

# They did things differently there: how Brexiteers appealed to voters' nostalgia

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/07/13/they-did-things-differently-there-how-brexiteers-appealed-to-voters-nostalgia/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/07/13/they-did-things-differently-there-how-brexiteers-appealed-to-voters-nostalgia/)

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*Most referendums ask voters whether they want to join a political project. Britain's EU referendum did the opposite. **Elliott Green** argues the campaigning was suffused by appeals to nostalgia and to a past in which Britain "took control", and identifies four groups of voters to whom this message appealed.*



Now the dust has settled a bit on last month's vote, we should reflect on the deep conflicts it revealed about sort of nation the UK's people would like it to be. One little-noted fact is that the referendum asked voters about leaving or retreating from a political project. Most referendums do the opposite. The vast majority of modern [national referendums](#) are about undertaking a new project, whether joining the EU, approving a new constitution or constitutional amendments, becoming a republic or an independent state. In these cases, the referendums invited countries to take a step forward into a new future – one in which life would be better than it had been before.



At a 1940s event in 2015. Photo: [David Guyler](#) via a [CC-BY-2.0 licence](#)

In contrast, the Brexit vote was a choice between the status quo or returning to what the UK looked like before it joined the European Community in 1973. This was a very rare example of giving voters an option to go back to the past, rather than the future, and it was explicitly sold as such by the Leave campaign. The common phrase used by Brexit supporters was "take back control" (in addition to "take control"), with an implicit appeal to the idea of returning the UK to what it looked like before it joined the EU. Boris Johnson similarly [talked about](#) the UK's "loss of sovereignty," with the implicit idea that the UK's sovereignty would be "regained" if voters chose to leave the EU. Nigel Farage [also campaigned](#) on the slogan that "we want our country back" – again, yet another clear call for returning to an unmentioned, halcyon past before the UK was overloaded by EU bureaucracy and European immigrants.

Far from appealing solely to a narrow group of anti-EU activists, these calls for returning to the past were directed at a variety of voters – in particular four overlapping groups of people:

1) **Imperialist nostalgists.** In 1973, the UK had only recently given up its Empire and still clung on to some of its smaller colonies like Belize and Hong Kong. The memory of the imperial past was quite fresh. Indeed, in the 1975 referendum to confirm Britain's membership in the then European Economic Community, one of the major No campaigners was Enoch Powell, famous not only for his "Rivers of Blood" speech but also for his earlier ambitions to

become Viceroy of India, while other No supporters [argued](#) that the UK should focus on its links with the post-imperial Commonwealth, rather than Europe. This nostalgia is [still present](#) today among the Brexit supporters, and it is not specific to the UK: the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party, for instance, has arguably drawn upon imperial nostalgia, as have Marine Le Pen and the Front National in France.

2) **Racists.** A huge amount of ink has already been spilt on how anti-immigrant racism contributed to the Leave victory, and one can easily see how invoking a Britain before mass immigration would encourage people to vote for leaving the EU. Indeed, the sharp rise in racist attacks after the referendum has included [shouts](#) of “make Britain white again,” despite the fact that leaving the EU will probably see a rise, not a fall, in non-white immigrants to the UK. Here again, there is nothing specifically British in this regard: just take a look across the Atlantic to Donald Trump, whose rise to power has been [built](#) largely on the support of white Americans with racist, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim attitudes, and whose major catchphrase is ‘Make America Great Again,’ not ‘Make America Great’.

3) **Non-racist and non-imperialist nationalists.** Scholars of nationalism such as [Anthony Smith](#) have long pointed out that nationalists commonly believe in the concept of a ‘golden age’ of the nation, such that their goal is to return their nation to its glorious past and revive it from its slumber. In many cases this ‘golden age’ is often set in the ancient past, but it need not be so distant. Indeed, for many British nationalists the golden age is World War II, when the UK resisted the Nazis and won a bloody war over great odds. Of course, World War II has long featured as a major feature in British national identity, and thus it was not surprising that references to the war [featured](#) prominently in the Leave campaign. Indeed, many Brexit supporters, including one 81-year old woman whom I met before the vote, cited Britain’s ability to ‘go it alone’ in World War II as a reason why it could survive outside the EU today, while others such as Boris Johnson compared the EU to Hitler and Napoleon.

4) **Older voters.** The Brexit referendum [exposed](#) a generational split in the UK. Age was one of the most important correlates of voting for Leave. What was surprising about this support for Brexit among older voters was that, in general, they tend to be [risk averse](#) as regards political change. However, in this instance they had a rare chance to vote to return to the UK of yesteryear, which in some cases certainly provoked nostalgia not only for what the UK looked like before 1973 but also what they themselves looked like. Mixing up happy memories of one’s youth with memories of society as whole is not uncommon: in [one study](#) conducted among elderly Roma in Bulgaria and Hungarians in Romania, the former group had much less attachment to the past on both a general and a personal level. Arguably, this difference lies in the fact that Romanian Hungarians can look back positively to a period when they were still part of Hungary and not an ethnic minority in another country, while the Roma have no comparable happy past to recall. This last point can also help to explain at least part of the strong support for the Remain camp in Northern Ireland and Scotland, inasmuch as the period prior to 1973 evokes the Troubles for the former and a period before devolution and the discovery of North Sea oil for the latter.

The one silver lining in this analysis is that, if another referendum were to be held again but with different wording, it is likely that the UK would vote differently. More specifically, if the question posed was not one of leaving the EU and implicitly returning the UK to what it looked like in 1973, but instead asked voters’ opinions about the specifics of the UK’s relationship with the EU going forward, then appeals to history would be much less salient. Whether or not there is a second vote on Brexit, one hopes that future referendums will be worded in such a way that encourages voters to think more about the future than the past.

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

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