

NOTES AND COMMENTARY

Why Brexit? The Toxic Mix of Immigration and Austerity

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It is now a few months since the United Kingdom voted 52 percent to 48 percent to leave the European Union (EU). In the wake of that decision, the pound collapsed to its lowest level since Ronald Reagan was sworn in for a second term as US President. \$2 trillion was wiped off global markets. Prime Minister David Cameron announced his resignation and Britain has a new leader in Theresa May. There was a leadership struggle in the Labour Party and concerns over a possible split. Given that Scotland voted Remain, the Scottish First Minister has announced her intention to hold a second referendum on independence (with some polls showing significantly higher levels of support than previously).

Multinational companies are announcing their intention to move jobs to other countries to maintain the commercial and economic advantages of operating in the EU. A wave of anti-foreigner violence (chiefly aimed at Poles), the likes of which have not been experienced for decades, has erupted.

The “Brexiteers” have reacted with satisfaction to the recent stabilization of the stock market, telling us that the Remain campaign was guilty of scaremongering over the economic implications of Brexit. The

potential demographic implications of Brexit, however, could be wide ranging, not just for the United Kingdom but for the EU as a whole. Effects on migration and freedom of movement are most easily imagined. Non-British EU citizens in the UK and UK nationals on the Continent are on tenterhooks, fearing disruption of their lives and careers. Matters relating to population were central in the referendum campaigns. Looking at how population was used (and abused) in the debate can tell us something important about the role of demography in the policy-political process not only in the UK, but also in Europe, and perhaps, in this Age of Trumpism, in the United States as well.

Immigration and the referendum campaign

No slogan played out more powerfully in public debate than the Leave campaign's "Take back control"—a deliberately ambiguous phrase. And it was on the topic of immigration where the desire to take back control was most keenly felt.

The population of the UK has been growing in recent years. While the UK does, indeed, have a relatively high fertility rate (1.83 in 2014 according the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2015)) compared to most of its European neighbors, total growth has been largely driven by immigration, which has a recent history going back to the end of colonialism and the favored status conferred on the Commonwealth

countries. In the second half of the 2000s, net migration to the UK fluctuated between 300,000 and 400,000 per year, reaching a peak of over 400,000 just before the onset of the 2008 financial crisis (ONS 2016). Before the 2010 General Election, then–Prime Minister Cameron said, “We would like to see net immigration in the tens of thousands rather than the hundreds of thousands. I don’t think that’s unrealistic.... That’s the sort of figure it was in the 1990s and I think we should see that again” (Prince 2010). In the same interview, he stated that “in the last decade, net immigration in some years has been sort of 200,000, so implying a 2 million increase over a decade, which I think is too much” (ibid.). This lowering of immigration did not transpire: annual net migration to the UK under both the Conservative-led coalition government from 2010 to 2015 and the Conservative government since 2015 has hovered around 300,000 (ONS 2016). Of course, population growth is not evenly distributed, with rapid total growth especially in London and the South-East. However, growth also occurred in areas not previously characterized by large-scale immigration. Finally, there is a prevailing narrative of “overpopulation” in the UK. This is especially associated with the vocal pressure group Population Matters (previously called the Optimum Population Trust), which in the past has claimed that the UK is “overpopulated by 70 percent” (Population Matters 2008) and

advocated encouraging couples to voluntarily “stop at two” children (McDougall 2010).

Immigration was the subject of strident material emanating from the two main streams of the Leave campaigns: Vote Leave and Leave.EU. The message that immigration was straining infrastructure and public services fell on receptive ears, and expectedly so. In England alone, there is an estimated shortfall of more than 10,000 primary school places (Helm 2016). There is a common perception that the National Health Service is crumbling and unable to cope with the pressure of a population not only growing, but aging as well. The shortage of affordable housing is acute. Tabloid stories of migrants (whether EU citizens or not; and whether true or not) having “lots of children” and “jumping the queue” for housing stoke these tensions.

