Make Great Britain Great Again: Populism And Nationalism In Brexit

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Introduction

Prior to the June 23, 2016, referendum vote, European Council president Donald Tusk told the press that a Brexit movement in the UK would inevitably lead to the destruction of Western political civilization in its entirety (“Donald Tusk…”). Although his statements at the time seemed hyperbolic, the historic move to hold a referendum quickly turned into a crusade of autarky as a campaign emerged to “take back control” and revert to times that many viewed as more prosperous and familiar. British voters and political parties were made to believe in deep atavisms of populism and nationalism as necessary steps to their country’s success. Subsequently, a war rooted deep in far-right ideology began between the citizen, the state, and the outside world.

The Brexit vote was historic not only due to the magnitude of the decision made by the electorate but also because it brought to surface salient political divisions fortified by economic and cultural anxiety. Brexit, at its core, was a populist revolt. The way proponents framed the discussion and subsequent vote, however, was through a nationalist urge. Populism revolves around a vertical dimension—the down versus the up—where a repressed people, the majority, oppose a corrupt elite, the minority. Nationalism, conversely, works on a horizontal scale, where the likeness of a group is essential to distinguish those who are in from those who are out. Proponents of the Leave campaign intricately combined these two urges during Brexit, arguing for a pull upward while also trying to navigate a horizontal plane in which only certain groups would benefit. Hence, the Leave campaign attempted to alienate the EU by arguing for a pull up and a simultaneous pull far right.

This reasoning holds a certain amount of irony since Britain has always been profoundly internationalist. Therefore, how did the UK Independence Party and its Leave campaign manage to twist and mold that global history
into a basis for the isolationist nationalism known as Brexit? This article explores how the victory of the Leave campaign transcended traditional political ideology by rooting itself in strong populist and nationalist urges that date back to when the UK first joined the EU and even further back into the era of the British Empire. Specifically, the focus is on how proponents leveraged sentiment surrounding issues of economic inequalities and immigration to convince the UK to leave the EU.

What Made Great Britain Great?

Over the span of several centuries, the English government became the British Empire through a worldwide system of dependencies, where colonies, protectorates, dominions, and other territories were brought under their sovereignty and administration. With 1,000 years of history deeply embedded into the current world system, it is imperative to first recognize the historical contingencies that originally allowed the Leave campaign to flourish under the guise of nostalgia.

For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the small island approximately the size of California grew to dominate world trade and governance. At its peak, the British Empire was the largest empire in history and held the position of global superpower more times than not. In 1916, the British Empire represented 412 million people: 25% of both the population of the world and the total land area of Earth (Wrong, p. 46). The hegemony became a microcosm of the world itself that included people of every race and creed. Hence, the phrase “the sun never sets on the British Empire” was often used to describe its far-flung nature for the very reason that British nationalism was anchored to the empire, either by expansion of war, trade, or religion (Wrong, p. 48).

As the British gained prominence economically, politically, and culturally, the empire became a vehicle for nationalism as its success abroad translated to pride and glory at home. Such a legacy does not dissipate overnight. Although the British Empire eventually dissolved into autonomous sovereign states, patriotism and love for a united kingdom did not fade away. In fact, it led to many of the difficulties the British government encountered when faced with the decision to join the EU in the twentieth century.

The Awkward Partner

By the 1960s, years after the peak of the British Empire, the economy in continental Europe was performing much better than the UK’s (Menon and Salter, p. 1299). Due to a historical desire to outpace West Germany and France and to prove British exceptionalism once again, the UK applied to join the EU in 1961. It was promptly denied, with French leader Charles de Gaulle denouncing any idea of negotiations on the matter. A second application in 1963 was again denied by the French. It was not until eight years after the UK’s first application that unanimous consent from member nations allowed negotiations for British membership to begin. The UK officially became a part of the EU in 1973.

Labeled infamously the “awkward partner,” the British regularly negotiated privileged positions of opting out of areas in which they had no interest: Protocol 25 of the Maastricht Treaty exempted the UK from participation in the euro; Protocol 36 of the Lisbon Treaty exempted the UK from European fundamental rights legislation regarding home affairs and justice; and Article 4 of the Schengen Agreement exempted the UK from abolished border controls between member states. From the beginning, the EU’s awkward partner carved out an advantaged position for itself, shaping a Europe congruent with its own preferences (Menon and Salter, p. 1298).

