

The view from East Anglia: Brexit messages to Theresa May

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2017-6-1

What do the public in East Anglia, where both Leave (in rural Lincolnshire) and Remain (in Cambridge) polled strongly, want from Brexit? **Catherine Barnard** (left) and **Amy Ludlow** held public engagement events in school halls, community centres, prisons and market squares in parts of Lincolnshire, Norfolk, and Cambridgeshire in early 2017. They found a striking degree of moderate consensus: a desire for Single Market access with a rebalanced free movement of people. That said, despite Theresa May's claim that the country is coming together, discussions revealed deep wounds and a divided society, generationally and geographically.



'I don't feel as scared about the future now as I did immediately after the referendum, but it does feel like the calm before the storm. Like we are all being lulled into a false sense that things will be alright.' (Participant at Boston Grammar School, Lincolnshire)



Most of our engagement events finished with discussion about the messages people would like to send to Theresa May and her Government. From this, emerged helpful insights into how participants were currently feeling.

First, regret was expressed, in some places on both sides of the debate, about how the referendum campaign had been conducted. There was a sense among participants that the tone of the referendum debate and, in the case of some Remain voters also its outcome, had damaged or diminished the UK's international standing. As one participant in Holt put it:

'A little bit of the light of the beacon of Britain has gone out.'



Wednesday market in Boston, 2009. Photo: [Dave Hitchborne](#) via a [CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

Some participants, especially those living in communities where many EU nationals also live, reported feeling embarrassed or awkward about the referendum outcome. This was especially the case in Cambridge, and in Boston, where one schoolteacher said:

'There are lots of Eastern European children at my school. I feel that the Brexit outcome has betrayed them. It feels awkward and difficult and embarrassing.'

Many participants were concerned about racism or bad feeling among groups from different countries within their communities. One participant in Holt described the UK post-referendum as 'Divided Britain'. In this context, some felt it important to emphasise the valuable contributions of people who come to the UK from other countries, arguing, for example, that 'British success is built on migrants' or that 'Eastern Europeans are some of the hardest working people I know'. Some also shared stories of where they had been told negative things about a group of non-nationals and, through direct personal experience, had come to see those things as unfounded. For example, in Peterborough, one man told us that he had been 'told that Poles are racist but then I lived next door to one and liked him and so we used to go to the gym together'.

We did not find evidence of significant concern about hostility from the local population among the recently arrived non-nationals in the English as a Foreign Language class. One of the students at the class who had lived in the UK for a year said that he had 'never felt unwelcome in the UK'. When we asked why, he said 'Unlike people who live here I can just go home if things get too bad.' This may suggest that the views of EU nationals who have lived in the UK for longer periods are likely to be less positive. There was clear consensus and strong feeling across all of our engagement activities that the Government should act quickly to protect the rights of EU nationals who were already resident and working in the UK. Counterintuitively perhaps, we were told in Boston that the town had been able to secure additional funding for improvement:

'Boston got the label of being the most racist town in Britain. Weirdly the Brexit vote has generated a platform, given us some leverage to get some positive change and investment.'

Second, there was generally significant anxiety among our participants. Some anxiety was about uncertainty and the 'eerie quietness' that had 'descended' since the referendum decision. One participant in Boston described it as 'like the calm before the storm' and 'like [...] being lulled into a false sense that things will be alright'. In addition to concerns about harmonious community relations, specific anxieties were raised about Ireland, and the possibility of renewed conflict there, and about the disintegration of the UK, in light of the strength of the Remain vote in Scotland. There was also real concern about the cost of Brexit and whether this had been accounted for. As one participant in Peterborough put it:

'We're on our arse as a country. It's costing money for all this Brexit carry on. Who is counting the cost of that?'

There was strong and widespread appetite for continued engagement by politicians as important decisions are made moving forward.

Third, beyond anxiety, we also found anger and resentment. This was expressed by some of the 48% who voted Remain, but it was most strongly expressed by young people. Many of the young people we met expressed anger because a decision had been taken over which they had no say, but with which they would have to live for the rest of

their lives. As one (German) student in Holt put it:

'How can it be that a 12-year-old who will be living this future gets no say but an 85-year-old who won't be here much longer is allowed to make their choice?'

Another student in Cambridge argued:

'My options and my future have been ignored by people who voted out. People who will be dead in a few years were allowed a say, but I wasn't as someone who is going to have to live with these decisions for the rest of my life.'

Though some young people saw the benefits of listening to the older generation who could remember a time when the UK was not part of the EU, or when the EU did not exist, many were frustrated as what many saw as a decision motivated by a 'backwards-looking nostalgia for something that never really existed.'

This is an extract from [Unravelling and reimagining the UK's relationship with the EU: Public engagement about Brexit in the East of England](#). It represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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