Explicit in much of the Leave campaign’s literature was the notion that the EU is a failed economic and political project, therefore making it implicit that, as an economic success, the UK could expect to see continued migration from other EU states. As *The Sun*, the UK’s top-selling tabloid, put it in a headline from early 2016, “Britain Risks Migration Time Bomb as Population Set to Swell by 500,000 a Year” (Woodhouse 2016). The article continued, “An increase of 500,000 a year would take the population to 77.1 million by 2039—an extra 12.5 million people at a time when services are already under huge pressure.” This

claim was backed up by an interview with Home Office Minister Lord Bates, who was quoted as saying: “If you take the statistical data which is available and you forecast it, you arrive at roughly the numbers you refer to.” The article continued, “But he [Bates] later admitted the current influx was being driven by factors ‘which are not totally within our control’ and also said ‘immigration remains too high’” (ibid.). Other articles linked these forecasts to the housing crisis and the necessity—arising as a consequence of EU migration—to build on the “green belt” of protected countryside surrounding towns and cities. Consider this headline from the *Daily Telegraph* citing the then Leader of the House of Commons: “Britain's Green Fields Will Have to Be Built Over to Provide New Homes for Migrants, Warns Chris Grayling” (Ross 2016).

These visions present a highly skewed, oversimplified view of the future. First, the projections of the UK population represent just one possible trajectory. The Office for National Statistics produces a number of variants, all of which will be shaped by future trajectories in the economy and society, both in the UK and in the EU and the world as a whole. However, these projections are often taken as demographic facts. Jane Falkingham at the University of Southampton has neatly deconstructed these presentations of the future, querying whether the UK really *will* have a population of 80 million, and whether it even matters (Falkingham 2016).

Another key message intimated that these projections of certain population growth from elsewhere in the EU may be underestimates. The main Vote Leave referendum communication, mailed to every household in the UK, ran:

The EU is expanding to include: Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. When we joined, there were just 9 member states. Now there are 28, the most recent being Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia. Five more countries are in the queue to join totaling 89 million people. When they join they will have the same rights as other member states. (Vote Leave 2016)

This reference to Turkey joining was echoed in the Vote Leave poster reproduced as Figure 1.¹ Vote Leave produced tweets on June 22 with graphics stating “BREAKING NEWS: The EU will open membership talks with Turkey on June 30—Diplomatic sources to [*Agence France Presse*]” as well as “We’re paying Turkey £1 billion to join the EU.” But Turkey is not joining the EU any time soon. At last count it had fulfilled just 5 of 70 stipulated criteria for accession and is presently on a political course taking it closer to Russia than to the West. But the insinuation is clear. As Figure 2 shows, the other campaign group, Leave.EU, left even less to the imagination.

Neither of these was, however, the most talked-about poster of the campaign—whether related to population or otherwise. This dubious

honor goes to the poster launched by the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and reproduced as Figure 3. It shows refugees trying to cross the border into Slovenia.² The UK has taken in around 5,000 refugees from Syria (FullFact 2016). There was widespread condemnation of this poster from across the political spectrum, even from within the Leave camp itself. Michael Gove, co-chair of Vote Leave, said that “When I saw that poster, I shuddered.... I think it was the wrong thing to do” (Simons 2016). Yet, it could be argued that Vote Leave was equally complicit in presenting the issue of Syria and strife in the Middle East as a security and demographic threat to the UK. Note, for example, the map in Figure 4, reproduced from their official referendum communication, and Figure 5, a map tweeted by the official Vote Leave campaign under the text “The EU is about to create a visa-free zone from the English Channel to the borders of Syria and Iraq.”

Deliberately mixing EU migration and the refugee crisis, with Turkey operating as the link between the two, allowed Leave campaigners to exploit currents running much deeper than concern about primary school places or hospital waiting lists. It allowed them to play on the idea of the existential future of Europe—a theme much discussed by a number of alarmist books (see Coleman and Gietel-Basten 2015 for a review). Europe is portrayed as aging, declining, and weakening on the global stage. It is portrayed as surrounded by hotbeds of population

growth, poverty, and fanaticism; as being under siege or even under assault by the rest of the world. But then in 2015, David Cameron, a Leave opponent, had spoken of “a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain” (BBC News 2015).

If the Leave campaign was guilty of demographic hyperbole, the Remain movement was trapped by the fact that a policy of economic austerity, cuts in public services, and the ideal of the small state are at the ideological heart of the then and present UK Government, which includes, by definition, the leaders of the Remain campaign. The stance of far-left-leaning Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the opposition Labour Party, was notable for its lack of vigor. In an interview, he stated that his passion for staying in the EU was about “seven, or seven and a half” out of ten (BBC News 2016). Throughout the campaign, it appeared that public services and infrastructure were fixed quantities on which recent and projected demographic change was putting too much pressure. Yet this view ignores the wider context of a history of chronic underinvestment in infrastructure coupled with an austerity agenda that has sought to pare back public services—a set of circumstances that is as much a political choice as an economic reality.

