

'Brexitannia': an unsettling, beautiful insight into post-referendum UK



*Brexitannia is a sociological portrait of post-referendum Britain. Travelling around the UK, its director invited people to talk about Brexit and left their responses to speak for themselves. **Oliver Daddow (University of Nottingham)** says the documentary is an unsettling insight into a Britain coming to terms with an imagined past, a leadership-less present and a manifestly uncertain future.*

Put together in the immediate aftermath of the referendum vote, Timothy George Kelly's [Brexitannia](#) combines beautiful staging and cinematography with – on occasion – the most repulsive of opinions. It is an insight into the ideational fabric of modern Britain the like of which you will not get from most 'political science', broadcast news or, perhaps most worryingly, from conventional political discussion.

The documentary is in two discrete parts. The hour-long first part covers 'the people'. Following this, a twenty-minute second part covers 'the experts', including Saskia Sassen and Noam Chomsky discussing the crisis of neoliberalism and global capitalism. Part one is the longest and most intriguing aspect of the film, so I will concentrate on that.

In the weeks that followed the referendum, Kelly travelled up and down the UK interviewing members of the public about Brexit. He structured the interviews, loosely, around three themes: first, interviewees' attitudes to the past; second, their perspective on the present, including Brexit; and thirdly, their fears and hopes for the future. Kelly's goal was to give people time and space to articulate their views in full. Academics and journalists could learn a lot from this approach: a good interviewer needs to learn to work with silences to get the best material. Stay quiet long enough as an interviewer, and people tend to fill the silence with their innermost thoughts. Therein lay the informational gems. Kelly added that he felt many interviewees responded well to him being from Australia. He was familiar enough to be taken into their confidence even while pointing a camera at them, but not so familiar that he did not feel able to ask probing questions.



Smeaton Tower lighthouse, Plymouth Hoe. Photo: [Smudge 9000](#) via a [CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

Near enough 200 people were interviewed, from all over England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. They were filmed within a few minutes of their home or place of work. Staging the film in the material reality of the 'everyday' adds huge visual authenticity to the documentary's verbal content. One interviewee bemoans the EU's obsession with banning curved cucumbers from her garden, another reflects on the decline of coal mining outside a burnt-out house in Horden near Newcastle.

'Normal' people just like us speak standing on football pitches, outside blocks of flats in Wales, sitting in the pub with a pint, and from an office in Bolton ('Boltopia', as the interviewee describes it). One interviewee bemoans the EU's Common Fisheries Policy from a pebbled beach, another muses on Britishness near a lighthouse in Plymouth. In keeping with the free form of the film in general, many speak from locations not always identifiable by scenery: front rooms and various fields, parks and scraps of wasteland around the UK feature heavily. In London, scenes of grinding poverty in the foreground are contrasted with the shining metropolis of Canary Wharf and the City behind. Relaxing at home, a Polish man tells us if he had been eligible to vote, he would have voted to Leave. There are some fairly ugly views represented around such issues as immigration, as well as some thoughtful reflections on the future of Britain and British democracy.

Echoing the Brexit vote itself, *Brexitannia* shines a light on the dislocations prevalent in a Britain still struggling to come to terms with its imperial history and, latterly, its conflicted relationship with 'Brussels' during the EU membership years. 'Us and them' identity constructions, banal expressions of nationalism-cum-patriotism and an underlying pessimism about wage packets, joblessness and the economic future are at the heart of a lot of the testimony. Having seen off the 'foreign' invaders of the past, we get a vivid picture of the British turning in on themselves to fight the 'enemies within'. Class antagonism and economic disparities between rich and poor, fat-cat elites and honest grafters dominate the discourse.

In the question and answer session, Kelly revealed that he wanted the on-screen interview breakdown to reflect as near as possible the actual referendum outcome. At 54% Leave to 46%, the final percentage is pretty much there, after much cutting and editing. It is rare for the interviewees to be heard saying how they voted: we in the audience have to draw our own conclusions. Our visual preconceptions are often challenged – deliberately – by what comes out of the interviewees' mouths. This is not a documentary that deals in glib stereotypes.

A further beauty of the documentary is that there is no meta-narrative holding it all together. The interviews are spliced together in a rapid cascade, the individuals literally speaking for themselves one after another without comment. This makes for a breath of fresh air compared to documentaries and television vox pops that hammer you over the head with an editorial line, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Kelly shot the piece in black and white to underscore the sense that Brexitannia is a piece of living history. In that goal he has succeeded admirably. This documentary is an unsettling insight into a Britain coming to terms with an imagined past, a leadership-less present and a manifestly uncertain future. New referendum or not, soft or hard Brexit, one thing is clear: only time will tell whether Britain's democratic structures are able to help the people unite behind a post-Brexit future. On the evidence of Brexitannia, the challenge is much, much deeper than even the most pessimistic commentator today appreciates.

Brexitannia can be downloaded from [iTunes](#).

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

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