Is nationalism to blame for the post Brexit vote divisions?

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The EU referendum was intended to answer, once and for all, the thorny question of Britain's relationship with the European Union. But instead it has brought to the fore many even more fundamental questions. The status of Scotland within the United Kingdom is once again a pressing issue. Concern is growing over the open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and with it the future of the Good Friday Agreement. The divide in values and outlook between a prosperous greater London and the rest of England, itself underscored by longstanding economic disparities, has become a looming chasm. **Jennifer Jackson-Preece** *explains whether nationalism is to blame for these divisions?*

Much of this was anticipated. Such divisions have become increasingly visible in British politics over the last two years. Here one can point to the Scottish Independence Referendum in September 2014, the Rochester and Strood parliamentary by-election triggered by then sitting Conservative MP Mark Reckless' defection to UKIP in November 2014, and of course the May 2015 General Election.

The stark generational divide brought to the fore by the EU referendum result was a surprise. A clear majority of those voters aged 49 and under backed Remain. Older voters supported Leave. The youngest voters were the strongest backers of Remain. A whopping 75% of those aged 24 and under want a future inside the EU.

Post referendum, this is not a country united under a common vision of a future outside the EU. This is a country deeply divided: by geography, by economic opportunity, by age, by race and ethnicity, and above all, by values. The election results speak volumes: 52% Leave to 48% Remain. And that schism at the heart of the United Kingdom is not going away anytime soon. Here the trending Twitter hashtags tell a powerful story: #outisout, #notinmyname, #whathavewedone, #votedLeave, #votedremain.

Those who voted Leave look to have done so out of distrust for political elites and institutions in Brussels and in Westminster, deprivation caused by globalisation, and fear of migration. Those who voted Remain seem to have a more positive attitude towards globalisation, and with it the European Union. But many Remain supporters also believe migration must be better managed. These various positions were visible in my initial analysis of the referendum campaign on Twitter. And they are echoed in the many traditional media articles, opinions and comments before and after June 23.

While the recent EU referendum can be read as a chapter in a British story, populist sentiments of this sort have been growing across the European Union. The 2014 European Parliamentary Elections saw significant gains for Eurosceptic and far right parties. The French Prime Minister called these European Elections a 'political earthquake'. The day after the EU Referendum, Marine Le Pen changed her social media profile photograph to a Union Jack. Her demand: a Frexit to follow Brexit. Early warning tremors of more political instability still to come?

Meanwhile in Britain, the political landscape has yet to stop shaking. The referendum campaign was British politics at its worse. Twitter confirms it only served to increase distrust in politicians, a view now widely shared amongst the British electorate on both sides of the referendum divide. Post-referendum turmoil in both the governing Conservative Party and the official opposition Labour Party adds to this distrust. The volume of chatter on social and traditional media over who will lead each party in the coming months is huge.

How can a state so fundamentally divided move forward to address the biggest political challenge of a generation? Undoubtedly, the rights and interests of both Leave and Remain must be included in any Brexit negotiations. But just who will speak for whom is uncertain.

Could Boris Johnson reasonably claim a mandate to speak for the 52%? Probably. But a prime ministerial

appointment chosen only by the Conservative party is not the strongest basis from which to lead the country in what will surely be a long and difficult negotiation.

Could Jeremy Corbyn reasonably claim a mandate to speak for the 48%? With difficulty. His lukewarm support for the Remain campaign calls this ability into question. For this reason, as I write, Corbyn is the target of a Shadow Cabinet coup.

Only the Liberal Democrats have unequivocally declared as a national pro-EU party in Westminster post-referendum. Thousands have joined the 'LibDems' in the first few days post-Brexit, answering Tim Ferron's call to 'stand with the 48%'.

Cameron has assured that all devolved authorities, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and the Greater London Assembly, will have a role to play in the Brexit negotiations. The two largest demographic concentrations of Remain voters, Scotland and London, have respectively Nicola Sturgeon and Saddiq Khan to advocate on their behalf. Both Sturgeon and Khan are currently the focus of much traditional and social media attention. From this, it appears that Sturgeon and Khan may well find the 48%, wherever they live, looking to them for leadership and direction.

