

## A British exit would harm the EU's global credibility – and it could rip apart the Conservatives, too



*A British exit would have a devastating impact on the European Union and relegate it to a second-rank world power in the eyes of the global community. **John Ryan** argues that the Union would see its diplomatic power greatly diminished. Domestically, a Brexit would also further divide the Conservative party.*

The geopolitical impact of a Brexit had become a “forgotten dimension” of the EU debate. The EU would become far less important and its influence on foreign policy within the UN and in a wider global context would be diminished. The EU’s own internal power dynamics would also become fundamentally imbalanced: the political and institutional reverberations for the Union itself would be far greater than any economic fallout. The impact would be much greater than that of a possible Grexit, which also may happen over the next year. And then there is the danger of the domino effect. Britain’s exit would embolden other member states to consider their position within the EU.

The Westminster and Brussels media bubble coverage of the negotiations leading up to UK’s deal with the EU missed the point. Most of the issues that were under discussion will get limited coverage in the referendum campaign. The manufacturing of a drama played out in Brussels was classic hyperbole by British and European media – supplemented by official press releases, and not very convincing. What will feature is the EU migrant crisis. The general public are concerned about the millions of economic migrants leaving war zones today combined with the prospect of large-scale migration on the back of detrimental climate change. Migrant flows will only increase.

To many, the June 23 referendum on EU membership looks uncomfortably close. In the eyes of the British public, the EU will probably have a credibility problem as far as dealing with issues such as the Eurozone crisis and migrant crisis are concerned. There has been a hollowing of democracy in the west over the last few decades including in the EU and in the UK. As a result, European citizens are voting for radical left parties and rightwing nationalist parties in their millions. The three main groupings within the EU – namely the European People’s Party, socialists and social democrats and the liberals – have been losing votes over the last few years at an alarming rate.

### Why should this matter in Britain?

Europe’s crises have been very important factors in explaining the peaks and troughs in UK support for EU membership. Britain may be outside Schengen and the Eurozone, but the British public seems highly sensitive to political upheaval on the continent. As it stands, the referendum result is likely to be very tight and the campaign could be influenced by external economic shocks from China or Japan, or from a major German or Italian bank running into serious problems, any of which would accelerate the slowdown of the global economy.



A map of the world, showing the British Empire coloured in red at the end of the nineteenth century. Date: late 19th century

The outcome of the referendum will rest on whether each side of the debate can mobilise their supporters to vote. It is unfortunate that the negotiations and the referendum are being conducted in large parts to address the real divisions within the Conservative party about EU membership. It is odd, to say the least, that Boris Johnson is being put forward as an important player for Leave by some rightwing commenters when his track record on Europe and international affairs is thin, eccentric and ill-judged.

Nevertheless, it is important to put the issue of EU membership to the British people to decide. Anything can happen in the weeks to come. The campaign will be very dirty and probably not very informative. Passions, emotion and instincts will play a major role.

### **The British people may well give the political elite a proverbial kicking**

Cameron stated at the beginning of this process that Britain required a new settlement with the EU. This deal falls a long way short of his rhetoric. One of the legacies of the referendum could be the breakup of the Conservative party. The challenges facing the prime minister in maintaining the unity of his party is clear from a [Guardian survey](#) of constituency party members from across the country.

The focus of the media and of the political class since the Brussels deal has been on how the cabinet would split and on Johnson's decision to campaign to leave. The Guardian survey of local Conservative associations emphasises the very dangerous divisions at grassroots level among the Conservatives. A divisive debate within the Conservative party about the deal by Cameron, especially on sovereignty and control of borders could also see members defecting to join Ukip, especially if Leave wins. Cameron and his party will face a very difficult time through the EU referendum campaign, which is essentially self-inflicted.

Cameron has taken a strong stance with his government setting out their position in favour of Remain. But the future of the Conservative party looks ominous. The Punch and Judy show of Dave and Boris will cause untold damage to the Conservatives, and a divided party will struggle to maintain its authority in government after the vote.

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

Professor [John Ryan](#) is a Fellow at [LSE Ideas](#) (International Strategy and Diplomacy).