Still, the relationship between the UK and the EU remained a necessary partnership. Britain needed Europe to ensure economic stability, especially since the continent is one of Britain’s highest export destinations. In 2016, 44% of the UK’s exports in goods and services went to countries in the EU (Ward, p. 5). At the same time, the EU often felt the benefits of London as one of the world’s top financial capitals, with more than a fifth of Europe’s 500 largest companies headquartered in the capital (Ward, p. 6).

No matter the mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship, Euroscepticism weaved
itself into British public discourse constantly. In fact, critics characterized the very notion of Britain joining a federalized Europe back in 1973 as “the end of a thousand years of history” (Menon and Salter, p. 1301). Over time (explored in detail later), a majority of the British electorate grew to view the EU as an imposing foreign entity that forced them to surrender their sovereignty and therefore their historic nationhood. Subsequently, deep grievances culminated across the island as political parties began to argue that withdrawal from the EU, rather than continued membership, would be more in line with expressed British identity.

**UK Independence Party and Brexit**

Right-wing Eurosceptic discourse found a voice in the UK Independence Party (UKIP), a party whose sole existence was to promote a British populist and nationalist agenda. UKIP rose to dominance with many British citizens starting to reject conventional parties and a broader political establishment that had too long ignored both their economic and cultural concerns.

Originally formed in 1991 as the Anti-Federalist League, the single-issue Eurosceptic party was primarily led by the well-known Nigel Farage, a member of Parliament of the southeast England constituency. Farage grew the party under his leadership by attempting to influence the government’s decisions on immigration and EU involvement. Hence, when Prime Minister David Cameron attempted to settle an internal party dispute by promising a national referendum on EU membership, UKIP naturally found its way into public discourse.

In January 2013, Cameron promised the public a simple Brexit ballot regarding continued EU membership, yet complex and emotional political campaigns ensued. The Remain side focused mainly on economic stability, citing that Britain would be “stronger, safer, and better off” in the EU (Menon and Salter, p. 1307). The campaign painted leaving the EU as a leap into a dark abyss of unknown that would inevitably hurt British economic prosperity. The City of London agreed, with business leaders from almost 200 companies signing a letter arguing against Brexit a mere 24 hours after Cameron’s original statement on the referendum (Williams-Grut). On the other hand, the Leave side, led by Farage’s UKIP, campaigned heavily by leveraging politics of fear with simple and powerful nationalist messages. Signs stating, “I want my country back” and “take back control,” were plastered across towns in the UK. The campaign represented an equivocation for a loss of national power, as the Leave camp grounded its message in nostalgia for some version of a successful British past.

During the course of the Brexit campaign, the Leave campaigners regularly attacked the Remain campaign by employing many shock and awe public crusades. Farage and UKIP falsely claimed that European migrants were using the National Health Service (NHS) for expensive HIV treatment, told the president of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy that he had the “charisma of a damp rag” and the “appearance of a low-grade bank clerk,” and famously broadcasted a red bus stating that Britain gave Brussels hundreds of millions of pounds a week (“Nigel Farage Insults…”). Even after Farage’s plane crashed due to a UKIP promotional banner becoming entangled in the plane’s propellers, the UKIP leader was dedicated to removing the UK entirely from the EU—in an interview with local media, he said the plane crash made him “more driven than [he ever] was before” (“The Nigel Farage Story”).

Farage, however, was no catch-all nationalist; his appeal was concentrated in specific groups and was utterly alien to others. The Guardian reported that UKIP had virtually no support among the financially secure and the middle-aged university graduates who dominated politics and the media. Essentially, UKIP hosted a revolt dominated by “white faces, blue collars, and gray hair”; support was weak among women, white-collar professionals, and the young, while ethnic minority voters shunned the party totally (Goodwin and Ford).

UKIP was not just a political party. They were a symptom of far deeper social and value divisions in Britain. The eventual results of the Brexit vote—52% Leave to 48% Remain—brought to surface these deep divides in the electorate: young versus old, rural versus urban, college educated versus those without degrees, rich versus poor, and white versus
non-white. The manner in which UKIP framed its Leave campaign—through an intricate weaving of populist and nationalist threads—exacerbated these divisions. The following sections explain how economic inequalities and immigration worry were used as vehicles to scapegoat the EU, the differentiating factor separating the then-glory from the now.

