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To cite this article: Erik Jones (2018) Four Things We Should Learn from Brexit, Survival, 60:6, 35-44
To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1542799

Published online: 20 Nov 2018.
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The British referendum on membership in the European Union was a teachable moment for anyone interested in democratic politics or European integration. Over the course of the past three years, the British have revealed the limitations of direct democracy, the importance of political rhetoric, the difference between integration and disintegration, and the meaning of ‘relationship’ in the concept of international relations. None of these lessons is completely new or unexpected, yet each of them is nevertheless important. The British people are paying a high price to serve as a case study; the rest of the world would be wise to pay attention.

Power to the people
Of all the lessons to be drawn from the United Kingdom’s Brexit experience, what the process has revealed about the limitations of direct democracy is probably the most important.¹ Fifty-two percent of the British population voted to leave the EU, while 48% voted to remain. This outcome did have the benefit of showing what the majority wanted to do. The vote also facilitated an open conversation about Europe, something that David Cameron had promised in his Bloomberg speech in 2013, and that he stressed could not be avoided. By calling a referendum, he ensured that this conversation

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took place. To be sure, the quality of debate was often very low. The Leave campaign touted erroneous facts about how much Europe costs and how much Britons could save; the Remain campaign presented exaggerated estimates of the short-term consequences of a decision to exit. But none of these errors went unchallenged. The people knew there were questions about the veracity of what both campaigns were saying, just as they knew the campaigners had a variety of motives for the positions they took. The important point is that the referendum allowed this debate to take place.

The limitations of the referendum are more obvious. At the same time, they are more complicated – not because the individual defects are difficult to identify, but because of how they interact with one another. To begin with, while the status quo defined the Remain option, there was no way for voters to know what the Leave option meant. Another limitation of the vote is that it has bound a population that inevitably changes: the 52% majority that voted to leave in June 2016 may no longer exist today. A third limitation is that the information available to British voters was incomplete due to a lack of experience. No country had ever left an organisation like the EU. By implication, no one could really anticipate what the true consequences of doing so would be. Add all this together and the underlying problem becomes clear. The British people have made a lasting decision to do something without knowing what that something is, and without building in any mechanism to modify that decision in light of new information about what is actually possible and how much it will cost them.

Although the British people needed to have a wide-ranging public debate about EU membership, an in-or-out referendum was a crude and costly way to achieve that objective. Moreover, the British Parliament is having a hard time overcoming the limitations of direct democracy as a decision-making process. The government can define more precisely what leaving the EU entails – moving from vague assertions that ‘Brexit means Brexit’ to more precise agreements on the terms of withdrawal, the structure of any transition period and the aspirations for a future relationship – but that is no guarantee that a majority of the British people will line up behind the arrangements. The government’s plans may not even receive majority support in Parliament. If they don’t, the resulting change will not be one
that anyone actually chose; rather, it will be the default option. In that case, it would be hard to see any connection between the majority who voted to leave the EU and the outcome of that decision.

Holding another referendum on membership, or to approve whatever the government negotiates as the new UK–EU relationship, would only compound the problem. The original supporters of the Leave campaign would complain about the legitimacy of any outcome that reversed the original decision either directly, by a vote to remain in the EU, or indirectly, by rejecting the government’s plans for leaving. By the same token, another majority in favour of leaving, or a new majority in support of the government’s proposals, would still suffer from the limitations of direct democracy – the vote might be somewhat more precise in terms of the change on offer, but would provide no guarantees about the kind of relationship the British government could negotiate with the rest of Europe. It would also be binding on a population that continues to evolve, and lack any clear means of changing tack in light of new information about the implications of what everyone now knows to be an unprecedented experiment.

**Representation and rhetoric**

If direct democracy is such a bad procedure for making decisions on important issues like British membership in the EU, it is worth asking what the alternatives were, and why the Cameron government did not select them. The answer is obvious. Cameron’s alternative was to stake out a clear vision of Britain’s relationship with Europe, and to campaign on that platform in the 2015 general election. Cameron did not choose that option because he knew that much of his party did not share his vision, and he worried that many Conservative supporters would defect to the UK Independence Party (UKIP) if he staked out a clear position. In other words, Cameron chose not to use Parliament to make important decisions about Britain’s relationship with the EU because he worried about losing control over the decision-making process. Moreover, Cameron is hardly alone in having made that calculation. Jeremy Corbyn did much the same when Theresa May called for early elections in order to get a stronger mandate for her government to deliver Britain’s exit from the EU. Corbyn
refused to allow May to frame the campaign as a repeat of the referendum, and promised to use the decision-making machinery of Westminster to do something else instead. The Europe issue would have divided his Labour Party in 2017 almost as much as it would have divided Cameron’s Conservatives in 2015. Corbyn hid behind the mandate of direct democracy in order to change the subject.

The willingness of the British people to talk about other matters is the second important lesson of the Brexit experience. This willingness reveals the power of political rhetoric. Cameron breathed life into the debate about Europe; Corbyn switched to another topic. This switch revealed that there are any number of critical issues that can grab the attention of the public. The British people face a host of important problems, as do the people of other countries. The role of political leadership is to focus popular attention. Politicians do so by telling stories or building arguments to highlight where the public should look, and how they should interpret what they see. This presents politicians with the challenge of diverting the public’s gaze once it has an issue in focus. The only way to address that challenge is not to deny the importance of what the public sees, but rather to redirect attention to something even more important. Cameron used Europe to redirect the public away from the divisions within his Conservative Party. Corbyn used income inequality to redirect the public away from Europe.

This experience raises the question of whether Britain’s relationship with Europe should ever have been a priority. The founders of European integration embarked on their project in order to tackle important issues that national governments could not manage as easily or effectively. In this sense, the story of integration can be told as the progressive expansion of Europe’s policymaking machinery to include a larger number of governments and a wider array of problems. Somewhere along the way, however, the notion of Europe took on a life of its own. Politicians began to talk about integration as the objective and not the instrument. They began to focus public attention on the importance of Europe as a project. And, perhaps as a consequence, they drew attention away from other problems.

Political rhetoric matters not only because it highlights important issues, but also because it suggests priorities. The problem here is not that politicians
exaggerated the significance of Europe; it is that each time they appealed to the people about Europe they implied that issues left unaddressed were less significant. When Cameron called his referendum, many of his constituents were left wondering who was focusing on matters closer to home. For people facing immediate concerns about income, housing or employment, appeals to focus on Europe were not just a distraction, they were an insult. By removing Europe from the national conversation, these voices have a better chance of being heard. Put another way, the alternative to EU membership is more domestic political attention. A vote to leave is a vote to put an end to a pointless conversation so that policymakers can focus on ‘real’ priorities. Politicians elsewhere in Europe should pay close attention to how their rhetoric frames political choices in this respect.

Integration and disintegration

Unfortunately, if the British who voted to leave the EU wanted more political attention, the experience of withdrawal suggests that they will not get it. Instead, the government will have to devote almost all of its resources to extricating Britain from Europe. This is the third lesson of Britain’s recent experience: that disintegration is not only more complicated than integration, but also occurs at an accelerated pace. This is because of the underlying nature of the process.

As noted, one way to view European integration is as a process for incrementally improving public policymaking by elaborating institutions and procedures for coordinating policies across national governments. ‘Integration’ is not the goal of this process, but rather a description of it. Instead, the goal is to improve policymaking. To achieve that goal, successive national governments in Europe chose how to work together in a series of discrete steps. The pace of those choices was very much a function of the challenges governments faced in adapting to the new relationship. Governments took the time to learn by doing; they often negotiated transition periods; and they occasionally requested or simply exercised opt-outs from those areas where they could not move forward as quickly as the rest. Of course, there were times when the process moved faster than governments anticipated, or the adjustment costs were higher than
politicians expected. Integration was always a process of stops and starts. Sometimes that process imposed costs above and beyond what a society could manage without great hardship. Recent developments in Greece are a powerful (but not the only) illustration of this. Nevertheless, Europe’s heads of state and government generally sought to calibrate the pace and scope of integration so that the benefits in terms of better policymaking outweighed the costs of participation.

The process of disintegration is different insofar as the goal is to ‘leave’. This goal can be described in other ways – perhaps the most compelling characterisation would be the reassertion of domestic control over the public-policy process. But it would be difficult to describe this goal in terms of the step-by-step improvement in public policy through the elaboration of new instruments. For disintegration, leave and control are the objectives. These goals imply a much faster pace than does ‘incremental improvement’.

It has become clear that many advocates of leaving the EU would accept less effective policymaking as a fair price for greater policy autonomy. As a result, it is unrealistic to expect that disintegration will restore the UK – or any other EU member – to the same state in which it found itself before joining the integration process. All the slow and painful adjustments that were required to participate in the EU cannot be undone at once. Moreover, the longer a country has participated in the European project, the more substantially those adjustments will have accumulated.

Conceiving of EU membership as a tangled mass of prior adjustments that would need to be unwound was always easily done in principle. What recent British experience reveals is the magnitude and the complexity of that mass. It is not enough to think about Brexit as a question of restoring control over discrete policy areas; all too often, those policy areas are interconnected in ways that do not suggest an obvious order of operations specifying what to do first, second or third. Moreover, doing everything at once is not an option. The state simply does not have that capacity. Worse, the state is not a unitary entity. National government and institutions play a leading role, but other levels of government are also implicated. Here too, the issues are interconnected, and the order of operations is not obvious. We might have expected this given what we know about the subtlety and
complexity of ‘Europeanisation’. Seeing how disintegration plays out in practice is nevertheless an instructive lesson in what other member states should expect if they choose to exit.

