Aberystwyth et son amour: talking to locals in the UK's most Europhile town

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/03/21/aberystwyth-et-son-amour-talking-to-locals-in-the-uks-most-europhile-town/

Is Aberystwyth, a small town in West Wales, really as Europhile as the recent YouGov polling suggests? **Sarah Trotter** *and* **Nick Morgan**, *two PhD researchers who grew up there, returned to the town to ask locals about the prospect of a Brexit.*

Aberystwyth, a small town nestled away on the coast of West Wales, has recently been making a name for itself in the national news. Although the polls indicate that Wales, on the whole, is now leaning towards a 'leave' vote in the upcoming EU referendum, Ceredigion, which is the county of Aberystwyth, has recently been described as the most Europhile area in Britain. For the past couple of weeks, Aberystwyth, which is the largest town in Ceredigion, has consequently featured regularly in the news, most notably pitted against Romford – deemed the most Eurosceptic place in Britain in a recent piece in The Guardian. That Ceredigion emerges in such a way in the data is not particularly surprising, perhaps; as Matthew Goodwin has pointed out elsewhere, University towns – and Ceredigion has two (Aberystwyth and Lampeter) – tend to lean towards the 'remain' vote. Aberystwyth is a prime candidate for this tendency: it has a population of 13,000, but is joined by 10,000 students who are in town for the nine months of the academic year. The university consequently plays a significant role in Aberystwyth itself and in the local economy more generally.

Photo: Matthew Hartley via a CC Attribution-Share-Alike 2.0 licence

But nevertheless, this possible 'university-factor' explanation notwithstanding – and we might also note, as potential contributing factors to the 'pro-EU' position, that west Wales benefits heavily from EU structural funding, and its farming industry depends on EU subsidies – it would be interesting, we thought, to see what the word on the street about Brexit actually is in Aberystwyth. So on Saturday 12 March we spent a few hours talking to 104 passers-by of voting age in the town centre about what the EU means to them, the upcoming referendum, and the perceived likely implications for Wales of a possible Brexit.

"I'm on the first plane to Mars if we leave" (M, 55-64)

Of those passers-by who were willing to participate, 66 per cent were in favour of the UK remaining a member of the EU (36 men and 33 women), 20 per cent were in favour of a 'leave' vote (15 men and 6 women), and 14 per cent were undecided (4 men and 10 women). Of the 25 University students who spoke to us, 21 were in favour of remaining, 3 were undecided, and 1 favoured a 'leave' vote.

Those who were pro-Remain conceived of the EU largely by reference to two closely related narratives. One was about interdependence and a sense of belonging, be this in terms of free movement, common values (including human rights), cultural identity, security, collective goods (such as protection of the environment), or the stability of retaining the status quo. The other narrative was more specifically about the EU as conceived through the lens of Welsh national interest, whether in terms of economic interest (principally for the farming industry), minority language interest (that Welsh is better-protected by the EU than it would otherwise be), and strategic interest (that the EU presents a platform for the assertion of 'Welsh' interest). Among these participants, the perceived implications for Wales of a possible Brexit fell into three categories. The first, and by far the most dominant concern, was that Brexit would entail economic insecurity, chaos, and isolation (including for the UK more generally), especially for more rural regions such as Ceredigion and in particular for farmers.

This is in keeping with the prevailing concern in Wales; First Minister Carwyn Jones warned a few months ago that the Welsh farming industry would "effectively come to an end" in the event of a Brexit, and the Farmers' Union of Wales has recently described the prospect of Brexit as "a dangerous step into the unknown". The second common concern was that a Brexit vote would leave Wales dominated by England, not only in economic terms, but also in terms of governance more broadly. Finally, some participants suggested that Brexit could ultimately lead to Welsh independence, although it was also acknowledged that it would "be hard to govern a country like Wales without much guidance" (F, 18-24).

"We should make a stand; this was a great nation years ago…" (M, 65-74)

If that was the view of the majority of the passers-by who were willing to speak to us, what then of the 20 per cent who were in favour of a 'leave' vote? A third of these said that the EU meant nothing or not much to them, and for those for whom it did mean something, this 'something' was negative in nature. Concerns not only went to the questionable democratic credentials of the EU, and to the topic of immigration (perceived negatively), but the EU was, moreover, essentially cast as an interfering, controlling, rule-producing, bureaucratic, expensive, distant entity. Or as one participant put it: "an expensive bureaucratic gravy train" (M, 65-74). The perceived implications for Wales of a possible Brexit were antithetical to this, and cast in a positive light, including by those who claimed to have voted in favour of continued EU membership in the 1975 referendum; the possibility of Brexit, for these participants, was the promise of freedom, more independence, greater say in decision-making, increased competition, and less money going out of Wales. A few participants did, however, suggest that Brexit would entail little, if any, change: "we'll still be poorer as usual – we need to invest more in Wales", commented one (M, 65-74), alluding to the fact that west Wales remains amongst the poorest regions in Britain and indeed in western Europe.

The Eurosceptic views of the pro-Leave voters were not all that different to the views of the 14 undecided voters, who voiced concerns primarily about what they perceived to be the bureaucracy, restrictions, and cost represented by EU membership. A few participants did, however, also acknowledge the benefits that Wales derives from the UK's EU membership: "we get everything from there and we need it", said one (F, 18-24); "Wales receives more than it gives", added another (F, 35-44).

A more complicated picture in practice?

Although it is not possible to draw conclusions from such a small and informal investigation, what did emerge was that the picture in Aberystwyth is far more complicated in practice than has perhaps appeared to be the case as of late in the media. The 'Europhile' case presented to us by the passers-by we spoke to was substantially based on fear about the implications of Brexit, and particularly for two acute 'Welsh concerns': structural funding and farming

subsidies. The 'Eurosceptic' case presented to us was meanwhile substantially based on a conception of freedom wherein Wales would be freed from purportedly distant regulation, interference, and bureaucracy.

But the most striking outcome, perhaps, was the number of those who were unwilling (or deemed themselves unable) to participate on the grounds of being uninterested in either 'the EU' or 'politics', and who were unfamiliar with the term 'Brexit'. The frequency with which this came through, notwithstanding the substantial role that EU funding, in particular, plays in Wales, indicates that for many, the EU still appears to be a distant entity, with 'Wales and the question of Brexit' not necessarily having any particular bearing on everyday life.

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

Sarah Trotter is a PhD researcher at the LSE Law Department. Her research is in EU law and European human rights law and looks at how being is ordered in Europe.

Nick Morgan is a PhD researcher in the International Politics Department at Aberystwyth University. He is conducting research into Welsh national identities and governmentality in Wales.

- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics