viewpoint. European diplomats expressed frustration that it was never clear who represented the UK position, or at times what the government's position was.

The Prime Minister played an important role in destabilising the situation further by calling a general election in 2017 on Brexit, during which she lost her parliamentary majority. She also expected the EU to make major concessions, despite her rigid red lines. Once these expectations were well established in the public mind (and in the minds of the Conservative Party) it proved politically impossible for May to change her strategy. Her own inflexibility and lack of imagination reinforces these tendencies and exacerbated them.

The UK position was also weakened from within. Senior members of the government privately opposed the hardline position adopted by May and the Leave advocates. The Treasury recognised the difficulties associated with a hard or no-deal Brexit,

reflecting the concerns of the business community in Cabinet. The divisions were wider than this; a minority of Conservative MPs have voted against their own government on important policy issues. Subsequently three MPs left the party and joined the newly formed Independent Group early in 2019.

In response to Brexit, politics has realigned. Remain voters are now predominant in the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party, the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats. Leave voters are the dominant voice in the Conservative Party, though as in the Labour Party there are those who continue to oppose the dominant view. In the case of the Labour Party, its leader Jeremy Corbyn has made it clear that even if his party won a general election, he would still negotiate an agreement to leave the EU, though on more benign terms than those in the current agreement. Corbyn is a long-time Eurosceptic from a left wing perspective, believing that membership would constrain the implementation of his socialist policies. A YouGov poll in March reported that 72 per cent thought that Labour policy on Brexit was unclear or confusing.

Alongside those who share his ideological views, there is also a group of MPs who believe that the will of the people as represented by the referendum vote should be upheld. Caroline Flint MP for Don Valley who voted to remain now opposes a further referendum, believing that the agreement negotiated by the government should be accepted. Her position is that 'another referendum would reawaken divisions and mistrust, and not resolve concerns about free movement shared by a majority of supporters of every major party'.<sup>[1]</sup> Despite this, Labour members are overwhelmingly in favour of a second referendum on the issue, though the leadership is reluctant. A further challenge to the Labour Party was the resignation of eight MPs who with three former conservative MPs established the Independent Group of MPs. This has renewed pressure on Corbyn by the dominant remain group of MPs and party members.

The Conservative Party continues to face a major dilemma. A majority of Conservative MPs voted to remain, as did Theresa May. However, the party moved to the right when May became leader and Prime Minister. She has taken a consistently belligerent position in respect of the referendum outcome and believes firmly that the only satisfactory position is for the UK to leave. However, the party is now seriously divided about the future and about what type of Brexit they would support. There is a constituency for leaving without an agreement but this is not the dominant position. Nor is it practicable at the moment as a majority of MPs oppose leaving without an agreement. The problem for the Conservative Party is that its

divisions have undermined party discipline and political loyalty. What has happened is that the Conservative Party has become the party of English nationalism by absorbing (for the moment at least) the protest vote that the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) originally mobilised. While the party continues to attract support in Scotland and Wales, the rightward movement in its ideology reflects trends in English opinion to a greater degree than that in Scotland or Wales.

A poll published on March 20 attempted to identify the state of opinion on Brexit (<https://www.opinium.co.uk/political-polling-20th-march-2019/>). Opinion is divided on whether there should be a public vote on the government's withdrawal agreement, now that it has been defeated three times in the House of Commons. 46 per cent think it should be put to a vote but 42 per cent are opposed to this. Over 60 per cent of those polled disapprove of the way Theresa May has been handling the decision to leave the EU. Corbyn's disapproval on this issue is even higher at 65 per cent. When asked about options for leave, 43 per cent supported leaving without a deal on March 29 (64 per cent of Conservatives supported this option). 15 per cent supported delaying implementing Article 50 until there was clarity on what Brexit would mean. A further 28 per cent wanted Article 50 to be revoked (45 per cent of Labour supporters). When asked how they would vote in another referendum, 45 per cent supported remaining in the EU while 37 per cent supported leaving. A YouGov poll found that 84 per cent now believe that the government is handling leaving the EU badly. Furthermore, 42 per cent think Parliament should reject the existing deal, though 34 per cent favour accepting it ([https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/ms8mozir3c/The\\_Times\\_190325\\_VI\\_Trackers\\_bpc\\_w.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/ms8mozir3c/The_Times_190325_VI_Trackers_bpc_w.pdf) ).

