A second referendum will not fix the social division behind the Brexit vote – and it could make it worse

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The social divide among Leavers and Remainers is striking. The immediate reaction of many to run a second referendum therefore fails to understand the cause of the result: many feel that they have no influence over the immediate circumstances that surround them. But it's not just the electorate's 48 per cent who need to understand these drivers, writes **Tony Hockley***, but UK and EU elites alike: it is time to start thinking about the reforms that will address this widespread division and discontent.*

Many of those who now complain about the referendum result personally know no-one who voted for Brexit. Think about this for a moment and the result begins to make sense. Think about it for a little longer and the idea of signing a petition for another vote becomes the worst loser response, not the best. Social group AB voted to remain. The remainder of the country did not. Put in more crude terms, those with money – of all ages – voted Remain, those without voted Leave. Calls for another referendum, a general election, or for Parliament to reject the result will rightly be seen as another attempt by privileged groups to assert their authority over the rest.

A decent job and relative affluence provide autonomy; at work, at home, and above all over the social circle that is inhabited. Within every area that voted to leave the EU there will still be shocked, isolated groups of ABs who see only the benefits of unfettered free movement in Europe, and worry about economic growth. For others the shock is from how much the identity of their community has changed, how quickly, how little they have gained from this, and how little influence they have had. They feel stripped of autonomy.

Since 2010, the government has pursued policies to devolve control to individuals and communities. Directly-elected mayors and police and crime commissioners, and the ability to create new "free schools" are all attempts to foster local engagement in decisions that affect daily life. In January 2016, David Cameron announced a new strategy to regenerate run-down council estates, concerned that those who could move out had done so, leaving behind those unable to do so. The crumbling buildings of the estates of the 1960s can and will be improved. But the established social identity of many communities has also been crumbling, with no strategy for its replacement. Social identities matter. Humans are herd animals and social identity determines a large part of individual behaviour. It can be a force for good, binding communities together in social engagement, or a force for division when a community feels threatened.

I recently revisited the council estate of my 1970s childhood in Southampton. Until I walked down my old high street I had not understood the rising discontent about migration. Whilst the benefits of free movement are spread wide, the costs tend to be very concentrated. Population data for my old council ward shows that in the decade to 2011 there was an unprecedented influx of almost 2000 new residents who had been born overseas, about half of these came from Poland. This will have affected local homes, schools, shops, and jobs.

Even ward-level data on migration hides the full-scale of the localised and rapid change that has taken place. Good or bad it is an external force over which no-one in Britain has any influence. It is human nature to attach greater value to what is already possessed rather than what might be gained from change, known as the "endowment effect". It is also human nature to prefer self-determination over control. That is why so many were motivated to vote for Brexit. These issues are not unique to one ward in Southampton, which is by no means an extreme case, but are being felt across the EU. It is clear that a referendum in any other member state could produce a similar response.

The European "project" was designed within a world of sparring blocs of developed countries. These countries were the source of world economic growth and social advance. Since then there has been the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, trade globalisation and fragmentation, and the single currency experiment. Excess confidence in the European project is based on an assessment of the past, and not of the future. The whole concept of a federal European bloc is looking dated and dangerous. It is too distant, and too inflexible. As the referendum has shown, handouts from the EU budget to deprived communities are no compensation for the loss of control. The message of the Leave campaign to "Take back Control" proved to be particularly salient amongst affected communities. Those who have control over their own lives – because they have money – just cannot comprehend the problem.

Leave voters were not ignoring the experts. They were not stupid and misled. To claim that they were simply reinforces the underlying prejudices. Polls the weekend after the vote showed little remorse over voting decisions. They understood as well as anyone that the claims on both sides were more rhetoric than fact. They understood that change is a risk, but they also believed that they had little to lose. The experts, however, were not listening to them, and were too quick to denounce anyone who challenged their consensus. For the most part the experts are still not listening, and still denouncing.

The period between the UK referendum and the beginning of any formal negotiation on Britain's European future provides a valuable opportunity for reflection and reform. Political leaders in the EU and the UK must think carefully about the substantive reforms that will be needed to address widespread social division and discontent. As long as people feel that they have no influence over the immediate circumstances within which they live, then divisions will become ever more entrenched and inflammatory. If more people feel in control of their lives then the problems within the UK and Europe can start to be tackled.

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About the Author

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