**Beyond sovereignty**

The fourth lesson that Britain is teaching (or re-teaching) the rest of Europe is that neither side actually controls the content of its relationships. Interdependence is not something that developed gradually in international relations; interdependence defines what an international relationship is. This seems obvious on one level. Britain has to agree with what Europe proposes, but Europe also has to agree with Britain. Even the default option is a matter of agreement. Somehow the aeroplanes have to keep flying and the goods have to keep moving; these things do not happen on their own. ‘The market’ is, first and foremost, a regulatory construct, even when market participants move from one country to the next.  

What Britain’s Brexit experience reveals, however, is just how deeply this problem of interdependence extends across the borders of putatively sovereign entities. That is why the Northern Irish situation is so important. The fate of Northern Ireland does not rest solely in the hands of the British, the Northern Irish or the Irish who live in the southern part of the island. Somehow everyone is implicated at once. Moreover, Northern Ireland is only one, extreme example of this problem. Gibraltar is another example; so is Scotland. Less extreme, yet no less intractable, problems centre on distributed manufacturing, services provision and the goods trade. That is why international trade negotiations have become so complicated – again, not just for Britain, and not just in the context of Britain’s exit from the EU. Economics does not merely cross borders, it permeates them and, in so doing, affects almost everything, from what we eat and wear, to what we watch, listen and read, not to mention how much it costs to do so – particularly in a digital age.

Here it is useful to go back to the Brexit debates, and particularly to the cost estimates released by the Remain camp. The short-term impact of the vote to leave was exaggerated at least in part because the forecasters did not anticipate the heroic efforts of the Bank of England to prevent the costs
from reaching the predicted levels. They also did not expect the success of the European Central Bank’s quantitative-easing programme in restarting the European economy, or the boom in American economic performance that somehow continued to gain momentum after Donald Trump was elected. In other words, policy responses and business cycles softened the immediate blow to the British economy. The reluctance of businesses to appreciate the full significance of Britain’s departure from Europe also proved important. Many large multinational firms have hedged their bets and waited until the last minute to see if they can somehow minimise the costs of adjustment or, at a minimum, smooth the transition from one situation to the next.

But the fact that the immediate shock was not as dramatic as some feared does not mean the final cost will be similarly limited. On the contrary, economic activity will leak out of the British economy in a steady trickle of missed opportunities as supply chains adapt to the change in relative cost structures and as investors look to locate their assets where the returns from interdependence are more resilient. From a global perspective, the consequences will be limited; the UK is, after all, only one country – no matter how important that country is to those who live in it. But Brexit’s consequences will also be cumulative insofar as other national economies will suffer from Britain’s absence from Europe, and from the pattern of interdependence that the EU fosters. They will suffer even more if Brexit becomes the first of many departures from the European Union. So will the United Kingdom.

This fourth lesson is a harsh realisation for everyone, not just the British. The modern international system was built on two notions of sovereignty, one that points to the existence of national boundaries and another that respects the monopoly of decision-making authority within them. Both notions were always fictitious to a greater or lesser extent. What Britain’s recent experience reveals is just how difficult and costly it is to insist on that fiction. The demonstration will not stop some politicians – one thinks of Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orbán and Jaroslaw Kaczyński – from pretending. But Britain’s experience should shed some light on the consequences of such pretensions.
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Notes

1 This point about direct democracy was immediately apparent. See Erik Jones, ‘Brexit’s Lessons for European Democracy’, *Survival*, vol. 58, no. 3, June–July 2016, pp. 41–9, and Erik Jones, ‘The Meaning of Britain’s Departure’, *Survival*, vol. 58, no. 4, August–September 2016, pp. 211–24.


3 Another way to make the same argument would be to focus on the weakness and divisiveness of modern party politics. See, for example, Erik Jones, ‘From the End of History to the Retreat of Liberalism’, *Survival*, vol. 59, no. 6, December 2017–January 2018, pp. 165–74, and Erik Jones, ‘Democracies Don’t Die, They Are Killed’, *Survival*, vol. 60, no. 2, April–May 2018, pp. 201–10.

4 For the long view on this argument, see Matthias Matthijs, *Ideas and Economic Crises in Britain from Attlee to Blair* (London: Routledge, 2012).


7 For the Italian case, see Erik Jones, ‘Italy, Its Populists and the EU’, *Survival*, vol. 60, no. 4, August–September 2018, pp. 113–22.