

# THE UK REFERENDUM (2016)

by Rutherford

In an effort to finally put to rest the Euro-scepticism that has plagued and divided the Conservative party for decades, PM David Cameron negotiated a number of minor concessions from the European Union and then (as promised in the 2015 election campaign as a way to head off large-scale defection of supporters to UKIP) called a national referendum on the UK's continued membership of the EU on 23 June 2016. The contest between 'Leave' and 'Remain' quickly deteriorated into a battle of mindless slogans and misinformation in which (in the words of Guardian columnist Gaby Hinsliff) "*politicians with scant respect for the truth met desperate voters*".

While the *Remain* campaign warned of war, pestilence and immanent economic collapse, the *Leave* campaign (under 'PM-in-waiting' Boris Johnson and '*We have had enough of experts*' Michael Gove) appealed to Little Englanders with mindless slogans ("*Take back our country*"), lies ("£350 million is sent to Brussels every week" which dishonestly ignored the UK rebate and the monies received from EU support programmes) and vague promises to control and reduce immigration and to secure shiny new trade deals with other nations.



'Leave' campaign battle bus

The two main drivers of the Brexit vote seemed to have been:

1. *An irrational fear of immigration and its impact on access to housing and social services* (I say 'irrational' because the regions with the highest levels of concerns about immigration were those with the lowest numbers of immigrants.) *Brexiters claimed that the only way to control immigration is to leave the EU.*

Never mind that, according to the Office for National Statistics, in the 12 months to March 2016, more immigrants came from outside the EU than from within. Never mind that, without foreign doctors, nurses and teachers, the NHS and the state school systems would be unable to function. Never mind that many companies have complained that they cannot find native Brits willing to accept certain jobs. Never mind that a higher proportion of immigrants than native-born Brits are in employment and that significantly fewer immigrants (EU or otherwise) than native Brits claim benefits, and so, as a whole, immigrants put more into the national purse than they take out (and so provide the taxes to pay for schools). Never mind that the shortage of housing and the budgets for social services such as school places is the result of Conservative austerity measures. And never mind that, to retain access to the Common Market (as the Brexiters promise to ensure) European political leaders (including German Chancellor Angela Merkel) have reiterated that access to the single market is contingent on the free movement of EU workers – the very thing that Brexiters promised to stop.

2. *The devastating impact of austerity on the lives and communities of many thousands of working people who therefore felt ignored and dismissed by a government which was supposed to act in their interests*

Hundreds of thousands of people across the country have seen their lives and communities weakened by the effects of the financial crash of 2008 and the austerity policies for which this provided the political cover. Angry, fearful and alienated and convinced that they have little left to lose, many seem to have treated this as a referendum on the 'political and corporate elites' who no longer act in their interests.

Refusing to admit that Brexit would be a leap into the unknown, Johnson, Gove & Co. instead offered blithe and unsubstantiated assurances that **EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE**; that trade with the world’s largest market will not be affected and that it would be a simple matter to negotiate new trade deals with other countries. (On the eve of the referendum, Johnson promised that, if, contrary to his promises, Brexit sends the UK economy into recession, he will apologise<sup>1</sup> on national television. So, that’s all right then.)

Never mind that US President Barack Obama said that, if it votes to leave the European Union, Britain would be at “the back of the queue” to negotiate a trade agreement with the US<sup>2</sup>, and that in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Germany’s finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble ruled out allowing the UK to have the same access to the single market as Switzerland and Norway, explaining “*If the majority in Britain opts for Brexit, that would be a decision against the single market. In is in. Out is out. One has to respect the sovereignty of the British people.*”<sup>3</sup>

In response to warnings by every economist that Brexit would lead to recession, Leave characterised such warnings as “Project Fear” which Gove airily dismissed with the claim that “*people in this country have had enough of experts*”<sup>4</sup>. (It seems that, in doing so, he had accurately read the mood of the gallery; polls showed that the public was “massively” misinformed on the central issues – but fortunately for the Brexit camp, Leave voters did not trust the views of ‘experts’. The perfect audience: ignorant and willing to remain so.)



Meanwhile, UKIP’s contributions to public perceptions and attitudes plumbed new depths of ugliness and racism with a billboard (launched the same day MP Jo Cox was murdered) which featured a photograph of a long line of Afghan refugees which bore a remarkable similarity to Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda.



1 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/21/boris-johnson-will-make-tv-apology-if-brexit-triggers-recession>  
 2 <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-04-22/obama-says-u-k-would-be-back-of-line-for-trade-deal-post-brexit>  
 3 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/10/no-single-market-access-for-uk-after-brexit-wolfgang-schauble-says>  
 4 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c.html#axzz4CbdpFAIX>

As ex-PM John Major reminded voters<sup>5</sup>, the same right-wing ideologues who had called for the privatisation of the NHS now promised to spend “at least £100m more a week on the NHS” from the money “clawed back” from Brussels. In an excellent essay, Paul Mason pricked the bubble by explaining that:

Brexit is a fake revolt; the elite does not usually lead the real ones. In a real revolt, the rich and powerful usually head for the hills, terrified. Nor are the Sun and the Daily Mail usually to be found egging on a real insurrection. But, all over Britain, people have fallen for the scam.<sup>6</sup>

On 16 June, one week before the vote, Labour MP and Remain campaigner Jo Cox was murdered in her West Yorkshire constituency by an assailant shouting “*Britain first*” and who, in his court appearance, gave his name as “*Death to traitors, freedom for Britain*”. Previously a human rights worker with Oxfam, since her election in 2015, Cox had continued to campaign on behalf of Syrian refugees. She was clearly one of the good ones.



