

# The long shadow of Brexit

David Lidington on how leaving the EU absorbed a decade of British politics without addressing the grievances behind it.

---

David Cameron was right about one thing. I remember the meeting in the run-up to the 2016 referendum when he warned that, if the British people voted to leave the EU, the government and parliament would spend the next five to ten years having to work through the consequences.

That prediction proved accurate. Brexit has consumed a vast amount of the finite time, energy and bandwidth of successive governments: from Cameron's 2013 Bloomberg speech, in which he promised an in-out referendum, to the fraught departure negotiations of the May and Johnson governments, to Rishi Sunak's negotiation of the Windsor Framework in 2023, and now the Starmer government's efforts to reset Britain's relationship with the EU.

British ministers and officials spent vast amounts of time and energy renegotiating the terms of EU membership; designing and legislating for the referendum; wrangling both with the European Commission and internally within British politics over the detail of, first, a Withdrawal Agreement and then a Trade and Co-operation Agreement; sorting out transitional arrangements; agreeing with the three devolved administrations how to handle the more than 150 areas of EU law to be transferred from the EU to the UK that also intersected with devolved responsibilities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; drafting and enacting new laws to transfer EU arrangements onto a domestic legal basis, and establishing new regulatory systems to replace those of the EU.

The time spent sorting out Brexit was the time and energy unavailable to address more acute economic and social challenges facing Britain: poor productivity, inadequate skills,

patchy infrastructure, a persistent difficulty of turning innovative technology and research into large and profitable businesses, and the pressures created by an ageing society and falling birth rate.

*“The time spent sorting out Brexit was the time and energy unavailable to address more acute economic and social challenges facing Britain.”*

Leaving a bloc in which Britain had been a leading player for more than 40 years – and by far our most important global trading partner, with rules intertwined in domestic law – was bound to be complicated. But the difficulty was compounded by the lack of any agreement about what leaving should mean in practice.

The Leave campaign took a deliberate decision not to specify the kind of relationship it wanted Britain to have with the EU. This was a shrewd electoral tactic, enabling them to deflect criticism of any particular model for future relations. But it meant that, apart from the Cameron government's 2016 paper outlining alternatives to membership, little preparation had been done in advance of the referendum about the strategic choices that followed a Leave vote.

Arguments about why Britain voted to leave continue to this day. Immigration certainly mattered, but so did a wider sense among

millions of voters that the current economic and political system was failing them and their families. Global competition and new technological change were squeezing living standards. The financial crash of 2008 deepened the pressure on families and fostered a widespread sense that the system was rigged against the interests of ordinary people. I remember knocking on doors during the Remain campaign, making the case for the benefits of the European market for growth and jobs, and getting the response from Leave voters that they didn't see any of those benefits in their life or work.

It is easy to say that the Brexit vote and the subsequent controversies undermined support for the established political parties, and it is certainly true that the interminable negotiations over Brexit and the deadlock in both government and parliament deepened public disaffection and resentment. But the underlying social and economic tensions in Britain, as in other advanced democracies, predated the events of 2016-2021, and have festered even as Brexit has faded from the headlines.

As the 2016 referendum approached, Carl Bildt, the former prime minister of Sweden, said to me: "You must tell Mr Farage that he is part of a European phenomenon". Across Europe, insurgent parties of the nationalist right have drawn voters plagued by economic anxiety and fearful about immigration. In the US, the same forces have found expression through a reinvented, Trumpian Republican Party rather than a new party altogether.

Brexit also exposed tensions within the coalition that supported it. Most of the leading Leave campaigners argued for economic reforms based on deregulation, open markets and a buccaneering approach to trade – an economic model often dubbed 'Singapore-on-Thames'.

But that was not what most Leave voters wanted. Their preference was for economic interventionism, protection and the regulation of business for the public good. The tension between those conflicting approaches has added to public frustration.

So too did the contradictions over immigration policy. Having campaigned vigorously to "take back control" and end the free movement of EU citizens, the leading Leavers, confronted by the realities of government, gave priority to ensuring a sufficient supply of workers for key public services and the private sector, and in effect substituted large-scale immigration from the Commonwealth for free movement from the EU, resulting in a belief by many who had voted to leave the EU that they had been betrayed.

The referendum and its aftermath were a divisive and bitter period in British politics. Personal friendships were broken. In some families, supporters of the two sides – often divided along generational lines – stopped speaking to each other. There was an uptick in support for Scottish separation and Irish unity. Much of that bitterness has abated over the years – and indeed opinion polls now show about 60 per cent of voters say the country was wrong to leave.

But the resentment directed at political parties and institutions has not dimmed. Nor have the profound economic and social problems that have fed it. Political leaders in Britain, as in other democracies, have yet to find the language or the policies to inspire a renewed sense of hope. Until that leadership is forthcoming, the anger and disillusion will continue.

**Sir David Lidington is a former senior UK government minister (2010-19) and a member of the CER advisory board.**