Cameron has also said there would be a role for other regional governments, perhaps because the referendum vote was conducted through local district councils rather than parliamentary constituencies. As a result, districts voting Leave have MPs committed to Remain. Indeed, the majority of MPs are Remain supporters. The opposite is also true. District councils voting overwhelmingly to Remain (as in St Albans City & District voting 62.7% Remain or Hertfordshire North voting 54.4% Remain) find themselves represented in Parliament by an MP committed to the opposite position (in these examples, by Anne Main, MP for the St Albans constituency and by Peter Lilley, MP for the Harpenden & Hitchin constituency, both declared Leave).

How these many incongruities will result in a political voice for Leave and Remain voters during the negotiations is an open question. Do we need a Brexit government? A pro-EU opposition? A government of national unity? Each has been suggested.

More fundamentally, does a negotiated Brexit require an explicit popular mandate beyond that provided by the EU referendum of 23 June? David Cameron has said a second referendum is 'not remotely on the cards.' Nevertheless, more than three million apparently bona fide voters have signed an online petition calling for precisely that. According to the law, this petition must now be debated in Westminster.

Meanwhile, Labour MP David Lammy has said Parliament should 'stop this madness' and vote against a Brexit. According to Lammy, the referendum was 'advisory' and so 'non-binding'. The Lammy position is not widely shared in Parliament. But there is an emerging consensus amongst politicians and pundits that a snap General Election before the end of 2016 is increasingly likely. Referendum round two, by another name perhaps?

And all this before one even begins to consider the millions who stood apart from the referendum, excluded by the European passports that brought them to these shores. The many European citizens who live and work in the United Kingdom, contribute to British society and economy – in the NHS, in education, in finance, in transport, in construction, in the hospitality industry, in essential if less than glamorous public services like waste collection & recycling, the list goes on. They are still here. For now, they have a legal entitlement to live and work under EU rules. Cameron has promised such arrangements will not change anytime soon. But their future status is ambiguous, subject to the outcome of Brexit negotiations.

Is nationalism to blame for these divisions?

If there was a decisive issue that swung the undecided towards Leave, it was surely migration. In answer to that key question 'why is Britain leaving the EU', I would be inclined to paraphrase former American President Bill Clinton: 'It's migration, stupid!'

But it would be wrong to conclude that widespread xenophobic nationalism has rent the United Kingdom asunder. The outpouring of public contempt for the now infamous Farage campaign poster contradicts any such claim. Leave supports have joined Remain supporters in denouncing racism in all its forms. David Cameron's first speech to Parliament post referendum affirmed the value of toleration while condemning the recent defacing of a Polish community centre as a hate crime.

Cosmopolitan, multicultural Britain still thrives in London, even while English working class pride in the Cross of St George flourishes in the North and East of England, and the Saltire flies high in Scotland. In other words, the post-referendum situation within the United Kingdom is complex. A simple xenophobic nationalism type argument cannot do it justice.

Nationalism is an ideology that asserts that humanity is divided into nations, and that nations ought properly to form the basis of independent sovereign states. Whether the nation itself is ethnic or civic, inclusive or exclusive, a creation of modernity or something deeply rooted in a distant past is much debated, and not just in academia. There are many such nationalisms active in Britain today, running across the full spectrum of possibilities from cosmopolitan, tolerant and outward looking to parochial, intolerant and inward looking. The Leave campaign's 'take back control' rhetoric does not encompass them all.

What we see in the United Kingdom post EU referendum is more than just a power vacuum, more than just political and economic uncertainty; it is a country in existential crisis. The crucial question that must now be answered is what kind of a country this shall be. The EU referendum has laid bare several different Britains, each seeking different futures. It is far from clear how, or even if, all of these different futures will be reconciled.

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

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