

Powerless to resist: Canute, Brexit and the tides of political pressure



*Canute tried to hold back the waves; David Cameron tried to hold back the discontent within and outside his party. Neither succeeded. **Will Jennings (University of Southampton)** and **Martin Lodge (LSE)** analyse why the referendum was called and the often contradictory impulses it unleashed.*

King Canute's attempts to hold back the waves are a frequent allusion in debates as to whether individual political actors have agency, or are washed along by greater structural forces. It could also apply to the question of whether post-Brexit Britain can stem the tides of globalisation and regulatory interdependence, or if it will succumb to them.

However, the story of Canute raises another question: under what conditions are political leaders required to perform public displays regarding the (limits of) their power? Translated into our contemporary context, this means: what were the forces behind the decision to call a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU?



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In [our contribution to the *Journal of European Public Policy*](#), we were therefore not interested in the factors in voters' minds in the ballot box (and indeed much research in the behavioural tradition would do well to reflect on the limits of survey data for identifying the 'causes' of the Brexit vote and what the 'will of the people' actually was). Instead, we are interested in the broader forces (what we call 'mega-trends') that might explain *why the referendum was called*. We distinguish between the influence of (1) electoral politics, (2) the breakdown of the dominant neoliberal policy paradigm and (3) contrivance of a spectacle of party management by a political class who now (pretend to) steer rather than row in the age of the regulatory state.

The decision to call the referendum can, firstly, be understood as an attempt by the Cameron government to manage the undercurrents of electoral politics: the party was faced with the growing threat of UKIP (and the defections of two Conservative MPs), rising public concern about immigration and its [increasing connection to Euroscepticism](#) (especially after EU accession in 2004), and [deepening distrust of the political class](#) – 'anti-politics'. From this perspective, our modern-day Canutes sought to use a referendum to tame the challenge increasingly posed by anti-immigrant and anti-elite populism.

From the perspective of a collapse of dominant public policy approaches, or ‘policy paradigms’, the decision to call the referendum might instead be understood as a reaction to the exhaustion of the neoliberal policy consensus dating back to the 1980s – which promoted retrenchment of the state and deference to the logic of the market. This policy paradigm had been shaken by events of the global financial crisis, with its dominant assumptions increasingly questioned. In this regard, Brexit represented (at least in part) a protest against the ‘no alternative’ consensus offered by the main political parties. Most crucially, it meant that experts’ warnings about catastrophic economic consequences were widely ignored, while the repatriation of £350m spending for the NHS had particular appeal after years of austerity. From this perspective, the modern day Canutes sought to offer a ‘release valve’ to pent-up economic frustration, especially in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

Lastly, the referendum can be seen as a side-effect of the ‘regulatory state’ – that is, the shift of government away from direct intervention and delivery of services (such as through privatisation and contracting out), towards a regulatory mode of governing. This regulatory state was itself inextricably linked with the expansion of the European regulatory state. With reduced choice and discretion in policy-making at national level, political elites have increasingly turned to symbolic politics, not least blaming the EU for domestic policy decisions (such as on migration). In this fashion, the referendum can be viewed – like Canute’s attempts on the shoreline – as an attempt to resolve a major policy conflict through spectacle.

These distinct mega-trends, and the tale of Canute, provide an important reminder that the decision to call the referendum cannot be distilled down to a single cause or a necessarily linear chain of events. While predicting the future is a mug’s game, the three mega-trends do point to some of the potential futures for British politics and policy. In terms of electoral politics – aside from accelerating a [tilting of the political axis](#) that had been long in the making – the negotiation and realisation of Brexit offers the prospect of populism run wild, with deals framed as a ‘sell out’ or ‘betrayal’ and the EU continuing to be blamed for any national tribulations for the foreseeable future. For public policy, Brexit seemingly offers two contradictory futures: in one, Brexit results in a critical break from austerity and leaving the market to decide; in another, Brexit leads to neoliberalism-on-steroids, with a low tax Singapore economic model and shrunken welfare state.

For the regulatory state, the question is whether the political class, which for years has ceded control to Brussels, has the resources and skills to navigate the tricky task of exiting the EU and shape Britain’s new relationships and regulatory arrangements. The danger, which is seemingly playing out in negotiations to date, is of continued engagement of the ruling club in spectacle politics with limited capacity for resolving more practical questions of how Britain is to be governed after Brexit.

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

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