

# Brexit And After

Here's my latest column for [The Indian Economist](#):

## Was Brexit An Emotional Decision?

*Has the Brexit referendum only been successful in unleashing rage and violence against different communities in the UK, making everyone including Brits insecure?*

A recent visit to Britain produced plenty to think about. Over four months since the referendum that delivered a narrow vote in favour of the UK leaving the European Union (EU), the outcome remains a, if not *the* dominant topic of political discussion. This is hardly surprising given that both the modalities and wider implications of the 'Brexit' vote are still being worked out.

Mirroring the outcome, discussions with friends and colleagues produced some real surprises. In brief, a number of them (admittedly small) voted for Brexit. A declaration of interest is in order: I regard myself as a thoroughly Europeanized, not to say internationalised Brit, and proud of it. And accordingly, my '[filter bubble](#)' mostly comprises people on the same wavelength. Nevertheless, learning that an old friend who's as cosmopolitan as they come, voted in *favour* of Brexit came as a shock. What on earth is going on in the country I still consider mine?

## Referendums in focus

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Here are three insights culled from my attempts to answer that question. First, it's time to revisit the question of referendums. On the back of declining popular trust in representative democracy, the appeal of an alternative 'direct democracy' approach has undoubtedly increased. The referendum has become a key tool for the 'direct' delivery of the people's verdict.



In the Hungarian referendum, plurality voted to reject EU plans, but poll numbers were too low to be valid. | Source: Deutsche Welle

Across the globe, it has indeed been quite a year for the referendum. Alongside the Brexit vote, a peace deal to end Colombia's civil war has been rejected; a new constitution that significantly limits democracy has been voted through in Thailand; and plans to reject EU requirements for accepting refugees have been approved in Hungary – [though thankfully low turnout meant the referendum result was invalidated.](#)

*In all cases, the fact that voters herded through decisions with huge implications, while not necessarily enjoying a clear understanding of the issues at hand, induces a real pause for thought.*

'Take Back Control', the Brexiteers shouted endlessly. 'It's the Economy Stupid', screamed Remain in reply. Looking closely at the recent UK experience makes matters clearer. The argument that it offers a textbook demonstration of the way in which politicians can refashion a complex issue – in this instance, the benefits or otherwise of continued EU membership – as a straightforward choice gathers steam. 'Take Back Control', the Brexiteers shouted endlessly. 'It's the Economy Stupid', screamed Remain in reply. And so it went on – plenty of heat generated with little, if any, resultant light. And all in the name of respecting the people's choice.

Is this democracy? As Professor Kenneth Rogoff [commented](#) following the UK referendum,

‘The idea that any decision reached anytime by majority rule is necessarily ‘democratic’ is a perversion. This isn’t democracy; it is Russian roulette for republics’.

If Rogoff is right, then, does the EU referendum qualify as British democracy’s worst hour?

## Immigration

*A survey found that post-referendum, crimes committed against people due to their race or religion rose by 41 per cent.*

A second insight concerns the role of immigration. The facts speak for themselves. A recently published survey found that post-referendum, crimes committed against people due to their race or religion rose by 41 per cent. Eastern Europeans, in particular, Poles, have undoubtedly been the target of a mounting campaign of vitriol and abuse. This has resulted in growing numbers fleeing the country.



In the aftermath of Brexit, violence in the name of race and religion has been on the rise. | Source: Independent UK

Take the case of Joanna Kalinowksa, as reported in a [recent BBC programme](#). “I was talking to my daughter [in Polish]’, Joanna recalls. ‘A man passed and said ‘if you are in England you have to talk in English... otherwise you go back to your country’. I said, ‘I am talking with my child, so I will talk in my language. And this is also my country, and I have equal rights here’. The man answered: “You don’t have any rights here anymore.” ‘That was my experience after Brexit’. Is this emblematic of the direction in which Britain is headed? And if it is, what’s to be done about it?

Within the UK Asian community, too, there are voices expressing concern over the impact of the Brexit vote. [In a](#)

[recent Hindustan Times column](#), for example, Sunny Hundal argues that the message from UK Prime Minister Theresa May to India's 'brightest and best' is this: 'You're not welcome anymore'. And she's right', he suggests, 'They are not welcome anymore.'

The impending clampdown on immigration promised by the Brexiteers, Hundal argues, will hit not only Indians seeking work in the UK but also those wanting to study, visit or join family living there. Furthermore, he also points out, it will hit Indian companies looking to invest in Britain.

## **Building walls of isolation**

All in all, it's a measure of the depths of mistrust the referendum campaign has stirred up that Hundal references Enoch Powell and his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech as a benchmark for discussing contemporary UK race relations.

What exactly are the causes of this collective UK turn inwards? Intriguingly, Dutchman [Joris Luyendijk](#) suggests that the explanation lies in a kind of visceral post-imperial retreat into narcissism. 'Rather than accepting itself as a country dependent on its neighbours like the rest of us, the English got lost in themselves, and then chose isolation.' Only this time, he argues, 'it will not be splendid.'

## **Post-truth politics**

*In this scenario, 'facts' no longer occupy centre-stage.*

The final insight concerns the notion of 'post-truth politics'. What? You may be asking: isn't politics supposed to be about truth? Verifiable economic facts, empirically informed policy proposals and so on? Welcome to the new/old politics – as demonstrated in the EU referendum. In this scenario, 'facts' no longer occupy centre-stage. What matters

is what you, I and everyone else *feels* about the issue.



The Leave-campaign was inspired by the Trump style, playing the emotions card while underplaying facts. | Source: Vanity Fair

An excellent [essay by Katherine Viner](#) makes the point succinctly. A few days after the EU vote, she notes, Arron Banks, chief funder of the Leave campaign, [told the Guardian](#) that his side knew all along that 'facts' would not win the day.

[We were] taking an American-style media approach. What [we] said early on was 'Facts don't work', and that's it. The Remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact.. – It just doesn't work. You have got to connect with people emotionally. It's the Trump success.

So forget facts. Go for gut feeling. With Trump as your inspiration. Not a savoury conclusion regarding the way the Brexiteers manoeuvred themselves into the realm of hard political 'fact'. But revealing, perhaps, of the wider world in which we find ourselves today.

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