

43 years after their accession Britons decide to leave the European Union

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Results

On 23rd June Britons decided to leave the European Union. To the question they were asked (Should the UK remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union? a majority of voters (51.9%) answered "leave" whilst 48.1% voted to remain. Turnout totalled 72.2%.

Geographical and generational cleavages were clearly visible in the results of this consultation. Hence, only England (53.4%), notably the eastern part and except for London and Wales (52.5%), voted in their majority to "Leave Brexit" whilst Scotland (62%) and Northern Ireland (55.8%) vote in their majority to "Remain". Incidentally many fear that the referendum of 23rd June will strengthen the lines of division between the different parts of the country. In Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein has already demanded a union referendum with the southern part of the island; the Scottish National Party (SNP) is again threatening another referendum on the independence of Scotland.

According to a YouGov exit poll three quarters of voters aged 18 to 24 (66%) and half of the 25-49 year olds (52%) voted "Remain" whilst 58% of the 50-64 year olds preferred "Leave" as did 62% of the over 65's. The vote in support of the UK remaining in the EU easily took the lead in the university towns

of Cambridge, Oxford, York, Liverpool, Manchester and Bristol.

More generally young people, the most qualified and urban dwellers voted "Remain", whilst the eldest, the poorly qualified and rural dwellers voted "Leave".

Brexit (Britain exit), i.e. the exit of the UK from the European Union bears witness of course to the British population's dislike of Brussels. It might very well have a knock-on effect (in the Netherlands, with populist Geert Wilders (Freedom Party PVV) already promising to organise his country's exit from the Union if his party wins the general elections planned for the spring of 2017). It points to the possibility of the unravelling of the EU after years of continuous enlargement. The UK's disaffection is the biggest failure in Europe's history and will profoundly modify the landscape of the latter.

The referendum results on the UK's exit of the EU on 23rd June 2016

Turnout: 72,2%

Country	Should the UK leave the European Union		Should the UK remain a member of the European Union	
	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of votes won	% of votes won
UK	17 410 742	51,90	16 141 241	48,10
England	15 188 406	53,40	13 266 996	46,60
Scotland	1 018 322	38	1 661 191	62
Wales	854 572	52,50	772 347	47,50
Northern Ireland	349 442	44,20	440 437	55,80

Source : <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/journalist/electoral-commission-media-centre/news-releases-referendums/official-result-of-the-eu-referendum-is-declared-by-electoral-commission-in-manchester>

THE SPECIAL POSITION OF THE BRITISH

Since their accession in 1973 the British have always had one foot in and the other out of the EU.

Some defenders of the Brexit, such as the "Vote Leave" group led by former Mayor of London (2008-2016), Conservative Boris Johnson, are fervent supporters of economic liberalism and during the electoral campaign they put British sovereignty to the fore, whilst others, led by Nigel Farage (United Kingdom Independence Party, UKIP) of the "Leave EU" group, primarily expressed their hostility of immigration.

The former, who support the Single Market, no longer support the regulations issued by Brussels, which in their opinion restrict both businesses and citizens. In their opinion the EU is an impediment to economic power and entrepreneurial freedom. It is a major risk factor due to its lack of growth and the debt crisis. The latter see the membership of their country to the EU as a loss of sovereignty, and want to take back control of their borders.

"The population blame their dissatisfaction on the leadership of the Labour Party, the establishment, immigrants, the banks of the European Union, all in one bag." This referendum is bound closely to one extremely polarising issue: *immigration*. In the last referendum in 1975 immigration was not an issue. Now small wage earners blame the immigrants and not the government for their problems, for their low wages. "Voting "Brexit" means taking revenge on the injustice of life," said Vernon Bogdanor, a

Professor at King's College and at the University of Oxford. *"The Leave vote is a kind of revolution in a country which has not known one. It would be the first time in the UK that the result of a vote, a referendum goes against the government and parliament,"* maintained Professor Bogdanor a few days before the vote.

FAILURE FOR DAVID CAMERON

David Cameron (Conservative Party) has therefore lost his wager. In January 2013 in the hope of countering UKIP and Nigel Farage and to appease the eurosceptic wing of his party the Prime Minister announced that he would organise a referendum on the UK's exit of the EU by the end of 2017 if the Tories won in the general elections in 2015. His re-election as head of the British government after the general election in May 2015 was finally rather more due to his promise of a referendum than the results he had achieved as head of the country.

David Cameron underestimated the strength of eurosceptic feeling and probably also the discredit of which his government is the focus. The Conservative leader was not helped in this electoral campaign by his Labour counterpart Jeremy Corbyn, who has never been an enthusiastic europhile himself (he opposed his country's membership of the EU in 1975, the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in 2005 and the Lisbon Treaty in 2009) although he sided with the upkeep of the UK in the EU this time. Moreover Labour refused to campaign alongside the Conservative party after the negative experience in the

referendum on 18th September 2014 on the independence of Scotland. The supporters of the "Remain" camp certainly did not promote adequately the positive aspects of the latter or the benefits to be had of integration and solidarity between Member States during the campaign.

The head of the British government announced on 24th June that he wanted to resign from office in the autumn. "I think the country needs a new leader to undertake negotiations with the European Union," declared David Cameron. The Conservative Party is to appoint a new leader during the party congress in October; the latter will be appointed Prime Minister after this. To date Boris Johnson is the favourite to take over from David Cameron but other names are in the running.

THE FUTURE

Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty stipulates that the Member State that chooses to leave the Union must notify the European Council of its intention. Then Brussels "*negotiates and concludes an agreement with that State setting the arrangements for its withdrawal, taking into account the framework for its future relations with the Union*". The European Treaties then cease to apply to the State in question "*from the date of entry into force of the withdrawal agreement or, failing that, two years after the notification referred to in paragraph 2, unless the European Council, in agreement with the Member State concerned, unanimously decides to extend this period.*"

200 trade agreements will have to be renegotiated, 80,000 pages of Community laws examined but nothing was planned for in the European treaties for the specific period of withdrawal by a Member States, which could therefore last several years. Does the same thing apply to the British

Commissioner (Jonathan Hill, Commissioner for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union, resigned from his post on 25th June), and the 73 British MEPs? Will they continue to vote on European legislation whilst they have been called to quit the Union? What will the calendar of negotiations be? Will the negotiations regarding the new relations between the British and Europeans run concurrently with those governing the divorce between London and Brussels? The Lisbon Treaty does not provide answers to these questions.

By way of the President of the European Commission Brussels has however asked the British to notify it of its intention to withdraw in order to dispel uncertainty on the markets. "*As painful as the process might be, we now hope that the British government will follow up on its decision as quickly as possible. All delay will simply prolong the feeling of uncertainty,*" declared Jean-Claude Juncker.

The British referendum of 23rd June comprises a third failure in European affairs in six months. On 3rd December 2015 the Danes rejected participation by their country in the European security programmes: 53.1% of the electorate said "no" to the adoption of 22 European rules within the framework of the fight to counter organised crime, cross-border financial fraud, the jihadist threat, arms trafficking, cybercrime, the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. On 6th April last the 61% of the Dutch rejected the association treaty between the EU and Ukraine.

These elections are undermining Brussels' legitimacy and bear witness to the gulf that exists between Europeans and their representatives which seems to be growing as the years go by. A reform and a renewal of the European Union now seem more necessary than ever before.

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