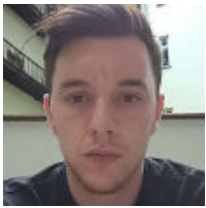


Brexit and the mainstreaming of the British far right



*In an extract from his new book **English Uprising: Brexit and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right**, **Paul Stocker (Teesside University)** looks at the role Vote Leave's inaccurate claim that Turkey was about to join the EU, and its 'Breaking Point' poster, had on the tone of the referendum campaign. It sought to link immigration with terrorism, and in particular with the refugee crisis on the EU's borders.*

Given the right-wing political culture which had been developing in Britain for years, immigration was always likely to be a central issue of the EU referendum. Speaking in January 2017, Labour MP Dan Jarvis told me: 'The debate on immigration leading up to and during the EU referendum unleashed a range of political forces. As a part of that, things were said and language was used much more commonly than has been heard in this country for generations.' Most significantly, in terms of people's attitude to immigrants and those of different races and religions. Jarvis was candid:

'The currency of our national debate feels to me far less tolerant than it was even a year ago, and certainly a couple of years ago. The risk for those of us who are concerned about that is that it becomes a truth, an accepted wisdom – a normality.'

I now want to focus on how Brexit, arguably the greatest ever political achievement of the radical right in Britain, was achieved within this fetid atmosphere.

The referendum began much like a general election – with the focus on the economy, namely the financial impact of leaving the EU. When the official Vote Leave campaign recognised this was an issue they could not conceivably win on, considering the swell of business opinion against Brexit, the debate dramatically shifted to immigration. Yet the campaign would not be dominated by Nigel Farage but by mainstream figures in the Conservative Party – Boris Johnson and Michael Gove – who lined up to attack their own government's record on immigration.



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Vote Leave made immigration an issue with an open letter signed by, among others, Gove and Johnson. The letter was a direct attack on David Cameron's government, asserting that the failure to meet their target of cutting immigration to the tens of thousands was 'corrosive of public trust'. It also sought to link immigration with terrorism, claiming it was 'bad for security' as well as for the migrant crisis, stating that 'the EU's policies are failing in humanitarian terms . . . a vote to remain is a vote for the UK to continue supporting the EU's failed policies to deal with the tragic crisis in the Mediterranean'. This ambiguous statement clearly had very little to do with Britain's membership of the EU, given the UK's exemption from EU asylum rules. It was designed to link EU membership with all forms of migration – asylum, refugees and economic migration – from both the Middle East and the EU.

More evidence of this strategy comes from Vote Leave's consistent but erroneous scaremongering over Turkey's bid to join the European Union. One billboard, coloured bright red, blared: 'Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU', alongside an illustration of footsteps leading through a door shaped like a British passport. A leaflet showed a map of countries 'set to join the EU', again coloured in red. All the other countries were greyed out except Iraq and Syria, which were shaded in pink. This was clearly designed to link freedom of movement with Turkey, a Muslim country, as well as Iraq and Syria, fellow Muslim countries, which had seen untold turmoil and were home to ISIS.

Another poster, which exploited a proposed visa-free travel arrangement between the EU and Turkey (which Britain wasn't even part of, as it isn't in the Schengen Area), claimed 'Britain's new border is with Syria and Iraq'. Defence Minister Penny Mordaunt stated that Britain did not have a veto over Turkish membership, which was completely false. David Cameron responded by arguing, 'It is not remotely on the cards that Turkey is going to join the EU any time soon. They applied in 1987. At the current rate of progress, they will probably get round to joining in about the year 3000 according to the latest forecasts.'

Vote Leave argued that Turkey would bring little other than crime and death in the event that it achieved EU membership. They argued that it would

'create a number of threats to UK security. Crime is far higher in Turkey than the UK. Gun ownership is also more widespread. Because of the EU's free movement laws, the government will not be able to exclude Turkish criminals from entering the UK.'

Farage, not to be outdone, would go down in infamy for the most inflammatory exploitation of immigration and the migrant crisis during the EU referendum. On the morning of 16 June, he unveiled a poster which showed swathes of desolate looking Muslim refugees arriving in columns on the trail through Slovenia into Croatia. Below, it said: 'Breaking point – the EU has failed us all', and 'we must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders'. The poster was clearly designed to give the impression that swathes of brown-skinned foreigners were trekking towards Britain's 'open borders'.

The 'Breaking Point' poster disgusted people on both the Remain and Leave sides. Yvette Cooper compared it to Nazi propaganda. Even Michael Gove said he 'shuddered' when he saw it. The poster, however, will also be remembered for what happened later on the day of its unveiling. Jo Cox, Member of Parliament for Batley and Spen, a Remain campaigner and an advocate of migrants' rights, was stabbed and shot by an extreme right terrorist outside her constituency surgery and died later that day. The attacker, Thomas Mair, was heard by onlookers to have shouted 'Put Britain first.' When he arrived in court for the first time he gave his name as 'death to traitors, freedom for Britain'.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. It is an extract from [English Uprising: Brexit and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right](#) by Paul Stocker, published by Melville House.

Paul Stocker (@PaulStocker5) has a doctorate in British far-right history from Teesside University. Based at the [Centre for Fascist, Anti-Fascist and Post-Fascist Studies](#), he has published research on the history of far-right and fascist movements in Britain from the 1920s until the 1960s.