



Beyond Brexit: Lessons learnt for Europe



Drawing lessons and thinking ahead for Europe is the focus of this complementary article for Progressives across Europe to take heed of the drivers of Brexit. It uses analysis of the results of FEPS - Fabian Society survey carried out by YouGov on attitudes towards Brexit, for the book *“Beyond Brexit: the Left’s agenda for the UK and EU”* edited by Olivia Bailey.

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Introduction: Drawing Lessons and thinking ahead for Progressives across Europe

This short commentary aims to be a response to complement further findings with the broader European context. With this mission in mind, there are three main issues that come to our attention from the survey:

1. ***European identity (understood as a sense of European citizenship)***
2. ***Europe's capacity to act and deliver***
3. ***Political discourse about the EU and its future***

The outcome of the referendum on EU membership in the UK on 23rd June 2016 was a very uncomfortable reality for many. Uncomfortable for a divided Britain. Uncomfortable also for close neighbours and the rest of the EU who have to deal with the consequence of what had up to now been treated as an internal British issue. Often referred to as the 'awkward partner' the UK had now voted to take both feet out as it were and exit from a Union it had been a member of for 43 years. Some delighted across Europe, with the prospect of now finally being able to get on with the things Britain had been causing the EU to delay on.

Yet those who thought the campaign was unbearable and were relieved that at least the people had taken a decision so that was the end, were not prepared for the lengthy negotiations to come. Two years on and most policy development is completely blocked by Brexit, and any news updates are negative or with an apprise of deadlock. Unfortunately reliable information about what the EU actually is and does was scarce, it's only now people are only beginning to understand the role of the EU whilst preparing to leave.

The current Brexit struggle is consuming both British internal politics and the European political agenda whereby there is a certain paradox to be noted; Brexit has been feared, amongst other issues, as a phenomenon that could encourage other states to entertain a possible distancing or even detachment from the European Union. Something which would not be unthinkable, taking into account that the EU of today is perhaps at its most divided ever. So to a large extent, the most insecure it has ever been as far as having a direction for the future is concerned. A clear example of that is the unresolved debate on the European Commission *5 scenarios*. Yet even if that is the case, the Brexit negotiations perhaps most ironically are the only example of a large-scale issue where the EU would stay united. And it would not bend – following the comments of Donald Tusk, President of the Council as given to BBC on Monday, 15th October - being ready as it would seem to rather risk a 'no deal' than to compromise on anything.

The procedure is in place and as it stands today, the membership of the UK is set to terminate in just over 150 days. This is of course ahead of the next European elections. However many are calling for a 'say' or a vote on the final deal and there seems to be no suitable solution for the border of Ireland and N.Ireland. Consequently finding any deal at this EU summit in October or the next remains



unlikely at this stage. Astonishingly at the same time the UK is asking for a divorce though it is also trying to negotiate a post-divorce living settlement. Which is challenging to say the least.

Nevertheless, in looking towards the future relationship for the UK and the EU, many people have defined fears and aspirations when it comes to the future they expect. Progressives can draw on the lessons from 2016-2018 and look at how they should approach this next phase.

Analysis of the poll

The recent survey commissioned by FEPS and the Fabian Society this summer, 2018 is therefore most instructive. The article by Olivia Bailey in the FEPS – Fabians pamphlet '*Beyond Brexit: the Left's agenda for the UK and the EU*' luminously captured the British understanding of what the figures tell. This short commentary aims to be a response to complement those findings with the broader European context. With this mission in mind, there are three main issues that come to our attention, referring to three respective segments; the first is the question of **European identity (understood as a sense of European citizenship)**, the second is a matter of **Europe's capacity to act and deliver**, and finally the third is the issue of **political discourse about the EU and its future**. The last seems most relevant, especially when 27 Member States are about to begin the campaign for the next legislative period 2019 – 2024 of the European Parliament.

European Identity

On the first question of European identity, the issue started gaining prominence and has become a preoccupation for the political elites. Before the experience with the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, it had been assumed that the Political Union could simply be built into the existing framework of the European Economic Community. There was an expectation that it would happen somehow by default with citizens becoming attached to the values the EU has been built upon. This was misleading and illustrates how people do often not relate to this sense of belonging and this in itself has often been underestimated.

Whilst in the context of the Brexit referendum as also elsewhere in the EU, the anti-European argument evolves around culture and identity defined in a narrow national frame. And unfortunately the way it responded to the economic crisis has been a detriment to the development of the EU. An EU that not only fails to strike back, but also overlooks how important that is for the citizens to share the sense of *being in this together*. So here the FEPS - Fabian survey is most enlightening because when asking British citizens if *they feel that they have much in common with the other European Member States and will continue to do so after Brexit*; one in three believes so, while slightly less people assume that there will be less in common in the post Brexit times. At the same time, a majority of the respondents (52%) say that they *don't currently feel European*.

