LSE Brexit: How do you tell the history of Brexit? A History of Brexit in 47 Objects

Page 1 of 3

How do you tell the history of Brexit? A History of Brexit in 47 Objects

How do you tell the history of Brexit? In the first of a nine-part series, **Tim Oliver** *(Loughborough University London) shows how 47 objects can tell the story of how Britain ended its 47 years of EU membership.*

How do you tell the history of something that's a live issue but with a long history stretching back decades, that's deeply divisive but can bore people, that pervades our lives (despite the best efforts of COVID-19) but which can often be abstract and distant? How, in other words, do we tell the history of Brexit?

It might be easier to imagine how several decades from now a history teacher or museum curator might try to portray Britain's attempts to end its 47 years of EU membership. Their goal will be to not only inform but to bring to life in an entertaining way the most controversial topic in Britain in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Interpreting the past and sensitive topics is, of course, a challenge regularly faced by all museums and historians. It was one faced by Neil MacGregor and his team at the British Museum when a decade ago BBC Radio 4 asked them to put together 'A History of the World in 100 Objects'.

Their 100 objects, selected from the millions held by the British Museum, not only broke down two million years of human history into digestible chunks. Being a radio series meant they also had to help listeners not only imagine the object but imagine the moment or change in human history from which it came and which it was chosen to represent.

As a result, their 100 objects brought to life peoples, cultures and, crucially, the ways in which human civilisation has developed. So successful was the series that the approach has been replicated to tell the history of everything from buildings to toys.

Can the same be done for Brexit? It's a vast topic and one that can be both abstract while having a very real effect on people's everyday lives. It's also about more than individual events or people because it's a set of complex and often unclear processes. It's also, like any history, prone to controversy over who won and whose perspective should prevail.

Before we pick any objects then, some rules similar to those set by Radio 4 for the British Museum are needed.

First, what's the timeframe and how many objects are needed to cover it? Brexit did not begin on the 23rd March 2016 and didn't end with withdrawal on the 31st January 2020. It, therefore, has no clear beginning or end. Better then to look back at the broader history. That could mean the 47 years of UK membership, but we need to go even further back and, in some cases, look to events after January 2020. A total of 47 objects, however, provides a symbolic number that's also large enough to be workable.

Second, what should the focus be? Brexit touches so much that it has to be a history of more than the rich and powerful, which is what history can often be about. It has to be about the whole UK and society, telling of the everyman and everywoman. But it can't stop there. It's also about Europe and in some instances it's about wider global changes. Nor can it be a Remain or a Leave history. History, as they say, is written by the victors. But the 52% vote for Leave was not an emphatic victory and it remains unclear who the winners and losers of Brexit – whether socially, politically, economically and so forth – will be.

Third, how can the history be divided? A history that's still very much alive needs more than a chronological approach. Instead, dividing the objects into different topics, periods and lessons will simplify what is a jumble of issues and timelines.

For that reason, the series is broken down into eight groups of objects. The first six tell the journey to 2016 with the next two sets of six objects exploring the history of why Leave won and Remain lost. Looking beyond 2016, the series will look at six objects about what Brexit has meant for the UK's unity and six more for what it has meant for Britain's many identities. But Brexit has always been about more than the UK. It is also a global saga, especially one about trade. Two sets of six objects will tell of this wider global story. Finally, Brexit has been driven and shaped by certain prime ministers, with the experiences of five premiers told through five objects.

Finally, what objects should be avoided? With Brexit it would be easy to go for signs for places affected or one of the multitude of reports or campaign leaflets written on the topic. But it's hard to tell a story through a functional sign or what are almost always dull documents. Better to have something more creative to fuel people's imaginations.

For that reason, we'll look at objects ranging from Margaret Thatcher's handbag to David Cameron's £25,000 shed, from a Wetherspoon's Brexit beermat to a MAGA hat, from bendy bananas to a blue passport.

What objects would you display to tell the history of Brexit? More importantly, what would they tell us? Send your suggestions to t.l.oliver@lboro.ac.uk

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.