Pluralism, National Identity and Citizenship: Britain after Brexit

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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 article 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. Postwar 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, and British Muslims have become particular objects of public and governmental suspicion.[1] Prominent figures have alleged that British multiculturalism allows minorities to prioritise their private commitments above their civic loyalties, thereby causing ghettoisation and a breakdown in social cohesion.[2] 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.[3] Multicultural, monocultural and perhaps even monoethnic interpretations of what it means to be British are in competition. The emotive nature of nationalism therefore 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.[4] Over 60 per cent of Scots voted Remain and recent polls indicate leaving the EU would lead to a significant increase in support for Scottish independence.[5] 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 among 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.[6] Nevertheless, it is surely undeniable that the economic and social rights granted during the postwar 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 supranational) 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 re-emphasise 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 while 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 debatable, 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 federalised 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, while posing additional constitutional and democratic problems.[7] In any event, we have argued elsewhere that the presumption that nations should be the primary units of liberal democracy is itself unsustainable.[8] 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. Organisations such as London Citizens have provided spaces for productive discussion at the local level and we must build on these efforts.[9] Such initiatives address deep cultural and religious differences more effectively than

government policies such as Prevent, which unhelpfully muddled community relations with counterterrorism. Britain should also embrace alternative forms of local or trans-local economic organisation. These might include promoting Community Interest Companies that fund and control matters such as local energy production and transport, emphasising 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.[10] Grass-roots organisation 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 cooperation 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.[11] 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 cooperation after a divisive campaign.[12] 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, and 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, legitimised—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 was 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 postwar European irenic and cosmopolitan project largely succeeded, but in the UK it is perceived to have primarily benefited already privileged groups. Likewise, the postwar 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 transformation of Britain since the Second World War 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, as 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 postwar 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 publicly 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.

Notes

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

2 For example D. Goodhart, 'Too diverse?', *Prospect*, no. 95, February 2004, 'National anxieties', *Prospect*, no. 123, June 2006, and *Progressive Nationalism*, London, Demos, 2006.

3 Contrast David Cameron's speech of 5 February 2011 (*New Statesman* blog 5 February 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 accessed 7 July 2016).

4 See *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 2, pp. 131–305 for a detailed discussion. See in particular 'England, Englishness and Brexit' by A. Henderson et al. (pp. 187–99), 'A question of culture or economics? Public attitudes to the European Union in Britain' by J. Curtice (pp.

209–18) and 'UK euroscepticism and the Brexit referendum' by S. Vasilopoulou (pp. 219–27). See also Lord Ashcroft, 'How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday … and why', 24 June 2016, http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/ (accessed 7 July 2016).

5 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 accessed 6 July 2016).

6 E. Thielemann and D. Schade, 'Buying into myths: free movement of people and immigration', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 2, pp. 139–47. See also S. Lister, 'Public services worries "drove immigration fears behind Brexit win"', *The Independent*, 2 July 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-public-services-worries-immigration-fears-eu-referendum-latest-a7115946.html (accessed 8 July 2016) and the 2015 British Social Attitude Survey, http://www.bsa-data.natcen.ac.uk/ (accessed 8 July 2016).

7 For a helpful discussion see A. Blick, *Federalism: The UK's Future?*, The Federal Trust, April 2016, http://fedtrust.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/FEDERALISM_THE_UKS_FUTURE.pdf (accessed 6 July 2016).

8 R. Ashcroft and M. 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.

9 For a helpful discussion see L. Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

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

11 For an overview 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*, https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/UK%20employment%20rights%20and%20the%20EU.pdf (accessed 8 July 2016).

12 British Future, '"Let EU migrants stay" say the British public, plus voices from business and politics', http://www.britishfuture.org/articles/15131/ (accessed 6 July 2016).