What conclusions can be drawn from the Brexit controversy? The first is to note the central role of nationalism in Britain, Ireland and the EU. Europe is not a post-nationalist society and is unlikely to become one in the near future. Nationalism, national identity and the nation-state remain the main sources of legitimacy, ideology and identity for Europeans. Journalists and academics have focused on populist insurgency in Britain and Europe as the main expression of contemporary nationalism. This focus obscures the extent to which the mainstream parties are nationalist (if expressed in a less discordant key than the populists).

Theresa May has played an important role in articulating an exclusivist vision of the future of Britain. She has consciously played the nationalist card since elected leader of the party, regularly invoking national interest and patriotism which she associates with those who voted leave. She has attacked EU citizens for 'jumping the

queue' in the UK and characterised those who support remain a 'citizens of nowhere'. Her language implicitly excludes those who are considered different in terms of citizenship, ethnicity or race. It is an open rejection of the EU model that emphasises inclusiveness, involving a return to narrower forms of nationalism based on a dominant ethnic core (English). She has also legitimised xenophobic attitudes by distinguishing between 'us' and 'them' in her nationalist speeches. This is a continuation of the policies pursued while she was at the Home Office which created a 'hostile' environment for immigrants. This may not be as aggressive as UKIP but as Michael Billig warned, banal or everyday nationalism is not necessarily benign. <sup>[2]</sup>

What the Brexit controversy has also shown very clearly is that nationalism is alive and well not only in Britain but in Ireland and the rest of Europe. The Irish government has been careful not to antagonise British opinion, though some right-wing commentators blame Ireland for the EU's hard line in negotiations. Europe is a nationalist project in Ireland and among Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland. It is represented as more than a national interest and has been integrated into popular nationalist consciousness. Membership of the EU provides a small state with resources to exercise influence which would not otherwise be available. Consequently Ireland has been able to pursue its national (and nationalist) interest with considerable effectiveness and success. The so-called backdrop in the withdrawal agreement is a result of Ireland's success in persuading other EU states that instability in Northern Ireland would undermine the Belfast/Northern Ireland Agreement that has brought a measure of peace to the region.

One side effect of Brexit has been a renewal of anti-British (English) sentiment in Ireland. Irish nationalists have treated the decision to leave the EU with incredulity and often contempt. Sinn Fein in particular has attempted to cultivate this hostility by demanding a referendum on a united Ireland. The anti-British rhetoric led journalist Stephen Collins to argue recently that the implication of these views was that Irish Unionists had no place in Ireland (<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/sinn-f%C3%A9in-s-brit-bashing-is-damaging-to-political-discourse-1.3832739> ). Brexit may be unravelling the consensus between the two nations in Northern Ireland; a consensus that is the bedrock for peaceful co-operation. One reason for this is that the two communities remain entrenched within their nationalist frameworks and despite every encouragement have not created a common political space or identity. Brexit has deepened these divisions, because it has exposed the conflicting nationalist objectives within the region.

The pursuit of a narrow English nationalist policy by the Conservative government

also re-opens the question of the Union. Scotland voted to remain in the EU, though there was a substantial vote to leave. The Scottish National Party has argued that the strategy pursued by May's government undermines the devolution settlement and ignores the majority view in Scotland. There is a real prospect of another referendum on independence as a consequence. Despite the use of the term Brexit, the controversy suggests that Britishness and the idea of a shared state is weakening appreciably. It is being replaced by the nation as the focus for loyalty and identity.

At a more general level Brexit exposes in a most explicit sense the failure to recognise the continuing importance of nationalism within the EU, notably in respect of political integration. For fifty years it has been possible to reconcile national identity and nationalism with integration and a shared political purpose within Europe. This model is now seriously challenged by Brexit and populist insurgency. It is also challenged by the European failure to persuade Europeans that there is a shared identity. Many in Europe now believe that it is not possible to reconcile European integration with the continuation of the traditional nation-state; when asked to choose they are likely to select the latter. President Macron is alert to this challenge but has failed to gain support for his radical vision for the future.

Brexit does indeed mean that the UK will leave the EU, most likely in May 2019. However, the hopes placed enthusiastically in the decision by those supporting leave have been disappointed. There is widespread criticism of the existing deal by those who supported leaving and in a recent YouGov poll the majority believed that neither a new Conservative Prime Minister nor Corbyn as Prime Minister would get a better deal from the EU. This confirms the fears and warning of those who supported remain. It is very likely that Brexit will continue to impact on British and European politics long after the UK leaves the EU. <sup>[3]</sup>

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[1] *Observer* 16/12/2018

[2] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, (London: Sage, 1995)

[3] Readers seeking further data and comment should go to *What the UK Thinks* at <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/>