BreXistential crisis? Making sense of British Politics after Brexit

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Introduction

• My aim: to reflect on ‘Brexit’ in the light of recent British political development;

• Drawing on the analysis of Developments of British Politics 10 (2016);

• It is 33 years since the first edition of Developments in British Politics, published in 1983;

• Much has changed in the intervening third of a century;

• To gauge how much, it is worth reminding ourselves of the world in 1983 ....
• Peter Davison was Dr Who
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• Thatcher on the verge of re-election
• Lib Dems and UKIP yet to be founded
Shocks for the time travelling political scientist

• UKIP’s 13 per cent in 2015 General Election;
• SNP winning 56 out of 59 seats;
• Lib Dems suffering biggest ever loss in vote share;
• Brexit;
• The possibility of the break-up of Britain

Yet, one does not have to travel forward three decades to be shocked by any of these current realities ...
Q. So is British politics more contingent and unpredictable than in the past (or ever)?

A. No, or possibly not ...

• Much of what appears exceptional is explicable
• ... In terms of longer-term trends;
• Exceptional outcomes the product of the interaction between familiar processes;
• All that is exceptional is the complexity of that interaction;
• Radical contingency is not guaranteed and may prove transitory.
Exceptional outcomes from long-term processes

Outcomes

• Rise of the SNP
• Rise of UKIP
• Demise of the Liberal Democrats
• In/out referendum on EU membership
• Brexit

Processes

⌘ 1 – Greater regional and geographical differentiation of political culture
⌘ 2 – Presence of non-majoritarian electoral systems & ability to carry success from one to another
⌘ 3 – Declining appeal of Westminster valence politics
⌘ 4 – Declining partisan alignment and identification
⌘ 5 – Increasing electoral volatility
⌘ 6 – The ‘taint of office’ and growing political disaffection with Westminster politics
⌘ 7 – Growing divisions within the Conservative Party over Europe
⌘ 8 – Increasing use of referendums to resolve positional issues
⌘ 9 – Growing anxieties about immigration and competition for jobs associated EU labour mobility
⌘ 10 – Growing economic inequality in a context of austerity and low growth
Consider the introduction to DBP1 (in 1983):

- “British politics in the 1980s [today] differ from British politics in the 1960s and early 1970s [then] in surprising and fundamental ways. We have seen the revival of ideological debate, the weakening of the two-party system; the assertion of strong political control over the machinery of central government ... Partly as a result of these developments, the study of British politics has become more dynamic and diverse” (Drucker et al. 1983: 1).
- Yet there are key differences – giving a different character to these ostensible similarities.
- Two examples: (i) ideology; (ii) the challenge to 2-party government.
Part II: What does this tell us about Brexit?
Its significance

- An unprecedented event;
- A referendum on a low salience issue with massive domestic & international implications;
- A result that the Westminster (and international) political establishment campaigned against;
- An unexpected result and a shock to the establishment;
- Exposed (again) the methodological challenge of polling in an age of political disaffection;
- Rich in its wider political implications and in its lessons and with frightening parallels.
Q.: ‘Which of the following are the most important issues facing the country/yourself & family at this time? (pick up to three)’

Source: calculated from YouGov General Election survey, 2015
The result(s)

- A vote for Brexit (51.9 % for leave) on 72.2 % turnout;
- The largest vote for anything in UK electoral history (17.4M votes for leave, v. 16.1M votes for remain);
- Yet only 2 of 4 constituent nations of the UK voted to leave (53.4% England; 52.5% Wales for leave v. 62% Scotland and 55.8% NI for remain);
- All local authority areas in Scotland for remain; 241 of 293 for leave in England excl. London;
- Support for leave strongly correlated with: low educational attainment; low income; population age profile (share over 65); increases in (but not aggregate levels of) in-migration; political disaffection; UKIP and Conservative support; national identification;
- Widespread characterisation of Brexit as a vote of those ‘left behind’ by globalisation.
The cast

