Untruthful Brexit rhetoric has undermined representative democracy in the UK

Throughout the run-up to the signing of the EU-UK withdrawal agreement as well as the trade deal, the British government's public rhetoric on Brexit has been criticised for being misleading and insincere. **Sten Hansson** *(University of Tartu/University of Birmingham) and* **Sandra Kröger** *(University of Exeter) argue that there are four ways in which untruthful statements by leading politicians may have undermined representative democracy.*

During the exit negotiations and the transition period, British political leaders tried to persuade the public to side with the government by making exaggerated claims about overwhelming popular support for their policy, misrepresenting the power relations between the EU and the national government, and downplaying the complexity of international negotiations. Such statements by powerful political actors should not be dismissed as 'mere rhetoric'. Repetition of inaccurate, misleading, or hyperbolic claims, even when many know these are not true, can have the effect of changing minds, derailing rational debates over policy issues, and hurting representative democracy more broadly. [Untruthful post-referendum Brexit rhetoric has undermined representative democracy](#) in at least the following four ways.

1. Reducing freedom and equality

Politicians curb citizens' freedom when they falsely claim that fewer policy options are available than is actually the case, and undermine citizens' equality when they falsely claim that their version of Brexit is something that 'everyone' wants. After the EU membership referendum, Brexit supporters have often talked of [the British](#) [people as an indivisible, unitary body](#), thereby disregarding the significant divisions in society with regard to EU membership.

For example, when Prime Minister Theresa May gave a [speech on Brexit in Grimsby](#) on 8 March 2019, a week before a vote on her 'Brexit deal' in the House of Commons, she claimed that her 'deal' is beneficial to all nations of the UK and that 'everyone' wants to 'get Brexit done'. However, considering that only three days earlier the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament had [rejected the deal in a joint motion](#), this depiction of her policy proposal cannot be supported by evidence. At the time, polls showed that in Scotland, [64 per cent wanted to remain](#) in the EU, and in Wales, only [22 per cent supported the draft Brexit deal](#). Moreover, UK-wide polls had consistently indicated [more than 40 per cent support to remaining in the EU](#).

2. Weakening accountability

Accountability relates to the possibility of the represented to hold officeholders to account. This presupposes the existence of reasonable public debate where participants provide their (competing) accounts of social circumstances and possible common courses of action. Therefore, attempts at closing down public debate are the opposite of allowing for accountability mechanisms to work. It is the course of action Theresa May seemed to choose when she [declared on 25 November 2018](#):

> The British people don't want to spend any more time arguing about Brexit. They want a good deal done that fulfils the vote and allows us to come together again as a country.

By claiming that people did not want to 'spend any more time' debating, the Prime Minister seemed to call for quick approval of her policy proposal, thereby disregarding an important principle of accountability: that people may need more time to acquire the knowledge necessary for evaluating the pros and cons of a possible common course of action. She opted out of a meaningful conversation with the public, thereby working against the idea of accountability.

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3. Undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions

Trust links ordinary citizens to the institutions that are intended to represent them, thereby enhancing both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of democratic government. Trust in democratic institutions is undermined by politicians who make insincere and inaccurate claims and exploit people's ignorance about specific governance structures. British politicians have often cast the UK government as a helpless actor who has no say in various decisions by the EU that could affect their country in an adverse way. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a personal strategy of blame avoidance, whereby policymakers seek to rhetorically minimise their own agency in order to attract less blame for a controversial or loss-inducing policy or outcome. On the other hand, such claims can be exploited to promote an overall anti-EU stance by depicting the EU as an oppressor who severely limits various sovereign rights and freedoms of national governments, or perhaps even holds them hostage.

For example, on 14 February 2018, the then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson gave a speech on Brexit where he knowingly depicted the EU in a negative and inaccurate way when he said:

It is only by taking back control of our laws that UK firms and entrepreneurs will have the freedom to innovate, without the risk of having to comply with some directive devised by Brussels, at the urgings of some lobby group, with the specific aim of holding back a UK competitor.

Here, Johnson juxtaposed 'our laws' (i.e. UK national legislation) with 'directives devised by Brussels' (which stands metonymically for the EU) thereby creating an 'Us' vs 'Them' polarisation that seems to falsely suggest that the UK had no say in EU decision making. He depicted the EU as posing a 'risk' to British companies and limiting their 'freedom to innovate' but did not provide any evidence to support that proposition. Actually, the UK had been leading in creating and shaping the single market programme. Moreover, the big lobby groups in Brussels are not known for holding back competition but rather for backing it.

4. Jeopardising the ability to compromise

To resolve conflicts in a democratic political community, people should seek compromise by engaging in discussions built on truthfulness. However, both before and after the 2016 referendum, several Brexit-supporting politicians seriously downplayed the complexity of negotiations involved in leaving the EU and reaching trade deals thereafter. For example, on 20 July 2017, the then international trade secretary Liam Fox said on the BBC Radio 4's Today programme:

> The free trade agreement that we will have to do with the European Union should be one of the easiest in human history.

While Fox expressed a strong but not complete commitment to the truth of the proposition ('should be'), he stood by his claim three months later, on 22 October 2017, in an interview on ITV. However, on 5 August 2018, Fox stated that the UK is more likely to leave the EU without agreeing a deal over their future relationship. In a similar vein, David Davis, who served as Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union from July 2016 to July 2018, has claimed on several occasions that Brexit was simple.

These claims have proved wildly inaccurate and reduced the space for compromise necessary to collectively form political judgements and reach 'deals' at both national and international levels.

Democratic representation requires truthfulness

Truthful communication – politicians making claims that are accurate and sincere – matters for freedom and equality, accountability, citizens' trust in democratic institutions, and the ability to compromise. It appears that ministers' deceptive statements concerning Brexit may have harmed all of these dimensions or preconditions of democratic representation. Scholars of democracy should increasingly turn their attention to the ethics of representation and seek to unravel the potentially manipulative rhetorical practices of leading policymakers.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.