

Abused in the street, invited to a Brexit BBQ: the limbo of being German in the UK

blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/03/07/abused-in-the-street-invited-to-a-brexit-bbq-the-limbo-of-being-german-in-the-uk/

07/03/2017

*An EU citizen is an EU citizen, writes **Tanja Bueltmann**, and the government has made it abundantly clear that we are all in limbo until a deal to secure our rights is negotiated with the EU – if such a deal can be done. Politicians have chosen not to oppose the wave of xenophobia sweeping across the country, but to indulge those Leave supporters who want to cherry-pick who stays and who goes.*



No, I was not surprised by the outcome of the EU referendum. It simply confirmed something I had been certain of for months: that xenophobic populism and lies would win the day. While I campaigned strongly for Remain – I could have been wrong, after all – I was thus, in a sense, very well prepared for the morning after. There were no tears. There was no sense of shock. I knew the Leave victory was coming and that was that.

What I was not prepared for was what happened on Saturday after the referendum. There I was, doing some shopping in Newcastle city centre – only to walk straight into [National Front members holding a banner](#) that read ‘Stop immigration, start repatriation’. That banner was not new, but the group behind it was clearly seizing the moment. Energised by the Leave result, they shouted that everyone from the EU would be kicked out. Their hate-filled chants are still stuck in my head.

A good 30 minutes later I walked down the street where I live, and ran into my neighbour. Smiling, he said hello, as always, and then proceeded to invite me to a barbecue. How nice of him, I found myself thinking. We had always got on well, but this was a first. ‘What’s the occasion?’ I asked. ‘Oh, we’re just celebrating that we are finally out of the EU – a Brexit celebration BBQ’.



An anti-Brexit demo in Berlin, July 2016. Photo: [Elly Clarke](#). Public domain

I was stunned. He knew that I am German. So I told him that I would not be able to come, as Brexit really was not something I would ever celebrate. As an EU national living in the UK, I said, the vote had pulled the rug from under my feet and would severely impact upon my life. My neighbour looked surprised, and went on to say that I was not the problem, of course. That he wasn’t against me being there, of course. No, I would be fine, of course.

This has been one of the most pervading themes of my life since that day: the idea that, somehow, there is a difference between EU nationals; that, somehow, those perceived as ‘the good ones’ would not be affected by the

vote to leave the EU. As I have noted [elsewhere](#), you don't get to cherry-pick. In fact, I take it as a personal insult if someone tries. An EU national is an EU national. Full stop. We will all be affected in the same way. We are in the same boat. In fact, it is the same boat as those of the Britons who live in another EU country. And even of Britons in the UK who have a partner who is from the EU. All of us have been living in Limboland since 24 June.

And it is largely hostile. With lies and xenophobia the central hallmarks of the Leave campaign, it is hardly surprising that the number of [hate crimes went up](#) in the aftermath of the vote. There are [warnings](#) already that another spike is expected after the triggering of Article 50. A few months ago I walked down the street talking to my mother on the phone. I spoke German. I was told to 'f- off back to your country' by a bystander. Never before 2016, never once, has any such thing happened. But I probably imagined that – or so many Leave supporters gladly tell me all the time. Instead of standing up to this hate that is spreading across the country, more and more politicians have jumped onto the populist bandwagon, repeating Leave's lies on the apparent connections between immigration and a broad range of problems in Britain, from housing shortages to GP waiting times. These are connections for which there is essentially no evidence, but many politicians keep making them. The Labour MP and candidate for mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, went so far as to [argue](#) that free movement was 'undermining the cohesion of our communities and the safety of our streets'. Politicians who say things like that are playing with fire. It is their rhetoric too, not just that of the likes of Nigel Farage, that [fuels hate](#).

What all this rhetoric is telling me is that I do not belong here. I am foreign, and now frequently described as a foreigner. This, too, is something that never happened before 2016; not to me, anyway. From newspaper front pages to Lord Tebbit's [comments](#) in the recent discussion in the House of Lords, the casting of EU nationals as foreigners who do not belong is now a daily occurrence.

Why is that so? For one, because the UK government is keeping us EU nationals in Limboland. Having made us bargaining chips in the Brexit negotiations, we are reminded every day that we are not seen as part of this country. Apart from the immediate and very negative impact this has on individuals and families across the UK, it also empowers racists who, in the absence of any guarantees, can continue to spin their hateful lines that we will be deported. Even initiatives that highlight our contributions, particularly One Day Without Us, received only limited coverage in the British media, and was essentially [hijacked by an anti-Trump protest](#). EU nationals were not given a voice in the referendum, and even now, as our lives continue to be in limbo, our voices are silenced.

Of course the [amendment](#) recently passed in the House of Lords and the [report](#) of the House of Commons Select Committee on Exiting the EU are very welcome. But in many ways the damage has been done. And that is because although the UK government keeps saying that all it wants to do is guarantee the rights of EU nationals, it has failed to do so in the more than 250 days since the referendum. Not only that, it made us bargaining chips in the negotiations, and sent some of us letters telling us to prepare to leave the UK. And it requires anyone wanting to confirm permanent residency – for instance in order to get British citizenship – to fill in an 85-page form, with 28% of applications [rejected](#).

These are very clear messages. And they are messages EU nationals in the UK hear daily. Life as we knew it is gone. The question that remains is this: how many of us will take back control ... and leave Limboland?

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

Tanja Bueltmann is an Associate Professor in History and Acting Head of Department at the University of Northumbria.

- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics