UC Berkeley
UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Pluralism, National Identity and Citizenship: Britain after Brexit

Permalink

Journal

ISSN

Authors

Ashcroft, R
Bevir, M

Publication Date

2016-07-01

DOI

Peer reviewed

Pluralism, National Identity and Citizenship: Britain after Brexit

Richard Ashcroft and Mark Bevir, University of California at Berkeley

Introduction

Our society is deeply divided over Brexit. Precisely what will happen in Britain after the referendum on EU membership is unclear. At the time of writing — less than a fortnight after the result — there is widespread confusion regarding what will happen next, what the overall consequences of the vote will be, and even what the referendum itself was truly about. The only certainty is that we are entering a period of profound and difficult change that may result in a fundamental remaking of the United Kingdom and perhaps even its dissolution. In this essay we consider some of the broad connections between Brexit and pluralism. We suggest that mismatches between plural forms of culture, national identity, and citizenship help to explain the referendum result. We then argue that just as pluralism is a cause of the current confusion, so it may be a solution. Instead of turning to an inward-looking nationalism, Britain should take this opportunity to embrace more open and diverse forms of identity, citizenship, and political organization. We advocate increased polycentricity in structures of governance, experimentation in social practices, and the renewal of an inclusive and tolerant public culture. These forms of pluralism could reinvigorate British democracy and neglected aspects of British citizenship, helping to address the social divisions that underlie our current problems.

Cultural Pluralism, National Identity and Citizenship

The Brexit vote was in large part about pluralism in culture, nationalism, and citizenship. These multiple aspects of modern Britain interact with each other in ways that relate directly to the referendum. Underlying tensions between them have been exacerbated by the prominence of immigration in the referendum campaign, the democratic deficit in the EU, and the longer-term erosion of the welfare state.

Cultural pluralism was a clear cause of Brexit. Post-war non-white immigration created a modern multiculturalism that some see as a threat to social cohesion and security. From the mid-1960s until the early 2000s, most government multicultural policy aimed at integration, rather than assimilation, which resulted in a high degree of internal cultural pluralism. The political consensus in favour of this approach was fractured by race riots in 2001, the atrocities of 9/11 and 7/7, and the broader consequences of the 'war on terror'. The result has been a backlash against multiculturalism. British Muslims have become particular objects of public and governmental suspicion.[i] Prominent figures have alleged that British multiculturalism allows minorities to prioritize their private commitments above their civic loyalties, thereby causing ghettoization and a breakdown in social cohesion.[ii] Whether or not this is true, concerns about multiculturalism, security, and immigration are frequently conflated in public discourse, as was seen in UKIP's notorious 'Breaking Point' campaign poster. This resistance to multiculturalism contributed to Brexit.

Plural forms of nationalism cut across attitudes to multiculturalism in the referendum vote. The attempt to build a 'multicultural' British national identity has encountered resistance from those who see their understanding of Britain as under threat. There are also conflicts between British multiculturalists who favour a deep cultural pluralism and those who advocate a more assimilative form of liberalism.[iii] Multicultural, monocultural, and perhaps even monoethnic interpretations of what it means to be British are in competition. The emotive nature of nationalism complicates debates over multiculturalism. Other complications reflect differences between national identity in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A sense of Englishness correlates more strongly with Euroscepticism than Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish identities do, and this may be linked to divergent views as to whether national identity is threatened by immigration.[iv] Over 60 percent of Scots voted Remain and recent polls indicate leaving the EU would lead to a significant increase in support for Scottish independence.[v] Different understandings of the various national identities based in the UK are therefore part of the story of Brexit.

Citizenship was also at stake for many voters. The overwhelming majority of those who voted were citizens of both Britain and the European Union, and Brexit was partly driven by divergent evaluations of these citizenships. Many Remain voters identify as European, which adds another layer of complexity to the conflict between plural national identities discussed above. Yet citizenship is not simply symbolic. It has both economic and political aspects, and it carries with it valuable legal rights. Support for the EU is higher amongst certain demographics — particularly younger voters, university graduates, and higher earners — who are more likely to value the freedom of movement conferred by their EU citizenship. Conversely, many who want to limit immigration believe it has adverse economic consequences for those who struggle to compete with highly mobile labour from within the EU. These concerns have been compounded by the perception that the welfare state is threatened by immigration, even if in reality it seems the increased demands brought by immigrants are outweighed by their contributions.[vi] It is surely undeniable that the economic and social rights granted during the post-war expansion of British citizenship have been gradually eroded since Thatcher and hit hard by austerity. In addition, many who voted Leave were concerned about a loss of British political sovereignty and a lack of democratic responsiveness within EU institutions. The high-handed dismissal of these very real concerns by the Remain campaign and the EU itself was both unwarranted and counterproductive. Clearly a significant number of people in the UK feel that the economic and political rights they take for granted as part of their British citizenship have been undermined by their status as citizens of the EU. Different evaluations of plural forms of citizenship were a crucial part of Brexit.

