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***Brexit* and the post-imperial trauma of withdrawal**

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1. The Brexit shock and what it reveals

--> Slide 1

Looking at the results that we can find in tables, maps and charts provided courtesy of the BBC and other media, what can we read from these data?

<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36616028>

--> Slide 2

A country deeply riven by multiple & intersecting divides:

- Old vs young? Yes, the young ones could have squashed it, but, alas, they didn't turn out in sufficiently large numbers;
- Centre vs periphery? Only if you consider England the centre and the rest of country the periphery (Scotland, Welsh Wales and the western and southern parts of Northern Ireland), with important exceptions at the celtic fringe;
- Economically backward areas vs more prosperous ones? Of course, but there were outliers like Liverpool and the Wirral;
- Poorly educated/skilled low income vs more affluent people with degrees/post-industrial skills? Basically yes, but...

Matthew Godwin and Oliver Heath (LSE) have summarized their aggregate-level data analysis:

...our results also reveal how turnout in the heartlands of Brexit was often higher than average, indicating that it is citizens who have long felt excluded from the mainstream consensus who used the referendum to voice their distinctive views not only about EU membership but a wider array of perceived threats to their national identity, values and ways of life. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/brexit-and-the-left-behind-thesis/>

2. Five ways to make sense of Brexit

The Brexit debate and decision can be discussed from various angles:

- →slide 3 as a struggle within the Tory party between Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans at least since the days of the debate about the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in

1992/93, and as a desperate attempt of a party leader to unite his party, driven by a xenophobic press and by the right-wing, populist UKIP.

- → slide 4 As a competition between two Eton / Oxford educated upper-class twits, --> Slide 5 while the Leader of HM Opposition was equivocating
- as a pointer to the resentment in the economically left behind areas in the North and in other peripheral regions of England and Wales; two examples: --> Slide 6
 - a) In Cornwall, which has received about 654 Mio € in European structural funds between 2007 and 2013, and will receive almost twice as much in the 2014 - 2020 budgetary period, 56.52 percent voted for Brexit.
 - b) In Sunderland in the Northeast, where *Nissan* is by far the largest employer and has made the future of its branch plant explicitly dependent on what deal the new May administration will be able to cinch from Brussels, there was a 61.3 majority for 'leave'.

The people in these areas blame Brussels! But wasn't it Tony Blair who pushed hardest for the eastern enlargement in 2004 and who then wanted to get a competitive edge through cheap labour and therefore right from the beginning opened the British labour market for workers from the new member states.

- → slide 7 as the result of a hopelessly anachronistic and outdated constitution, which allows *Her Majesty's* government to trigger *Brexit* at will, without the consent of Parliament, on the basis of *Royal Prerogative*.¹
- → slide 8 and last but not least as an ideological battle about Britain's future role in the world: On one side we have post-imperial *go-it-alone* ideologists (*Anglosphere* apologists, unreconstructed Thatcherites and the likes) still enthralled by a glorious past.

3. The rise of the Eurosceptic beast

Haven't we seen this all before? Yes, indeed! The spectre of Europe was already invoked more than 50 years ago by the Leader of the Labour Party, Hugh Gaitskell. After the ardently pro-European Edward Heath had succeeded in taking Britain into the EC in 1973, Harold Wilson, after winning the 1974 elections, insisted that the terms of entry were intolerable. The new Labour government should renegotiate them and call a referendum. More than two thirds voted 'yes' (on a turnout of 64.5 percent), and Britain remained in the EEC, but Euroscepticism continued to linger among the country's political elites. After the TUC's conversion to the Single Market when the president of the EU Commission Jacques Delors to Mrs Thatcher's utmost dismay promised 'tougher labour and social regulations' in 1988, Euroscepticism shifted to the right of the political spectrum. → slide 9 In the Maastricht Treaty ratification debate it rose to notoriety in John Major's cabinet (his famous 'bastards') and gained more ground among the Tories in the long years of opposition 1997- 2010. Unable to face down the Eurosceptical beast early in his tenure as the new Tory leader³ David

¹ Presently, this is a contentious and hotly debated issue among constitutional lawyers, see:

<https://ukconstitutionallaw.org/2016/07/08/thomas-fairclough-article-50-and-the-royal-prerogative/>

³ "While parents worried about childcare, getting the kids to school, balancing work and family life, we were banging on about Europe." Consequently, in his first conference speech as the party leader in October 2006,

Cameron tried to placate it with the promise of another referendum preceded by a similar renegotiation exercise as in 1974. But unlike Harold Wilson, who achieved “the minimum of gain for the maximum of irritation” (Denman 1996, 249-50), he simply lost everything.

4. Delusions of Empire

We think the deep-seated identity crisis behind **England's** legendary ‘semi-detachedness’ (Stephen George) towards Europe stems from the post-WW II forced withdrawal from empire that the country has never quite come to terms with. Dean Acheson’s, former US secretary of state, famous statement at West Point in 1962: ‘Great Britain has lost an Empire but not yet found a role’ may still be accurate.

