

The Brexit car crash: using EH Carr's What is History? to explain the result

Justin Frosini (Bocconi University) and Mark Gilbert (Johns Hopkins University) draw on EH Carr's seminal *What is History?* to consider the root causes of Brexit. They identify three key factors: a British preoccupation with parliamentary sovereignty, the role of the media and the impact of migration from Central Europe.

The Brexit vote was the result of a confluence of several social and political causes – though the debate over parliamentary sovereignty, which burst into flame when Britain applied to join the 'Common Market' and has never been doused since, permeated all of them. The prolonged debate over sovereignty is crucial, since it explains why 17.4 million British citizens not only voted to leave, but in many cases manifestly rejected the EU even as an ideal.



The State Opening of Parliament in December 2019, shortly before the UK left the EU. Photo: [UK Parliament](#). ©UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor

Why were so many British voters adamant that the EU was a superstate taking away fundamental rights? One answer might simply be that there are an awful lot of deluded nationalist bigots in Britain. But this is implausible. Brexit voters are ordinary, mostly lower middle and working class people who live in England's rural towns and villages, the industrial heartland, the ports. They are Victor Meldrews, not Viktor Orbans. They voted for both John Major and Tony Blair not so long ago. Yet millions of them *celebrated* when Britain voted to leave in 2016 (and again on Brexit night in January 2020). Why?

The June 2016 referendum result was a car crash waiting to happen. We do not use the metaphor casually, since the methodological frame for our paper was provided by EH Carr's use, in *What is History?*, of a road accident to explain historical causality. Carr examines the case of Robinson, who is knocked down while crossing at a blind corner where 'visibility is notoriously poor' by Jones, who is returning from a party where he has 'consumed more than his usual ration of alcohol', and is driving a car whose brakes are defective (Carr 1973: 104–5).

What is the cause of Robinson's death? Jones' drunkenness? The blind corner? The faulty brakes? The answer, of course, is that these causes fatefully combined. As Carr says, 'the historian deals in a multiplicity of causes' and the 'relative significance of one cause or one set of causes or of another, is the essence of (a historian's) interpretation' (Carr 1973: 103). Most historians do ultimately identify one cause or set of causes that 'in the final analysis' they regard as overriding in any particular case (Carr 1973: 90). In the case of Brexit, the sovereignty debate is ours.

Of course, chance and human agency played a part in the accident, too. Jones might have knocked someone else down five minutes earlier. Robinson ought to have looked right and left before he crossed the road. Carr insisted, however, that we should not waste excessive time on happenstance. Scholars should construct their explanations primarily around 'generalisable causes'. They should isolate the crucial socio-economic, intellectual, institutional, and political variables of any given case and suggest how they combined over time to produce a particular result.

The three generalisable causes that we concentrate on are

- (1) the deep-rooted conviction that EU membership was incompatible with the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty;
- (2) the role of the press;
- (3) mass migration into a society that was already experiencing serious problems with social injustice.

We emphasise that the Brexiters' slogan Take Back Control was a very effective way of summarising in plain English a 50-year debate about how entering the Common Market/European Union would adversely affect one of the pillars of the British constitutional system, i.e. parliamentary supremacy. Of course, this is not a debate unknown in other European countries (think of the judgment handed down by the German Federal Constitutional Court a few weeks ago), but it is particularly poignant in the UK because the sovereignty of Parliament has a similar significance to the British as postwar constitutions have for the Germans and Italians: though, of course, parliamentary sovereignty is centuries older and intrinsically bound up, for some, with a particular notion of British national identity. One of the huge paradoxes of Brexit, however, is that a campaign whose mainspring was giving back control to the British Parliament has damaged *parliamentary* sovereignty by enhancing *popular* sovereignty. In fact, mixing a classic representative democracy with an instrument of direct democracy such as a referendum gives rise to an unpalatable cocktail where the "taste" of direct democracy is overpowering. Whoever would have imagined the Daily Telegraph opening with the headline "Judges versus the people" after the famous High Court judgment concerning the triggering of Art. 50 TEU?

This leads us to the role of the press. We contend that, especially after the fall of Thatcher in 1990, the Eurosceptic press used a water torture method to disparage anything "European," be it the European Commission, the Court of Justice of the European Union, or even the European Court of Human Rights, which of course is not even an EU body. Though some headlines were amusing if you share the British sense of humour, they were part of a strategy to intimate that British freedom was in peril. In a nutshell, the tabloids played an important part in achieving Brexit by raising the profile of the issue of lost sovereignty with public opinion.

Large-scale migration, in particular from CEE countries following the 2004 enlargement, was grist to the mill. Many British people believed that their government and parliament no longer controlled their country's border. This sentiment was exploited during the referendum by an electoral poster, redolent of Nazi propaganda, showing an endless queue of refugees, and by fake news claims that Turkey was on the [brink of joining the EU](#). Again, however, the issue of EU migration was not a compartmentalised cause, but one that added fuel to the burning question of parliamentary supremacy. Brexit was perceived to be about the most fundamental question of politics: who rules?

The reference to fake news underlines a key element of contingency in the Brexit process. The Brexiters were more ruthless and more committed than the Remainers. Farage, Johnson and Gove were ideologues and Machiavels. The Cameron government, by contrast, was complacent about the result and fearful of the damage a Remain vote would have done to party unity. The campaign swung decisive votes to the Brexit camp.

We acknowledge that the weight of causation might be placed elsewhere. In *What is History?* Carr argued that historical interpretation is like looking at a mountain: it looks different from every angle of vision (Carr 1973: 26–27). Cultural causes such as the English habit of defining themselves against a continental 'Other' (Spiering 2014), or the role of imperial nostalgia both mattered. The strange death of British social democracy mattered too. We mention David Goodhart's emphasis on the cleavage between 'Somewheres' and 'Anywheres' (Goodhart 2017). These are all legitimate 'generalisable causes' which other scholars might weigh heavily in the balance.

We plead guilty to sketching the mountain from one angle in particular. But this angle is an important one, since the sense of liberation that many voters genuinely felt on 24 June 2016, and the tenacity with which Brexiters have since resisted compromise, is inexplicable unless you look at Brexit from this point of view.

References

Carr, EH (1973). *What is History?* London: Pelican.
Goodhart, D (2017). *The Road to Somewhere*, London: Penguin.
Spiering, M (2014). *A Cultural History of British Euroscepticism*, London: Palgrave.

*This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor LSE. It is based on Justin O Frosini and Mark F Gilbert, [The Brexit car crash: using EH Carr to explain Britain's choice to leave the European Union in 2016](#), *Journal of European Public Policy*.*