Pluralism is therefore central to Brexit. Conflicts over the desirability and effects of multiculturalism, contests over and disconnections between different forms of national (and supra-national) identity, and divergent assessments of the economic and political value of multiple citizenships all played important roles.

Pluralist Governance and Democratic Renewal

Pluralism of culture, national identity, and citizenship helped cause the current chaos in Britain. We cannot ignore these forms of pluralism nor the different reactions to them by members of our polity. Yet the response should not be to retreat from pluralism but rather to reemphasize it. We should restructure our governance in order to empower the local, and we should take action to reinvigorate our political, economic, and cultural practices. Such reforms would help to address the legitimate grievances at play whilst accommodating diversity. A reconstituted pluralism would mitigate the possibility of post-Brexit Britain sliding into inward-looking and exclusionary forms of populism and/or nationalism.

More polycentric political arrangements may help to accommodate the multiple identities that constitute modern Britain. Greater devolved governance would enable those who identify primarily with more local levels to express their identity and feel a sense of political ownership. It would also allow those who possess more fluid and cosmopolitan identities to participate at multiple levels and across different social spheres. Whether political devolution in and of itself undercuts problematic forms of nationalism is debateable. Yet persisting with the current lopsided form of devolution will continue to fuel a mismatch between the different national identities at play. The authors' preference is for a fully federalized United Kingdom with a clear demarcation of powers between levels of government and a separate executive for each major federal unit. We are open as to whether this would include England as a single entity or divide it into regions. We note, however, that 'English votes for English laws' is subject to many of the same objections as English devolution whilst posing additional constitutional and democratic problems.[vii] In any event, we have argued elsewhere that the presumption that nations should be the primary units of liberal democracy is itself unsustainable.[viii] Political devolution should not stop at the borders of the nation but must move further downwards. We must re-empower local communities through more radical forms of democracy. For example, the crucial power to raise taxes — including an income tax — should be devolved to a much more local level. The recent drive towards the academisation of state schools under the direct supervision of central government must also be reversed. Primary control of education should be local, including many decisions about curricula and testing. Plural political structures of this kind would help carve out spaces for national, cultural, and religious groups to participate in self-government, and would therefore address the issues underlying Brexit.

A renewal of our actual democratic practices must accompany these structural changes. Brexit presents an opportunity for engaging in experimental forms of democracy at the local level. Possible innovations include deliberative polls, participatory budgeting, and the extension of consultative initiatives like Sciencewise into other areas of policy. Nor should these experiments be limited to purely 'political' matters. Cross-cultural dialogue is also vital. Organizations such as London Citizens have provided spaces for productive discussion at the local level and we must build on these efforts.[ix] Such initiatives address deep cultural and religious differences more effectively than government policies such as *Prevent*, which unhelpfully muddled community

relations with counter-terrorism. Britain should also embrace alternative forms of local or trans-local economic organization. These might include promoting Community Interest Companies that fund and control matters such as local energy production and transport, emphasizing common resources such as open-universities, 'share-shops' and municipal gardens/farms, and supporting employee ownership of private businesses. Cumulatively these approaches could help circumvent the inertia caused by traditional party politics at the local level, as can be seen by the successes of 'flatpack' democracy in Frome.[x] Grass-roots organization cannot by itself, however, address the overall economic exclusion that underlies Brexit. Even if austerity was economically necessary — which the authors do not accept — it must now be rejected. Central government must try to reverse its effects through renewed investment in public services, particularly the NHS and education. Neither Westminster nor the EU can afford to continue the appearance (and perhaps reality) of pursuing the interests of wealthy financiers or metropolitan elites at the expense of their citizenry.

Cultural renewal is a necessary part of building a Britain that is both inclusive and comfortable with pluralism. Major structural alterations and a reinvigoration of our political, economic, and social practices will be ineffective without an accompanying change in public culture. Britain is at a crossroads and we face a clear choice between turning in on ourselves or reasserting our commitment to solidarity, openness and co-operation at home and abroad. In the event of withdrawal from the EU, retaining via domestic legislation aspects of EU law that protect workers' rights would help preserve solidarity.[xi] Likewise, negotiating access to the EEA would help to protect a cosmopolitan outlook. Recent polls show widespread support for securing the right of non-British EU citizens to remain in the UK, which would help garner co-operation after a divisive campaign.[xii] Britain should also place a higher priority on assisting the victims of conflict, natural disasters, and human rights violations. Accepting a much greater number of Syrian refugees is one example. Brexit does not preclude the introduction of more fluid pathways to British citizenship for refugees and others. Finally, everyone in Britain must condemn in word and deed the racism and xenophobia that has been released — and in the minds of many legitimized — by Brexit.

Our goal should be to build a more tolerant and inclusive Britain that embraces the pluralism inherent in the modern world. Brexit presents an opportunity for vital political restructuring, democratic experimentation, economic innovation, and cultural change.