People hold hands at a special service for Jo Cox in Trafalgar Square, London.  
Photograph Toby Melville-Reuters

Britain voted to Leave the EU by a margin of 52%, while all of Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to Remain. As a consequence (given that the Conservatives’ key argument during the previous referendum in 2014 was that the only way Scotland could ensure continued membership in the EU was to remain within the UK), a second referendum on Scottish independence is now expected, and some have called for the reunification of Ireland.

Having gambled that a vote to Remain would finally silence the ‘Euro-septics’ in his party, PM David Cameron resigned. In declaring the result a victory “for the decent people”, Nigel Farage implied that those who had voted to Remain were not, and claiming that independence had been won “without a single bullet being fired”<sup>7</sup>, he simultaneously ignored and dismissed the shooting death of MP Jo Cox.

I’m having difficulty deciding what bothers me more: the outcome – or the suspicion that a significant majority who voted Leave did so animated by mindless platitudes and slogans which (one would like to hope) education would have enabled them to recognise as such. It has always bothered me when politicians have made – and been allowed to get away with – demonstrably false claims (Weapons of Mass Destruction anyone?), but these were usually to justify actions over which we had no control. Now we are confronted with evidence that a significant proportion of the public mistake mindless slogans for arguments and cast their votes accordingly.

In *vox pop* interviews with voters the evening of the 24th:

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/05/john-major-nhs-risk-brexit-pythons-johnson-and-gove>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/20/brexit-fake-revolt-eu-working-class-culture-hijacked-help-elite#comment-76746326>

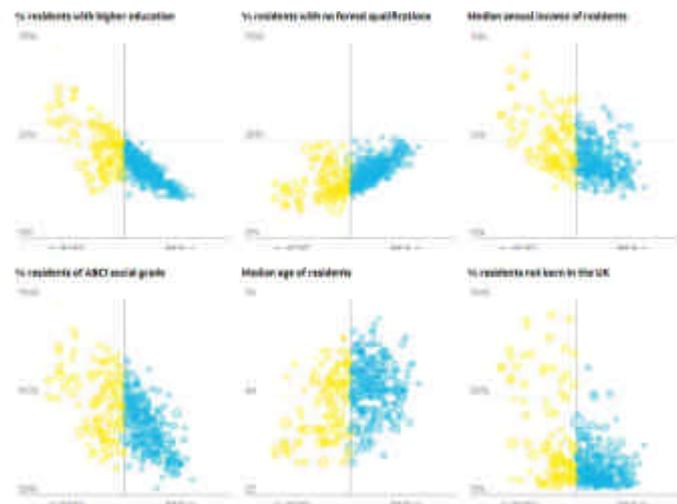
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/24/nigel-farage-uqliness-bullet-fired>

*As long as I've got my independence, my country, my queen and country still belong to me. [Channel 4 Reporter Jackie Long: What does that mean?] If you don't know what that means you are missing out on something. I spent two years in the army and I swore allegiance to the King and country when I was in and when that flag went up I saluted, and I thought it was a wonderful thing.*

*It's all about immigration. It's not about trade or Europe or anything like that; it's all about immigration; it's to stop the Muslims coming into the country.*

*Foreigners... Get 'em out. Kick 'em all out!*

According to *The Guardian*<sup>8</sup>, in the regions that voted for Brexit, the three common denominators were: low levels of education, low wages and (counter-intuitively) low levels of immigration. Feeling abandoned by successive Labour and Conservative governments, the post-industrial north interpreted the question as asking, in essence, whether they were satisfied with the status quo – and had replied that “We want something to change”. The irony is that these areas had been receiving significant levels of financial support from the EU.



<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2016/jun/23/eu-referendum-live-results-and-analysis>

Having exploited voters' ill-informed concerns about immigration and funding for the NHS, within hours, Tory MEP Daniel Hannan has admitted that Brexit might have no impact on levels of immigration, and Nigel Farage announced that it had been a “mistake” to suggest that the funds to be saved from UK contributions to the EU could now be spent on the NHS – and that no such funds would be available.<sup>9</sup> I am reminded of Churchill's observation that ‘*The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter*’.

There is a widespread and growing conviction – even among those who voted Leave – that Boris Johnson did not expect, and did not even want, to win the referendum, but had used this as a platform to bolster his leadership prospects among the ‘Euro-septics’ within the Conservative party. Within days of the referendum, Johnson dropped any reference to controlling immigration and promised that “there will continue to be free trade, and access to the single market”, and that “British people will still be able to go and work in the EU”<sup>10</sup> and it quickly became obvious that no one in the Leave camp had a plan to deal with the inevitable consequences.

The priority now must be to prevent (although, given the inability of so many members of the public to recognise lies and logical fallacies, how it is to be prevented I cannot imagine...) neo-liberals from using the inevitable economic consequences (see Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*) to get rid of (what is that term for policies which protect social justice, worker safety and the environment...? Oh yeah: ‘Red Tape’) legislation which threatens ‘prosperity’. I await the announcement that, ‘*Sorry folks, but under the present circumstances, economic necessity and investor confidence demand that...*’

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2016/jun/23/eu-referendum-live-results-and-analysis>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/25/48-britain-regrexit-voted-remain>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/26/i-cannot-stress-too-much-that-britain-is-part-of-europe--and-alw/>