**Those Left Behind Vote for Change**

The roots of the populist revolt can be traced back over decades. Divides in economic experiences left large segments of British voters on the wrong side of developmental change. Many Leave voters struggled with stagnant incomes, felt threatened by the way their communities were changing, and became furious at established political parties that appeared not to understand or even care about their concerns (Goodwin and Ford). Together, these factors alienated particular communities, specifically those who benefited the most from the heyday of labor-intensive industry and postwar social democracy. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research Commission on Economic Justice, half of all households in the UK have seen no meaningful improvement in their incomes for more than a decade (IPPR’s..., p. 2). The fact that only London and the southeast region of the UK have fully recovered from the 2008 financial crisis ostracizes rural areas that have not seen that type of economic recovery at all. Only a fifth of the public think that the way the British economy works is fair, with average workers’ pay dramatically decreasing while directors of companies’ pay is increasing by more than 47% (Schmitt et al., p. 74).

Polarized living standards and varied economic lifestyles thus followed citizens into the ballot box. Studies of exit polls made by the British Election Study find that nearly 49% of semi-skilled workers, unskilled workers, and those reliant on state welfare payments voted to leave the EU due to economic anxiety (Schmitt et al.). A similar study by the British Social Attitudes team found that 80% of those with a higher education degree voted to remain whereas those with a General Certificate of Secondary Education or less voted to remain by only 30% (National Centre for Social Research). This demographic pattern reflects an educational divide, as well as a social class divide, that exists in voting patterns. These types of vertical divides combined with economic decline typically incentivize domestic political turnover, yet British citizens took their own country’s economic struggles and began to push the blame horizontally onto a susceptible foreign scapegoat: the EU.

UKIP attempted to create an economic enemy out of the EU by leading voters to believe that Britain was somehow subsidizing the rest of Europe. Farage’s red bus stating, “we send the EU £350 million a week; let’s fund our NHS instead,” made its way from town to town during the Brexit campaign (“The Nigel Farage Story”). Its plastered cry to “take back control” by voting to leave the EU insinuated that Britain was no longer benefiting from its historic mercantilist model and instead needed to turn inward for economic success. Nationalist impulse couched in populist concerns dates back approximately five centuries, when the Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England touted that Britain “must always take heed that we buy no more from strangers than we sell them, for so should we impoverish ourselves and enrich them” (Stafford). The Leave campaign attempted to showcase that Brussels and the EU were enriching themselves while impoverishing those in the UK. The apparent lack of autarky fueled the anger behind economic inequalities and drove those who were economically disenchanted to the ballot box in droves.

Those who find themselves at the sharp end of a series of economic changes and stress unsurprisingly arrive at an antagonistic political self-identification that is couched in negative cultural reaction. UKIP benefited from this populist insurgency by channeling voters’ frustrations and promising a populist pull upward. Yet populism, by definition, pits a virtuous and homogenous people against a set of elites or dangerous others who are together depicted as depriving the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperities, identity, and voices (Albertazzi and McDonnell, p. 2). Farage won over these voters because they felt left behind by Britain’s rapid economic and social transformation (as shown by the British
Election Study) but he still needed to navigate the nationalist’s horizontal plane of strictly outlining who is included in that definition of “virtuous and homogenous people.” Therefore, although voters may have found an economic voice in UKIP, they needed to find a “dangerous other” to exclude from the nationalist narrative, and they found the perfect contender in immigrants from the EU.

The Dangerous Other

UKIP argued for Great Britain to become “great” again not by removing economic hierarchies or by redressing the economic injustices suffered by many in rural areas but by shifting blame for all ills onto the foreign other. For UKIP, the scapegoat for this type of thinking was often immigrants, especially from the EU. The political party used language, such as “spiraling,” “floodgates,” “besieging,” and “swamping,” to describe outsiders who had infiltrated their society and threatened the majority’s rights (Seaton). This idea of a persecuted majority fuels a type of majoritarian nationalism that claims the UK is under siege by enemies and must be “taken back.”