From the beginnings of European integration after World War II many English politicians have always insisted that “we cannot consider submitting our political and economic system to supranational institutions”⁴. Why? Three reasons were repeated time and again:

- uniqueness of Britain’s parliamentary system,
- responsibilities towards the Commonwealth and
- joint free world leadership together with the US (regardless of Britain’s hopelessly dependent role gracefully termed ‘special relationship’)⁵

→slide 10 Unsurprisingly, today, many conservatives entertain similar ideas about Britain’s leading role in the world.

Obviously, the notion of the superiority of British institutions, and of the Commonwealth “as an extant, if loose, political community” (Wellings and Baxendale 2015, 125), have outlasted both the country’s entry into, and now, its exit from the EC/EU.

Cameron advised his fellow Tories to stop banging on about Europe and rather ‘become the champions of a “new spirit of social responsibility”’ (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/5396358.stm accessed Jun2, 2016)

⁴ Foreign Office Memorandum Dec 12, 1951

⁵ Interestingly, US administrations have always insisted that Britain’s EC/EU membership would rather strengthen its role as a partner of the US in global leadership and as a transatlantic bridge

5. *Anglosphere* – a viable alternative?⁶

“Brexit means Brexit” and “Breakfast means Breakfast”. Almost three months after the referendum this sentence has become an iconic mantra: There is nothing but “policy emptiness, ministerial bickering and departmental rows”⁷ Of the many scenarios bandied around the notion of “a formal intergovernmental Anglosphere organization” (Wellings & Baxendale 2015, 139) seems to have some ideological traction beyond solely economic considerations.

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Comparable ideas & pressure groups have been around for a long time (cf. Gamble 2003, 83-107).

Recently, the concept has been promoted by a spectrum of conservative Eurosceptic intellectuals, policy advisers and high-profile politicians. Media support has come from newspapers and magazines owned by Conrad Black and Rupert Murdoch.

Robert Conquest, the conservative British historian, who died in 2015 aged 98, managed to inspire many high-profile British Eurosceptics with his blueprint for an Anglosphere Association. Margaret Thatcher explicitly endorsed it in a speech to the English Speaking Union in New York.

Such concepts tie in with the notion of British exceptionalism, celebrated by historians from Th. B. Macauley to A.J.P. Taylor and Winston Churchill (“*We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked, but not combined. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed.*”)⁹. Even a progressive historian like Linda Colley reminded us shortly before the referendum¹⁰

that Britain’s particular experience of the Second World War- its freedom from invasion and its emergence on the winning side—contributed to a sense of distinction from the continent and made many of its people and politicians react rather differently to post-1945 experiments for European realignment than those Continental Europeans who had experienced defeat and/or invasion.

We agree with her conclusion that “Men and women do not live by bread alone. They ideally also need sustaining ideas... about Britain engaging more constructively in Europe.” (ibid) This would involve critically engaging with the issue of how the EU as a unique transnational ‘association of states’¹¹ can provide more democratic responses to globalisation’s inherent challenges.

⁶ For details see Wellings, Ben, Helen Baxendale: ‘Euroscepticism and the Anglosphere: Traditions and Dilemmas in Contemporary English Nationalism’, in: *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2015, vol 53, no 1, 123-139.

⁷ Green, David Allen: ‘Brexit requires more than political will – it needs to be capable of happening’, in *Financial Times*, Aug 30, 2016.

⁹ Churchill in the Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post, Feb 15, 1930. For a history of this often misused quote see <https://neweuropeans.net/article/604/revealing-deception-about-winston-churchill>

¹⁰ The following quotes from <http://blog.historians.org/2016/06/historians-news-linda-colley-brexit/>

¹¹ or *Staatenverbund* as the German Constitutional Court has termed it in its 1993 ruling on the Maastricht treaty

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However, an *Anglosphere Association* founded on language and some notion of British exceptionalism, would be wallowing in a history that was, but no longer is and will not hold under pressure: The political interests and cultural differences within the group are too substantial.¹²

6. Conclusion →slide 13

So, where does this leave us? David Allen Green, FT journalist and lawyer aptly summarizes the situation:

The challenges facing a Brexit government are legion. Should the UK be part of the single market? What about freedom of movement? What about Scotland's opposition? [...] The Brexit government has to address each of these and many other serious questions on top of its routine and mundane work, in a period of austerity and budget cuts, and with a civil service one-fifth smaller than in 2010.

None of this is to say Brexit will not happen. Many things are possible in human affairs. But it will not come about because of declarations that it "shall" happen. Brexit also needs to be capable of happening, and that requires a policy as well as resources.

<http://blogs.ft.com/david-allen-green/2016/08/30/brexit-requires-more-than-political-will-it-needs-to-be-capable-of-happening/>

¹² see e.g. Gret Haller: *Die Grenzen der Solidarität*. 2nd ed. Berlin: Aufbau, 2002.