

'Like the end of a love story': Brexit and highly-skilled French migrants in London



*French migrants in London, most of them highly skilled and economically successful, were among the most shocked by Brexit. **Jon Mulholland (University of the West of England)** and **Louise Ryan (University of Sheffield)**, who first researched this group in 2011-12, revisited them after the referendum and found uncertainty, precarity and deep sadness.*

Despite the destructive shockwaves of the financial crisis of 2008, London was still a mighty good place to be for the tens of thousands of French highly skilled migrants working in London's financial and business sectors in the second decade of the 21st century, and a place that felt welcoming in most ways that matter. The UK capital offered almost unparalleled [career escalation](#), [financial remuneration](#), [global networking opportunities](#), and a veritable 'home-from-home'. It also provided a much treasured [cosmopolitan](#) and amenity-rich urban landscape blessed with vibrant [French quarters](#) able to offer the French resident of the city the most familiar of French services.



Bastille Day celebrations in London, 2013. Photo: [Garry Knight](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

It is testimony to the seismic impact of Brexit on the circumstances of the French highly skilled in London, that it even eclipses the financial crisis of 2008 as a cause to reconsider the warmth of London's welcome. If the question of securing British citizenship was a can that could be kicked almost indefinitely down the road, at least for the French highly skilled who enjoyed such economic, social and cultural security in the capital, Brexit appears to have brought a sudden and dramatic end to that can's journey.

In 2011 and 2012, we interviewed French highly skilled migrants working in London's financial and business sectors, as part of a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. At that point, it was a rare exception for any of our 40 participants to have taken the opportunity to secure British citizenship. The advantages of British citizenship appeared insufficiently persuasive or pressing for the 'difficult and lengthy' process of securing citizenship to muscle its way to the top of anyone's priority list. And why should it? Noémi characterised the responses of many of our participants in saying, "it has never been a problem for me not to be actually under the citizenship of the country where I worked".

There was some recognition among our participants, that a lack of eligibility to vote in national elections sat uneasily with the scale of their economic, social and cultural contribution to the country's fortunes. But the prospect that a national election could produce an outcome capable of introducing life-changing insecurity to French residents in London had not been remotely considered.

From sadness, to disappointment, to fury: coming to terms with living in a newly foreign land

In the light of the Brexit referendum, we revisited our original participants to enquire about the impact of Brexit on their experiences, feelings and plans. Only one of our respondents in this follow up exercise was anything less than shocked and dismayed at the outcome of the referendum. Carinne, a board member of one of the City's leading financial institutions, felt that Brexit "has had a very positive impact", and offers a "huge political and economic opportunity for the UK". Emphasising the resilience of the City, she has no intention of leaving, and enjoys "the best of both worlds" that are her dual UK and French citizenships.

Asked how Brexit had affected their feelings about living in London and the UK, we found our participants in large part stunned – feeling unwelcome in, and even betrayed by, a country into which years of hard-earned taxes had been bountifully paid. Participants described the UK as a newly-foreign land, as a country transforming before their eyes in a process likened to 'watching Monty Python'. Shock and sadness had turned to anger for many:

"My friends from the EU living in Britain shared (and still share) my fears, disgust, etc. after the referendum. They are all considering to move, though it is easier said than done" (Noémi).

Noemi went on to describe the current moment as like the 'end of a love story'. The relative economic, social and cultural privileges enjoyed, and largely assumed, by our participants, and underpinned by EU-guaranteed freedoms of movement, had proved most unexpectedly provisional.

For many of our participants, Brexit raised concerns for their career futures. There were reports of banks relocating jobs, and of many EU friends moving back to France or to other EU countries through intra-firm transfer. There was an overwhelming sense that Brexit would not play out well for London's position in the global financial marketplace. There were concerns about Brexit's impact on the business performance of the companies they worked for, or for the longer term demand for financial services upon which some of our participants' consultancies depended. More personally, workplace relations had been, at least, temporarily reconfigured. How to navigate changed relationships with colleagues who had voted to leave the EU? As Irène declared, dramatically,

"Brexit at work was strange as some people had voted remain and some had voted leave; it was very awkward for many weeks after the vote and I suddenly realised what the Jews must have felt like in Germany in the 1930s. I kept a very low profile. In terms of career plans I realised I had to get the British nationality asap".

When, in 2011, we asked our participants about their future mobility plans, we uncovered a complex interplay of forms of social, cultural and occupational [embedding](#), bringing significant attachments to the place and people of London, but allied to a sense of keeping future mobility options open. In line with their opportunity-rich status, our participants expressed little sense that onward mobility might be for any reason other than personal preference or circumstances. Post-referendum, our participants were being confronted by degrees of precarity unimaginable in 2011, and precarity necessitating an unexpected and immediate engagement with the question of their future mobilities. Brexit has compelled even the most privileged of migrants to navigate unanticipated, complex and deeply ambivalent choices around residency, settlement, citizenship or emigration.

Some of our participants, of course, had already secured residency and/or citizenship, and particularly those in relationships with British partners, while a few had left the UK entirely. But others are in an uncomfortable predicament, combining uncertainty and prevarication. The 'gruelling bureaucratic process', 'the £1300 cost', 'the point of principle', or the 'state of denial' were all reasons given for 'inaction' on the residency/citizenship question. For Aurélie, "if I am not welcome with my French passport, I don't want to stay here. I might be forced to apply for residency, I will deal with it if and when that happens. I am in denial, I prefer to believe that something, anything(!), will happen and Brexit will not happen".

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

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