While the Labour Party does support investment in infrastructure and improved provision of public services, its failure in the 2015 General

Election and inability to gain significant electoral traction since then suggest that the austerity message has won. Corbyn's (accurate) observation a few days before the referendum that there is in effect "no upper limit" to EU immigration was considered extremely unhelpful by his allies in the Remain movement (Swinford 2016).

At the 2015 Conservative Party Conference, then Home Secretary—now Prime Minister—Theresa May stated that:

...When immigration is too high, when the pace of change is too fast, it's impossible to build a cohesive society. It's difficult for schools and hospitals and core infrastructure like housing and transport to cope. And we know that for people in low-paid jobs, wages are forced down even further while some people are forced out of work altogether.

Now I know there are some people who say, yes there are costs of immigration, but the answer is to manage the consequences, not reduce the numbers. But not all of the consequences can be managed, and doing so for many of them comes at a high price. We need to build 210,000 new homes every year to deal with rising demand. We need to find 900,000 new school places by 2024. And there are thousands of people who have been forced out of the labour market, still unable to find a job. (*Independent* 2015)

Clearly, in the view of the current Prime Minister, the “price” of building these homes and of delivering these school places was too “high” —even where the economic benefits of immigration and a growing population might have allowed it.

Coupled with the issues of infrastructure and public services was that of welfare-state benefits. Restricting in-work benefits for EU migrants was a centerpiece of Cameron’s negotiations with Brussels—something that resonated with the desire to restrict “benefit tourism” (or, as it is called on the Continent, “poverty tourism”). In 2015, for example, Michael Fallon, the Defence Secretary, said the government intended to “look at free movement as a whole and make sure that the right to claim is not the primary driver...for migration” (Mason 2015a). In the same year, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that “We are looking for substantive changes to our relationship with the European Union...that reflect our concerns about migration and people coming into our country just to claim our welfare payments” (Mason 2015b). Even the Labour Party turned against immigration. In the last days of his Premiership, Gordon Brown advocated “British jobs for British workers” (Summers 2009). In its 2015 election manifesto, the Party stated “Low-skilled migration has been too high and needs to come down.”

The immigration narrative from successive governments and opposition parties meant that it was almost impossible to deliver a

positive message on the subject. Many studies have identified the positive net economic contribution of migration to the UK in recent years (e.g. Dustman and Frattini 2014). Yet, recognition of immigrants' contribution—and of the effects of their potential departure—was absent.

Politicians know that there are pros and cons to immigration. Populism tends to emphasize the cons. Once a narrative critical of immigration is created and embedded in a broader narrative on the fragility of infrastructure and public services, the need for belt-tightening, and threatened national identity—as well as the purported dysfunctionality of responsible institutions perceived to be foreign to the common man (Brussels in the case of the UK, Washington in Donald Trump's America)—it becomes very difficult to reshape.

Conclusion

Brexit was about “taking back control”—voters showing their disdain simultaneously for Brussels and Westminster and, with gleeful transferred malice, for the City of London and Wall Street. It was, like Trumpism in America, about globalization and people getting left behind. But the power of the Leave campaign can be explained by the fact that it was not just about distant political institutions and secretive decision-making cabals, however derided or feared; it was about gut-wrenching issues like borders, culture, and the homeland. Remarkable to many

outsiders, the NHS is almost a religion in the UK; its “overstretching”—especially by foreigners—presented as a blasphemy. The Leave campaign presented shaky projections, embellished with dire predictions of the consequences that would result from “uncontrolled” immigration from existing and prospective EU members. The refugee crisis, a representation of Britain under attack, was latched on to this concern. The government’s commitment to an ideology of austerity meant that there was little or no wiggle room in the form of investment in public services and infrastructure to cope with population growth, which was uniformly presented as bad. With weak leadership from the Labour Party, these two strong signals—the perils of high immigration and the continued need for austerity—combined to carry the day.

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Figure 1: Official Vote Leave Campaign Poster



Source: Twitter

Notes

1 Figures are available at the supporting information tab at wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/pdr.

2 On the same day as the poster was launched, an assailant fatally stabbed and shot Labour MP Jo Cox, a vocal supporter of Syrian refugees and a prominent Remain campaigner. In court, when asked to give his name for the record, the accused murderer, Thomas Mair, responded “death to traitors, freedom for Britain” (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/18/jo-cox-murder-suspect-thomas-mair-told-police-he-was-political-activist>. Accessed 31 July 2016.). In response, Nigel Farage stated that “I wish an innocent MP had not been gunned down in the street.” Regarding the poster itself, he said “Frankly had that not happened I don’t think we would have had the kind of row over it” (Simons 2016).