# 'I want my country back': the resurgence of English nationalism

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*The three phases of Brexit – campaign, referendum, aftermath – have revealed three urgent problems, writes **Russell Foster**: the lack of public faith in establishment politics, the emotional deficit of the EU, and the return of English nationalism. All three stages have been characterised by contempt, anger and despair unseen in recent British politics and the referendum was thus fought on raw emotion. Once the genie of nationalism has been released from its bottle, it turns on those who released it and it cannot easily be put back.*
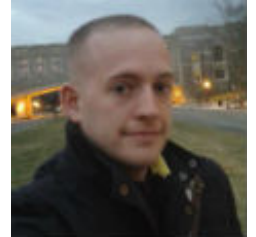
On BBC1's Question Time programme broadcast on 15 June an audience member pleaded "I want my country back… we're all just so frustrated". This single plea symbolised a referendum which has been dominated not by sober analysis and evidence-based reason, but by hysteria, hatred, savage emotions, and the sinister monster of exclusionary, ethnic nationalism.

The three phases of Brexit – campaign, referendum, aftermath – have revealed three urgent problems. First, the lack of public faith in establishment politics. Second, the emotional deficit of the EU. Third, the return of a particularly ugly English nationalism. All of these were intimately connected in a campaign whose nature was fundamentally emotional. While the EU is no longer an immediate priority for the next government, public lack of faith and the return of national identity in England are urgent issues which a new government must carefully address.



Fencing around the Eurotunnel terminal at Calais. Photo: UK Home Office via a CC-BY-2.0 licence

First, the erosion of political faith. An unforeseen consequence is that a campaign about Europeanness has brought to the fore severe tensions within Britishness. The accusations made by Leave against the EU – that it is an undemocratic, elitist network sustained by corruption – were appropriated by both cross-party campaigns as criticisms of the British establishment. In the aftermath of Brexit a lack of faith in the referendum's legitimacy – in the viability of the UK as a collective union, in party leadership, and perhaps in the very system of British Parliamentary politics – has manifested in the form of demands for another referendum, threats of balkanisation, and a dual Conservative-Labour leadership crisis. Lack of faith was not a sideshow restricted to conspiracy theories about

ballot papers. It has underpinned the entire campaign and will likely trigger a general election even more emotional, bitter and unpredictable than the elections and referenda of 2010-2016. A probable election in late 2016 will require all factions to quickly restore public faith in parties, leaders, and the very system of government. This will not be easy, and will likely result in major party infighting and parties moving much closer to populism for years to come.

The second issue raised by Brexit is final proof that EU leaders and EU scholars must abandon the long-outdated assumptions of neofunctionalist spillover – the dominant, archaic belief that ever-closer political and economic integration would result in stronger feelings of 'EU-ropeanness". This has not happened. Euroscepticism is higher than ever. Upcoming French and German elections could see the same frustrations give birth to populist anti-EU governments in the Union's keystones. Unless the EU, whose leaders have consistently failed to respond to an ever-louder Euroscepticism since 2007, act immediately to improve the EU's image as a democratically accountable alliance rather than an out-of-touch clique, Britain could prove to be the first of 27 closely-spaced dominos to fall.

Lack of faith in the British and European establishment are deeply emotional issues, and are intimately connected with the third consequence of Brexit – the rise of an aggressive, angry, ethnic Englishness. All three stages of Brexit have been characterised by contempt, anger and despair unseen in recent British politics. And these are issues with which the Remain campaign struggled to compete. The referendum was not fought on logical, sober, rational arguments. It was fought on raw emotion. No amount of economic data and well-meaning appeals to cosmopolitanism can compete with the pull of nostalgia and the primal savagery of resentment. This emotional surge was not most keenly felt in the nations or the capital but in those post-industrial provinces of England which have spent forty years as backwaters; such places have not shared the same degree of power and prosperity as the devolved nations and the metropolis. When asked to support the cause of a government and parties which have either harmed or simply ignored the provinces ("the North" acting as the media's poor synecdoche for England), the consequence was the unleashing of English resentment traceable to the 1970s:resentment of those who campaigned for Remain, accused of being traitors; resentment of those who voted Leave, demonised as uneducated racists; resentment of immigration, of economic decline, of the Westminster consensus and the Brussels establishment. Ultimately it is resentment which has created a bitterly divided Britain and triggered an assassination on a city street.

Ultimately the referendum was a test of Britain's, and specifically England's, faith and identity. Faith has been proven to be fallible, and identity has retreated into an ethnic nationalism, a yearning for a collective belonging which is given meaning not by appealing to a distant, nostalgic imagination but by appealing to a rejection of the present. This present is symbolised by a multi-party establishment which may soon discover that, like in Scotland in 2014, once the genie of nationalism has been released from its bottle, it turns on those who released it. And it cannot be easily put back.

*This article represents the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Brexit blog, or of the LSE. It was first published as part of the EU Referendum Analysis project.*

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