UKIP normalized its politics of fear and exclusion by representing it as a defensive reaction to the threats supposedly posed by European immigrants to the security of the nation as well as the collective British identity. The most effective way UKIP broadcasted these nationalist messages was through media discourse, which was 75% anti-European (Seaton). Having the British press at UKIP’s defense changed the dynamic of the Brexit vote, especially with issues of immigration. The readers of the Daily Mail, the Telegraph, and the Sun received intense Leave persuasion and accounted for four times as many readers than the Guardian, the Independent, and the Financial Times, which published opinion articles mainly supporting a Remain vote (Martinson). Therefore, anti-European rhetoric found its way into almost every headline on newspaper stands: the Express featured a story claiming that “half of all rape and murder suspects in some parts of Britain are foreigners” (Sheldrick) and the Daily Mail included a headline saying that “More Than 30,000 Europeans a Year Are Arrested in London” (Doyle).

If these portrayed criminal immigrants were not stealing physical materials from British citizens, they were presumably stealing their benefits. The Express claimed that “the average family of unskilled migrants cost the UK £30,000 a year, once tax, public service use, and benefit payments are considered” yet the report produced by the Express did not balance their research with the positive effects that migrants have on public finance and how economically beneficial they are to the country as a whole (Ruhs and Vargas-Silva). A study by an Oxford University Migration Observatory research team found that in reality there is no significant impact on unemployment or average wages for British citizens by overall immigration into the UK (Ruhs and Vargas-Silva). (Katherine Wu’s article in this volume of Perspectives further explores how incorrect UKIP’s presented statistics on immigration were.) Nevertheless, demographic warfare continued as UKIP successfully bracketed millions of immigrants into a single identity, demonizing a collective group as the “other” and constantly painting them as a people beyond an average British person’s understanding.

This type of purposeful attack on immigrants had a profound effect. Studies conducted by British Social Attitudes found that issues associated with citizens’ sense of national identity and cultural outlook were significantly associated with vote choice. The study found that 73% of those who saw immigration as a “growing concern to Great Britain’s culture and identity” voted to leave the EU (National Centre…). Furthermore, the perceived identity of those polled also made a difference in response. The study found that no less than 92% of British citizens who said they identified as European wanted Britain to continue to be a member of the EU. On the other hand, those who identified as strictly English, rather than British or European, had great support for leaving the EU (National Centre…). Remain voter Beverly David told the study that “people in London have a different identity. We are Londoners first, then European, then British” (National Centre…). With some London boroughs voting close to 80% Remain, it is easy to see how identity—
whether foreign or native—made a difference in the attitudes of voters. After the vote results came out, British citizen Julius Beltrame said, “I’ve never felt less British and more Londoner” (National Centre...).

Similarly illustrative of the central importance to the Brexit outcome of national identity and anti-outsider attitudes, the British Election Study created a word cloud of the language used by survey respondents about the reasons for their vote preferences (Figure 1). The size of the text reflects the relative number of times Leave voters used each word when answering, “What matters most to you when deciding how to vote in the EU referendum?” The findings show extraordinary consistency. Immigration leads the list by a long margin, followed by control, country, sovereignty, laws, and borders (Prosser et al.).

At the core of UKIP’s identity politics was a movement in search of a homogenous Britain. Alarmed by the perceived downfalls of heterogeneity and hybridity, nationalists in the party crafted a narrative of us-versus-them that would eventually reconfigure the island as narrowly British while alienating those who did not fit their version of expressed British identity. UKIP knew the importance of aliens and outsiders to the formation of group consciousness; it had existed throughout history. Even Winston Churchill’s son touted that “immigration has to be halted to defend the British way of life” (Storry and Childs). As a result, UKIP and other nationalist parties could easily reimagine the nation’s self-identity by promoting the deep, horizontal comradeship that only common language, culture, and customs can arouse in British citizens. By directing the electorate’s economic and populist grievances to the dangerous other, embodied by the EU, UKIP fostered a nationalist culture that no longer resided only in the domain of the far-right. The party brought nationalism from the fringes to the mainstream, continuing to purposefully alienate the EU through negative narratives of immigration that amplified economically rooted populist angst.