Conclusion

We have argued that pluralism in matters of culture, national identity, and citizenship were central to Brexit. This meant there could be no unequivocally good result from this referendum. It asked the wrong question, and was undertaken at the wrong time for the wrong reasons. It presented a number of different issues in the form of a binary choice and therefore either result would inevitably have alienated substantial segments of the population. We should not make the mistake, however, of thinking that it is the referendum itself that has divided our polity. The post-war European irenic and cosmopolitan project largely succeeded, but in the UK it is perceived to have primarily benefited already privileged groups. Likewise the post-war British expansion of the scope and nature of domestic citizenship has been slowly eroded in ways that have impacted some more than others. Much of the responsibility for these failures lies with European and British political institutions, which have done little to dispel the impression they are remote and out of touch. The fault lines in Britain (and beyond) have been clear to see for some time. It was wishful thinking on the part of political, economic, and socially liberal elites that they could be ignored. They are out in the open now, and we must all deal with the consequences.

The remaking of Britain since World War II has made it a deeply diverse country, but this pluralism is not in and of itself to blame for our current difficulties. If Britain is to resist the slide into petty-minded nationalism, we need to embrace pluralism rather than retreat from it. This pluralism must be expressed in our practices and structures of governance, with an emphasis on re-empowering the local without turning away from the global. Losing the mediating level of the EU might make this more difficult. Brexit runs the risk of entrenching opposition to cultural difference, reinvigorating unproductive forms of nationalism, and diminishing even further the economic value of citizenship. Nevertheless, we must persevere with pluralism if we are to resist the temptation of right wing populism. We should turn back to the democratic, economic, and social ideals of the post-war era, ensuring that on this occasion no-one is excluded. We should open spaces for genuine self-governance, including for those who wish to reject aspects of the liberal moral consensus. We must experiment politically, economically, and socially at the local level. And we must publically reassert our commitment to the ideals of cooperation, openness, and solidarity. If we work together, we can build an inclusive but diverse Britain which embraces its role in Europe and beyond.

i See the recent Met figures on Islamophobic crime (http://www.met.police.uk/crimefigures/textonly_month.htm recalled 7 July 2016) and Nasar Meer *Citizenship, Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism: The Rise of Muslim Consciousness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

ii For example David Goodhart, *Too Diverse?* Prospect 95, February 2004, *National Anxieties* Prospect 123, June 2006, and *Progressive Nationalism* (London: Demos, 2006).

iii Contrast David Cameron's speech of 5 Feb 2011 (The New Statesman blog 5 Feb 2011 http://goo.gl/Z7gmbT) and the Parekh Report of 11 October 2000 (http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects-and-publications/past-projects/meb/report.html) both retrieved 7 July 1016.

iv See The Political Quarterly Vol 87 Issue 2 pp131-305 for a detailed discussion. See in particular *England, Englishness and Brexit* by Henderson *et al* (pp187-p199), *A Question of Culture or Economics? Public Attitudes to the European Union in Britain* by John Curtice (pp209-218), and *UK Euroscepticism and the Brexit referendum* by Sofia Vasilopoulou (pp228-237). See also *How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday.....and why* by Lord Ashcroft (Friday 24 June http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/ recalled 7 July 2016).

v Poll results published in *The Sunday Post* and *The Sunday Times* on 26 June 2016 (https://www.sundaypost.com/news/political-news/end-uk-new-survey-shows-59-support-scottish-independence-brexit-vote/ and http://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/majority-of-scots-willing-to-leave-uk-7qsm0pq75 both recalled 6 July 2016).

vi *Buying into Myths: Free Movement of People and Immigration* by Eiko Thielemann and Daniel Schade in The Political Quarterly Vol 87 Issue 2 pp139–147. See also *Public services worries 'drove immigration fears behind Brexit win'* by Sam Lister (The Independent Sat 2 July 2016 http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-public-services-worries-immigration-fears-eu-referendum-latest-a7115946.html recalled 8 July 2016) and the 2015 British Social Attitude Survey (http://www.bsa-data.natcen.ac.uk/ recalled 8 July 2016).

vii See *Federalism: The UK's Future?* by Andrew Blick for a helpful dicussion (The Federal Trust April 2016 http://fedtrust.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/FEDERALISM_THE_UKS_FUTURE.pdf, recalled 6 July 2016).

viii Ashcroft and Bevir *Liberal Democracy, Nationalism and Culture: Multiculturalism and Scottish Independence* in *Multiculturalism in Contemporary Britain: Policy, Law and Theory* (Special Edition of the Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy edited by Ashcroft and Bevir, forthcoming).

ix For a helpful discussion see *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* by Luke Bretherton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

x John Harris *How Flatpack Democracy beat the old parties in the People's Republic of Frome* (The Guardian, Friday May 22 2015: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/22/flatpack-democracy-peoples-republic-of-frome, recalled 6 July 2016). Initiatives by Citizens United, the Transition Network and the Employee Ownership Association also provide helpful models.

xi See the TUC paper *UK employment rights and the EU: Assessment of the impact of membership of the European Union on employment rights in the UK* for an overview (https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/UK%20employment%20rights%20and%20the%20EU.pdf recalled 8 July 2016).

xii '*Let EU Migrants stay*' say the British public, plus voices from business and politics (retrieved from http://www.britishfuture.org/articles/15131/ 6 July 2016).