- **David Cameron** – aiming to resolve divisions within his party and the threat of UKIP.
Jeremy Corbyn – new leader of a more divided Labour Party who had advocated a referendum, was lukewarm for remain and hadn’t expected to win the leadership.
• The SNP – united on remain but struggled to achieve turnout in a polity in which all principal parties united in support for remain.
• **UKIP** – their moment in the spotlight and their *raison d’être*; Nigel Farage the leader of the unofficial ‘Leave.EU’ campaign.
• Boris Johnson & Michael Gove – the outsiders inside (the Cabinet), leading the official ‘Vote Leave’ campaign (and contenders for the party leadership).
Why did Brexit succeed?

- Cameron’s negotiation strategy (inviting comparison with Wilson in 1975).
- Differential turnout (amongst those for whom the issue was a positional as distinct from a valence issue).
- Political disaffection and socio-economic dislocation.
- The failure of an elite politics of expert paternalism (that had failed in the Scottish Independence Referendum too).
Cameron’s negotiating strategy

• A disastrous piece of political brinkmanship.
• Cameron didn’t expect to win (outright) in 2015 – having to honour the commitment to an in/out referendum an unanticipated consequence of success.
• The referendum gambled Britain’s economic fate on a tenuous strategy to reunite his party (it failed catastrophically).
• Cameron failed where Wilson (in 1975) had succeeded.
Differential turnout

• A majority of UK citizens did not support Brexit on 23 June 2016 (even if a majority of those who voted did).

• Significant turnout differentials between ‘Brexiters’ and ‘Remainers’ (reflecting very different motives).

• Key factors include: (i) age; (ii) positional v valence; (iii) Scotland and NI v England and Wales; (iv) the London effect (and urban v regional); (v) education.

• The Brexit campaign mobilised a significant proportion of habitual non-voters (explaining, in part, the failure of the pollsters to anticipate the result).
‘What matters most to you when deciding how to vote?’ (open format question, British Election Study, 2016).

Leave supporters

- immigration
- country
- sovereignty
- control
- laws
- back
- borders
- make
- economic
- independence
- rights
- democracy
- future
- stability
- workers
- best
- trade
- human
- security
- jobs
- remain
- leaving
- movement
- effect
- immigration
- benefits
- workers
- future
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- best

Remain supporters
Salience of issues to referendum choice
(same question, British Election Study, 2016).
Disaffection, dislocation and the politics of expertise

- Brexit represents the failure of the politics of expertise.
- A rejection of ‘expert-oarchy’ and the (associated) depoliticisation of economic choices.
- ‘Taking back control’ not just from Brussels but an end to elite paternalism (‘the EU is good for you because we tell you so’).
- A new politics that is populist, nationalist, disintegrationist, anti-internationalist and ‘nostalgically democratic’ (Weale).
Brexit and the rejection of ‘expertise’

Q: ‘I’d rather put my trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinion of experts’ (British Election Study, 2016)
Economic consequences

- A worsening of the terms of trade with the EU and trading partners with an EU-negotiated trade deal.
- Reduction in the supply of skilled labour.
- City of London likely to loose ‘passport-ing’ rights (loss of capacity to ‘offshore’ euros).
- Inward FDI will suffer (loss of market access; greater currency volatility etc.).
- Boost to export competitiveness will be limited and is a small effect (given Britain’s place in production chains).
- Housing market may suffer (with consequences for growth).
- Likely to reinforce austerity with significant distributive consequences.
Political consequence – ‘Brexitential crisis’?

• Threatens the dis-membering of the UK and Britain.

• Northern Ireland – the potential restoration of a hard land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic or of a hard border between the island of Ireland and Britain.

• Scotland – a second Scottish Independence Referendum in the absence of a separate deal for Scotland (in the single market but not the EU).

• Both depend on the ‘hardness’ of the Brexit deal.

• Such dynamics reinforce existing tendencies towards national differentiation (Britain increasingly difficult to govern).

• But so much remains undecided ... British politics is certainly no less contingent after Brexit than before – but the stakes are higher!