The Difficulties of Creating a “Truly Global Britain”

Populist and nationalist sentiment surrounding economic inequalities and immigration was not left at the ballot box after Brexit. Half a year after the vote, newly appointed Prime Minister Theresa May has attempted to maneuver the complicated waters between a “hard” or “soft” Brexit in the midst of bitter civic and political opinions that plague negotiations and planning for the
implementation of the UK’s exit from the EU. May has tried to convey to the nation that the result of the referendum was not a decision to turn inward and retreat from the world but rather was “the moment the country chose to build a truly global Britain” (Department for Exiting the European Union). Although she said the UK is proud of its European heritage, she claimed that the nation has always been a country that has looked beyond Europe and to the wider world because “Britain’s history and culture is profoundly internationalist” (Department for Exiting the European Union). Indeed, over several centuries, havens for British ideology have existed all over the world, whether through imperial, religious, or economic expansion. Still, can the UK actually become a global Britain post-Brexit as May hopes the country to become? How does a country position itself to become more globally oriented when populist and nationalist sentiment drove the country to become more isolationist in the first place?

Furthermore, May wants to create this new and equal partnership between Europe and an independent, self-governing, global Britain that is “strong, confident and united at home,” yet the UK is still strongly divided. The Brexit vote exacerbated the social and cultural divisions in British society, leaving the path ahead of May riddled with hurdles to overcome—politically, socially, and economically. Politically, the British Social Attitudes team found that both the Conservative and the Labour parties were virtually equally split on the issue of leaving the EU, whereas the UKIP base voted by almost 100% to leave the EU (National Centre..., p. 86). How will negotiations play out internationally in Brussels if domestically parliamentarians cannot agree on the merits of the very decision they are negotiating? Socially, 75% of voters under the age of 30 voted for a future in Europe whereas 61% over the age of 65 voted against (National Centre..., p. 12). How can the ideological differences between the varying age groups be reconciled? Economically, May must also take into consideration the parliamentary concerns of Scotland, which voted overwhelmingly to stay in the single market of the EU. All aspects considered, inherent populist and nationalist sentiment may serve as restrictions to limit the scope of May’s globalist goals for negotiations.

**No Island Is an Island, Entire of Itself**

In June 1940, the *Evening Standard* published a comic by David Low on its front page. The drawing depicted a heroically isolated British soldier on the White Cliffs of Dover, fighting against vicious waves of the channel, and featured a three-word caption: “Very Well, Alone” (Low). The cartoon was commenting on the fall of France to Nazi Germany and the prospect of a war that could end in either “surrender, starvation, or subjugation” nevertheless, the soldier stood tall…and alone.

This type of national resoluteness resurfaced in the Brexit vote. Popular culture, politics, and economics have always boasted a “finest hour" reflex in British history, but the bouts of populist and nationalist morale present in the Brexit vote took the world by surprise. A barrage of disapproval emanated from the international community: one Swiss newspaper asked, “What in the world has happened to this country?” (Zaschke); a German radio station called Brexit the “biggest political nonsense since the Roman emperor Caligula decided to appoint his horse Incitatus as consul” (Boland); Japanese media called Britain an “outcast”; Poland depicted the nation as “an offended, spoiled child” (Cortazzi); Pakistan headlines described the British lion as possessing “more of a moan than a roar” (Husain); and another German newspaper called the UK “the laughing stock of the world” (Stephens). A nation once lauded by its neighbors for its relentless and impenetrable steadiness now struggles to keep May’s promise of becoming a “strong and stable” UK.

As argued, the victory of the Leave campaign in Britain was underpinned by economic and cultural anxiety that transcended traditional ideological lines. The aversion to international bodies such as the EU was based on populist and nationalist tribalism, drawing on the perception of nationhood, sovereignty, and the need to protect historic British identity. Although UKIP and other right-wing parties often caricaturized complex realities, they essentially sold a romantic and exclusive
Downton Abbey age of economic prosperity and traditional values. The problem that May must face now, however, is how to take those anxieties and channel them into a successful Brexit negotiation. UKIP promised a UK that would benefit from a populist’s pull upward economically and a nationalist’s pull to the right culturally. May will most certainly struggle to keep that promise, especially if it means fundamentally restructuring her government to aid the electorate economically while also alienating the EU from those benefits.

There are only 20 miles of water separating the White Cliffs of Dover from continental Europe. The next two years of negotiations on Brexit will determine whether or not that 20-mile stretch completely severs the island from the proximate continent. In an ever-increasing globalized world, Britain will soon ask itself whether or not an island can truly be an island, entire of itself, alone.

References


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