

2016-06-28

Brexit outcome unlikely to satisfy anyone

JW Mackey. 2016. "Brexit outcome unlikely to satisfy anyone." BU Today. Available online: <https://www.bu.edu/bostonia>
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POV: Brexit Outcome Unlikely to Satisfy Anyone

[Vote likely to hasten Britain's decline as a world power](#)



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- **Published:**

July 1, 2016

- By John W. Mackey

Voters in the United Kingdom have done what many, inside the country and out, have found unthinkable. Defying the predictions of most pollsters, the British people voted in June to leave the European Union (EU) by a decisive 52-48 margin. The dust has barely settled, and the full implications of the so-called “Brexit” will not be known for some time. But the impact is already far-reaching and significant; the vote has brought down Prime Minister David Cameron, it has dealt a blow to over six decades of

momentum toward European integration, and it has left the future of British commerce and even the future of the United Kingdom itself uncertain. The most ironic outcome of the Brexit vote, however, is that it is ultimately unlikely to satisfy anyone—not even those who campaigned for it.

At its best, European unity is a farsighted and ambitious project, a rejection of the toxic European nationalisms that led to catastrophe in the 20th century. With origins in the six-nation European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, what has come to known as the European Union expanded over the following decades into a 28-member political and economic union. The United Kingdom joined in 1973, and has always been something of a reluctant member, refusing, for example, to join the Eurozone monetary union.

Despite Britain’s somewhat half-hearted membership history, pro-EU (“Remain”) voters in Britain are devastated in the wake of the vote. The EU has significant flaws, made most painfully evident by the Eurozone debt crisis, but free and open access to the European single market offers real benefits to British workers, consumers, and investors. Britain’s ability to compete in a global economy that includes much larger nations like the United States and China will be greatly compromised by the loss of the bargaining power and access that comes with membership.

As the longer-term implications of Brexit become clearer, even those who voted and campaigned for it will almost certainly be disappointed. In the short term, Conservative former London mayor Boris Johnson and UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage are celebrating, and Johnson may indeed become the next prime minister. And the xenophobic, anti-immigrant elements among the Brexit side may be delighted by new, tighter immigration controls that would be made possible by leaving the EU. Immigration appears to have played a key role in the vote, as a recent poll indicated that 41 percent of British voters considered immigration one of the two most important issues they were weighing.

But the underlying nationalist vision of the Brexit campaigners is a fantasy at best. What Farage hyperbolically calls the UK’s “Independence Day,” promising a Britain freed from oppression by “bureaucrats in Brussels,” will likely only hasten Britain’s decline as a world power. The Brexit logic greatly overstates Britain’s economic and political clout outside its membership in the larger EU and is ultimately a backward-looking form of British nationalism. Images of World War II spitfires and romantic tales of Britain’s lost greatness won’t build a better Britain for the future. Instead, even Brexiters are likely to suffer from a case of voters’ remorse when the realities of a more isolated Britain become clear.

The nationalists who campaigned for Brexit will likely be even more disappointed by another potential effect of the vote—the breakup of the United Kingdom. A majority of voters in every single constituency in Scotland voted to remain, and the total vote there was a landslide 62-38. The Brexit vote will leave a majority of Scottish voters feeling even more disillusioned with, and disconnected from, Westminster than they were before, and Scottish National Party leader Nicola Sturgeon has already indicated that another independence referendum is “highly likely.” (Nearly 45 percent of Scottish voters opted to leave the UK and create an independent Scotland in the 2014 referendum.) Scottish voters overwhelmingly want to remain in the EU, and independence from the UK may be the route they choose. The ultimate irony of this vote may eventually be that the British nationalists who campaigned so strongly for the Brexit may have inadvertently precipitated the breakup of their beloved country.

Not all criticism of the EU, and thus not all Brexit energy, has come from the nationalist right. There is a left critique of the Union, too, which argues that the EU serves as a multinational, institutionalized form of neoliberalism. The “social Europe” that many on the political left hoped would institutionalize the best elements of the social democratic tradition has not materialized. Left-leaning critics of the EU, whose ranks formerly included Labor leader Jeremy Corbyn, cite, for example, the austerity measures imposed during the Greek debt crisis and inequality in Britain as evidence of the EU’s shortcomings. But like their conservative counterparts, Brexiters from the left are bound to be disappointed. Leaving the EU will not magically transform Britain into a social democracy, and if Scotland becomes independent, the remaining United Kingdom will lose millions of reliably left-wing voters, and thus become a much more conservative country.

In the larger picture, both this vote and the problems that the EU has faced in recent years point to ongoing questions about sovereignty and the nature of the nation state. Critical questions about the nature and extent of EU powers, about the extent of national sovereignty retained by member states, about the future of fiscal policies among member states, and about the fate of the euro will be difficult challenges for Europe in the future. Britain has now voted to play no role in the discussions, and to go it alone. But it will face its own challenges with regard to sovereignty and nationality. In addition to the impact in Scotland, the vote to leave the EU may have destabilizing effects in Northern Ireland, which voted approximately 56-44 to remain, and where just over a fifth of committed voters reported wanting to join the Republic of Ireland before the Brexit vote. It is becoming more clear that the nation is a United Kingdom mostly in name only. But now the results are in, and the voters have spoken—they’re going it alone. In due course, however, even enthusiastic Brexiters might just wish they had chosen to stay.

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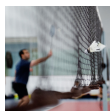
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