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Brent Nelsen
Furman University

BREXIT AND EVERYTHING AFTER

Britain's place in the world and the future of the European Project

BY BRENT NELSEN, PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

On June 23, 2016, the day Britain voted on its membership in the European Union (EU), I was in Ljubljana, Slovenia, for an academic conference. As social scientists we couldn't help but talk about the British referendum campaign—mostly with bemused disapproval. How could the British even think about abandoning a beneficial, if flawed, organization believed to be the cornerstone of postwar European peace and prosperity? Surely the Brits would get it right when they went to the polls.

Like everyone else at the conference, I went to bed expecting to wake up to news of a close but clear British vote to remain in the EU. After all, the bookies said it was a done deal! But when I checked my phone for headlines in the morning, my mood changed. The first texts I saw were from students I had taken to Brussels last fall on Furman's internship program. They had watched the results from the comfort of a six-hour time difference and were sending cryptic texts. I wasn't sure exactly what had happened, but clearly "Leave" had won. I sat stunned on the edge of the bed for more than 20 minutes scrolling Twitter, trying to take it in. It was the most startling European political development since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

What on earth happened?

The referendum itself was a political blunder. Prime Minister David Cameron did not really have to call the vote. No great issue in European integration confronted the country. The UK was not a member of the Eurozone (EU members using the euro currency) or Schengen (the EU's free travel area), so Greek debt and Syrian migration did not directly concern the British. And the country's economy was growing much faster than the rest of the EU's. So why call a vote on EU membership?

Cameron pushed it for domestic, mainly internal party, reasons. A steady barrage of criticism from the Euroskeptical right wing of his Conservative party and an electoral threat from the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a nationalist party led by an EU-hating, Trump-like

politician named Nigel Farage, forced his hand. Cameron believed that EU membership had grown so politically contentious that it was time to settle the question once and for all by negotiating a new relationship with the EU, then consulting the people in a referendum on membership. This had been done once before in 1975 when the British voted overwhelmingly for continued membership, confirming the Parliament's 1973 vote to join. Parliament went along with Cameron's plan, but the negotiations with the EU flopped and the electorate voted 52-48 percent to leave. The gamble failed, costing the prime minister his job.

Why did the electorate vote to leave? The campaign was deceptive and often silly, but in the end the British voted to protect their national sovereignty. Leavers argued that too many important decisions—and far too many regulations—were now imposed by EU institutions and Brussels bureaucrats rather than the British Parliament. Many also argued that Britain could not control its borders without leaving the European single market, which guarantees freedom of movement for European citizens. As the campaign slogan went, British Leavers simply wanted to take "control of their country back."

Whatever the motives behind the vote, Brexit has and will continue to disrupt a Europe already struggling with terrorism, migration, Russian belligerence, and poor economic performance. Untangling the UK from its deep ties to an integrated EU will take a lot of time and energy.

To begin, Britain and the EU must establish good working relations—hardly an easy task. New Prime Minister Theresa May delayed invoking Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty (on withdrawal) until she felt comfortable that her new government had worked out a set of goals for the negotiations. Many EU leaders, however, like a jilted spouse in a fraught marriage, just wanted the Brits to go away, arguing for a "clean break" and a quick one. This could get ugly!

Britain remains a European country, so it will have to decide just what kind of relationship it wants with the EU. It will probably push to remain in the single market, but limit immigration (a major issue in the campaign) and insist on its right to reject EU regulations it deems unnecessary. EU leaders are unlikely to accept such a sweet deal and may insist that the UK fend for itself, at least for a while. In the end, Britain and the EU may agree to some kind of free trade area, but that is not guaranteed. Consequently, some wags have suggested that Britain should forget Europe and apply for membership in NAFTA—the North American (er, Atlantic?) Free Trade Agreement!

Finally, the technical details of leaving the EU are mind-numbing. Most of the burden will land on the British who have outsourced many government functions to the EU for over 40 years. The British will, for example, have to recreate a farm subsidy system and re-learn how to negotiate trade deals. They will also have to decide which of the astronomical number of EU regulations they will want to keep. Parliament will be amazingly busy in the next few years as members completely overhaul the nation's regulatory regime.

What does the future hold?

No one knows for sure, but in my opinion Brexit weakens Britain, Europe, and, in fact, the West. The referendum revealed Britain's deep divisions: educated vs. uneducated; elites vs. masses; young vs. old; urban vs. rural; globalists vs. nationalists; libertarians vs. authoritarians; and immigrants vs. natives (with the second group in each pairing favoring exit). In addition, the vote has widened the gap between the UK's constituent nations: England and Wales voted to leave (the latter narrowly), but Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain. The UK may well break up in the next five years if Scotland votes for independence and joins the EU, and Northern Ireland votes to join Ireland, already a member. Such a development would leave England a smaller, weaker, and less influential country than the old United Kingdom.

"A NEW EUROPEAN IDENTITY WILL NEVER FIT COMFORTABLY IN A REGION WHERE DEEP NATIONAL IDENTITIES PERSISTED."

An EU without the UK will not be as friendly toward the United States, either, and will certainly not be as tough on Vladimir Putin. It will be less market-oriented and more focused on the problems of an aging population and an unbalanced economy. Perhaps more worryingly, other EU members may follow the UK out. The Protestant countries of the north are the most awkward partners in the EU. They always resist proposals from their continental partners for more sacrifices of sovereignty to solve Europe-wide problems. Already we see prominent politicians, mostly from the right, calling for membership referendums in France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden. Additional departures would certainly weaken the EU and perhaps cause it to unravel.

The Brexiteers' victory also strengthens the populist forces sweeping the West. New right-wing parties in Europe and Donald Trump in the US are tapping into a deep political vein: people with grave doubts about or outright disdain for open societies. They distrust globalization, with its open trade and open borders. They want to preserve their unique ways of life and would prefer not to see too many immigrants in their neighborhoods. These forces are driving a wedge between educated, well-traveled, cosmopolitan citizens and less educated, poorer citizens who simply haven't had the resources to take advantage of a more open world—or who do not want to participate in it. These tensions show no signs of abating. The British vote is just the start of a conflict that will challenge Western liberalism, particularly its historic commitment to democracy and capitalism.

The founders of the EU had a marvelous vision of creating a new political entity that went beyond nationalism and the nation state to something different and better. Their efforts made war in Europe unthinkable and connected its regions in a large, dynamic economic area that brought unprecedented prosperity. But a new "European" identity never fit comfortably in a region where deep national identities persisted. Without a "European people" it is impossible to establish institutions that are truly responsible to "the people." Thus, to survive, the EU must be much more willing to accommodate national identities and to preserve national sovereignty. The EU must become an international organization of sovereign states that cooperate in deep ways but abandon hope of forming a federation—an EU that Britain would feel comfortable joining again. ●