There could be many ways to interpret this data and possibly some commentators would point at the British context. Although, this could be disputed if you take the example of the arguments developed by the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown in his book '*Britain Leading, not leaving – the Patriotic Case for Remaining in Europe*' (Dierpartpress 2016). The pan-European lesson to take on seems a very simple one in fact; anti-Europeans have been profoundly successful in showcasing what divides



us and this is most likely what they will be aiming for to frame in the campaign ahead of the 2019 elections. In the context of the UK and the analysis of the survey, it is up to the point that citizens believe that they may have a lot in common with others in Europe (or across the globe), but it isn't the European Union that brings them together offering a sense of belonging to the same cause and sharing responsibilities for it. This would mean that another kind of a convincing, values-embedded discourse on Europe would be required both for the Progressives to stand a chance next year, as also for the pro-European camp to be able to make the case for a new rapprochement for Britain.

So how to get there? The EU Barometer Survey *Democracy on the Move: One year to go to the European Elections* issued in May 2018 (PE 621.866) and the Standard Eurobarometer issued at the European Culture Forum in 2017 seem to offer partial answers. Following their findings, 84% of Europeans say that cultural heritage is important to them (with 90% saying it very much is, when it comes to their countries). 70% claim that being in proximity of European cultural heritage or experiencing Europe directly (here also through Erasmus) makes them feel European, for which reason perhaps **as many as 88% would like to see European history and European culture to be taught at school. These results in themselves are overwhelming and only further underpin the notion that there is solid ground to stand on to fight back the nationalists. What is needed is the head-on involvement in the European identity debate and a new narrative capable to contradict the division between 'them in Brussels and us at home'. There is a need and space for progressive leadership that could create new openings and to frame the conversation in a different manner.**

Europe's capacity to act and deliver

The Fabian and FEPS polling results highlight an understanding that while the lack of sense of belonging mattered, what was equally or possibly even more important is the typical British pragmatism in making the choice. Yes, many say that referenda are an atypical vote that in the end turns out to be about many other things than the question itself. This is why it has been suggested that the 'no' was also a cry out of people, who were simply given a chance to express their opposition to unfairness and wrong course of affairs observed in their country. At the same time, our survey prompts people to look at the long-term context – the interpretation quoted above appears to be a certain simplification. It is quite possible that British citizens voted on the Union that was not delivering, that was disappointing them – disbelieving at that moment that much could be changed. Indeed many have shown that the campaign reacted mainly to the most impressionable headlines.

Interestingly when asked about the perceived benefits and losses of Brexit in the perspective of 10 years and then looking at what they could be in 2044, there seems to be little difference. That is quite telling and encouraging in a way. Nowadays, politicians find themselves under vast pressures to deliver – for today's or even yesterday's deadline. But this is very hard to accomplish when it comes to the EU, where a complex process of an idea being launched and finding consensus to make it happen can take sometimes even decades. **Subsequently the results collected through the survey tell us that both matter equally the same, so there is a place both for concrete deliverables and long-term visions to be spelled out in the context of the European debate.**

When asked about the possible benefits and losses post-Brexit, the only points where British respondents thought it would have a positive impact were the matters of British pride and the issue



of rule of law. When it comes to immigration, for example, the views were already much more divided – with Conservative voters of 2017 claiming it will have a positive impact, while Labour and especially LibDem supporters having a different opinion. **To that end, supporters of the latter two were rather convinced that leaving the EU would have a negative impact for the long term, when it comes to security, jobs and workers' rights, environment, business and prices.** Most surprisingly however was to see that on public services a higher percentage of LibDem voters than Labour; 58% of LibDems believing that Brexit would have a negative impact. *Rather* is a crucial word here, as the data shows a great division of the opinions suggesting also no overwhelming coherency in the parties' narratives and strategies.

Additionally, when asked specifically about what issues British politicians should give priority to when it comes to both the negotiations and the post-Brexit future – issues such as immigration, UK laws, access to the European market and security were named at the top. Interestingly, this falls very closely to what the Standards Eurobarometer 89 discovered for the rest of European Member States. People named as main concerns the issues that are pressing and are most related to the diverse challenges which have shaken the EU in the last decade: immigration, terrorism, economy (prosperity), finances and unemployment. This contrasted markedly when asked to list the political priorities at national level, Europeans started with unemployment, health and social services, immigration and cost of living.

Secondly, the concern about the EU's capacity to act and deliver is illustrated in the survey and points to yet another uncomfortable truth; the European Union is seen by its citizens as struggling and not being able to effectively deal with diverse issues that it has faced and also is bound to be confronted with in the future. Similarly, it has not developed the social dimension – the famous Social Europe – to the level with which citizens would associate it and its benefits to membership of the EU. This contributes to why many people think about the EU as a community based on markets and not a community they belong to as an individual. To back-up this conclusion, it is enough to look at the percentage of citizens feeling European not in terms of the EU average, but within the Member States. Most of those identifying themselves with the EU as it stands today can be found in Luxembourg, Ireland and Germany – two out of which countries surpassed the economic crisis unaffected. The lowest numbers, on the other hand, are noted for Italy, Greece and Bulgaria – each of which find themselves still struggling, a decade after the global markets crashed.

Therefore it should be about a new kind of emancipation for the future; based on socio-economic and political senses together. A very important factor of our survey is the time and the future orientation. Proposals that Progressives should be leading on should not be about brushing up old programmes but rather looking towards the Next Social Europe – the Social Europe of the Future. This is because looking at how British and other Europeans see the risks of not only no improvement on living standards but even worse a decline in living standards and availability of opportunities prompts the need to address the drivers of the Brexit vote.

Political discourse about the EU and its future

Thirdly, regarding the political discourse about the EU and its future, on the question of European elections and the anticipated discourse, it would seem that the following lesson should be learnt; it is



clear that there is a need for a new, progressive unifying narrative about the future of Europe and furthermore it is evident that the return to the principle promise of a next Social Europe is a fundamental basis. Whilst at the same time more needs to be done for citizens to feel that the decision-making power for defining what Europe for the new times belongs to them. The Fabian - FEPS survey clearly stipulates the issue of self-determination as a priority for the British but also for Europeans, who surveyed in 2018 found that their main concern is that their vote counts. 40% said that if they abstain it's not because they don't trust politicians or dislike the EU, but because they do not think that their vote matters and can make a change. This is especially the case in European elections, where turnout is frequently low, notably perhaps because it is seen as a sign of lack of support towards the EU. This is a specific reading which is not applicable to any national vote as the sense of existence of the country as such is not usually questioned.

Consequently, there is a question for Progressives of how to ensure citizens' votes count and that they can actually effectuate a change. One-way is about fighting the scape-goating, whereby Brussels is blamed for unpopular policies or misfortunes. Whereas when there is something positive and popular, national governments are quick to take responsibility. This has been going for years in all Member States and is therefore no wonder that the *'take back control'* slogan was so easy to convey. Here Progressives could better articulate the argument used by Martin Schulz, the former President of the European Parliament, who reminded us in 2016 that the UK was never forced to become a part of anything it did not want to join and Schengen and the euro are just two good examples of that.

Furthermore, there is a need for showcasing that although there is much criticism against so-called traditional parties, they are still the ones who have established avenues of cooperation on the European level and can make a difference. When it comes to Brexit, only 4% of the citizens surveyed in the FEPS – Fabian project said that they would favour a 'distant and cold' relationship. Richard Corbett, MEP – speaking at our *'Beyond Brexit'* book launch event in Brussels, conveyed that people's opinions have been changing not least because everytime Brexit is mentioned in the news it is negative but also we are learning how important cooperation and mutual understanding of other actors is. For those reasons Social Democrats in Europe should perhaps break out of the attitude that the referendum in Britain was a British issue. It has always been a European matter and its' consequences are to be profoundly relevant for everyone – whether its about Polish workers in the UK, international companies and financial centres in London, or about common global causes such as fighting climate change.

Building on that, Progressives should be proud that they are a traditional, historical political family. They should not be allowing themselves to be overwhelmed with the changes of the partisan systems, by fragmentation. Hard data showing that in the years 2013-2018 around 70 different parties and alliances were established in the Member States, a huge increase, nevertheless a majority of Europeans see this as no threat to democracy. **However significantly 70% of respondents believe that being against something is not enough to make things improve.**

All in all, the data of the survey commissioned by FEPS and the Fabian Society shows quite clearly that it carries instructive material to learn and build on. Contextualised and contrasted with the European data, it shows common tendencies that are perhaps uncomfortable truths – but which



should be met with courage. If understood as lessons, they can be encouraging and inspiring for Progressives to face the debate about identity and the sense of belonging when it comes to the European Union, to make the case for the European society of the future via a vision of the Next Social Europe and to that end make sure that each vote cast on them at the next European elections in May 2019 will truly count.

[*“Beyond Brexit: the Left’s agenda in the UK and EU”*](#) published by FEPS and the Fabian Society, edited by Olivia Bailey is available at FEPS office and online.

Further complementary article by Jo Leinen MEP, [*“The EU cannot be flexible on its principles with Brexit”*](#)



**The left’s agenda for
the UK and EU**

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