



The EU Referendum in the UK Views from Scotland, Ireland and Wales

ESRC UK in a Changing Europe Seminar Series: Brussels

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REPORT ON EVENT

EVENT OVERVIEW

The United Kingdom faces a momentous decision, whether to leave or to remain in the European Union. Voters, who will soon be asked to settle the matter in a referendum, are looking for more information and impartial analysis. At this Q&A event, we discussed the issues at stake with the help of a panel of academic specialists.

Among the matters we covered:

- The impact of the EU on the economy and jobs
- Immigration
- National sovereignty and the political implications of Europe

PANEL (L-R)

Dr Mary Murphy (University College Cork)

Professor Jan Wouters (Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies) (Chair)

Dr Rachel Minto (Cardiff University)

Professor Michael Keating (University of Aberdeen)

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

JAN WOUTERS opened the session by introducing some of the issues which are particularly salient in each of the devolved regions, before introducing the speakers and encouraging questions from the audience.

MICHAEL KEATING outlined the work of the UK and EU programme, and the events which we have organised across the UK, and pointed out the relevance of the topic for discussion – the impact upon the devolved regions of the EU referendum – is salient in Belgium as well.

“The internal constitution of the UK is intrinsically tied to the EU. The UK has no Ministry of Agriculture or the Environment, there has never been a UK-wide Education Ministry – which emphasises the differences across the UK (much like Belgium – what would happen to Belgium if it was removed from the EU?).

The agenda on the EU issue is different in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England is very different – and attitudes in each are very different, and since the last referendum on EU membership (1975) there has been a dramatic shift in attitudes. Scotland was the most sceptical of the nations in 1975, but now it has become the most pro-EU, a consensus across the parties forming in favour of remaining. Indeed, all parties bar the Conservatives in Scotland appear to want “more” Europe – the more social aspects to be extended. This contrasts with the Brussels



agreement reached by David Cameron, the removal of “ever closer union” and the solidification of the UK position around opt-outs.

What are the potential outcomes that would impact upon the devolved regions?

1. We all vote the same across the UK, and this results in a united voice (either to leave or remain). This is an unlikely scenario, given current poll figures, but it does make the prospect of internal constitutional crises limited.
2. Scotland votes to stay, but is forced to leave by the rUK voting to leave. While this would have salience in Scotland – and possibly move us towards a second independence referendum – there are also issues for nationalists here, as this would make arguing for an independent Scotland (with a hard EU border with England) more difficult.
3. Scotland votes to stay, England votes to leave and the result is a slim majority for remain. In this scenario, the likelihood of internal constitutional crisis is greatest: England, the dominant component nation in the UK, would be over-ruled by more pro-EU voters in Scotland. Herein, the scenario of England seceding from the Union might be more plausible than Scotland doing so.
4. The UK – regardless of regional disparities in vote – provides a majority for leave and Brexit occurs. The devolved administrations would thus likely receive more powers (given the models of devolution, as well as the competences that would be repatriated from the EU) as a result.

There are significant differences internally in the UK with regards to different

RACHEL MINTO talked about the Welsh perspective, emphasising 3 particular points about Wales:

- 1) The broader political and context for the EU referendum within Wales. The election last week has altered the Welsh political landscape, with the election of 7 UKIP Assembly Members. In addition, the ongoing constitutional evolution in Wales – the relationship between Westminster and the Welsh Assembly. In particular, there is a shift from a devolved powers model to a reserved powers model, which only occurred after the initial draft of the new Wales Bill was roundly criticised.
- 2) The gap in support the EU in Wales. Public bodies, political elites and lobby groups appear to be very pro-EU: the Common Agriculture Policy and the Single Market are very important to Wales for foreign direct investment, as is the EU structural and cohesion fund budget, with Wales being a net beneficiary. On the whole, political elites are supportive of the EU, with the exception of the Welsh Conservative leader and UKIP in the Assembly. By contrast, public opinion is much more divided – support for remain (41%) and leave (37%) in April suggested a reasonable support for the EU, but it is likely that the situation is more fluid. One reason for this is the lack of Welsh-specific media – unlike Scotland, Wales does not have an established separate media, adopting much of the London press and the regional television from English counties on the border. As a result, a Wales-specific EU position has not developed – and indeed engagement on the EU question in Wales has been limited.

- 3) Finally, the ability of the devolved administrations to get involved in UK decision-making processes has been a factor in discussions going forward – there was limited engagement within the UK’s renegotiation of the EU deal. We are now six weeks away from the EU referendum but focus is not on that yet – focus remains on the Assembly and the formation of government in Wales.

MARY MURPHY talked about the Irish and Northern Irish perspective. 1.8million of a population in Northern Ireland, so the smallest of the devolved nations, but an important aspect of the vote. Polling is limited, so we’re not entirely set on how it will vote.

Northern Irish Assembly elections in 2016 returned another power-sharing agreement, with limited focus on the EU question, and indeed focused on local issues.

DUP – 38/108 seats (supports leave campaign)

SF – 28 seats

SDLP – 12 seats

UUP – 16 seats

UKIP’s representative in NIA did not stand for re-election, but Northern Ireland’s anti-EU vote was probably taken by the DUP.

So far, we have had a muted debate on the EU, and a lack of information has been directed towards the electorate there – despite the fact that the impact of leaving the EU would likely have the largest effect of any part of the UK (especially given the land border with Ireland).

4 key issues for Northern Ireland in the event of Brexit:

- 1) The border between NI & ROI: a common travel area for a number of decades, but how this would change in the event of Brexit is a major issue. With one a member of the EU and another not, this would have to be revisited. However, a hard border would be a step backward for the peace process
- 2) Trade arrangements (particularly with the ROI): the UK & ROI have significant trade.
- 3) Absence of CAP funding and EU structural funds – where does the money for this come from in the event of Brexit.
- 4) Stabilising community relations – how will this be achieved post-Brexit? Free movement is in the interests of both NI and ROI, but a hard border would make this more difficult.

Will the British government have the economic power or the political will to support Northern Ireland in the event of Brexit? And the impact upon the two community blocs – about 90% of the nationalist community is in favour of remain (2% undecided) compared to 20% from the Unionist community (24% undecided).

In Ireland, the concern is particularly about how trade would be impacted with the UK in the event of Brexit. Sinn Fein are pushing for a Border Poll in the event of Brexit, which might well increase inter-community tensions again.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

1) “WILL SOMEONE, SOMEONE PLEASE SPEAK UP FOR ENGLAND?” WAS FAMOUSLY PART OF A HOUSE OF COMMONS DEBATE, BUT IT IS RELEVANT AGAIN HERE. THE PERSPECTIVE FROM ENGLAND IS THAT THERE IS NO MANDATE AT ALL FOR AN INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM IRRESPECTIVE OF THE EU REFERENDUM.

Michael Keating – The Scottish election was not a second independence referendum – it was part of the debate for sure, but the question of a mandate is rather more vague, since the SNP said they were not looking for a referendum, except if Brexit occurs, in which case they might look to take this forward. The election itself – given it returned a minority government – provides no real mandate for anything. But invariably, any large change in the constitutional setting would provoke a change in attitude here.

2) SOVEREIGNTY APPEARS TO BE A LARGE PART OF THE DEBATE IN THE LONDON MEDIA, BUT IT APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN LIMITED IN THE DEBATE ELSEWHERE – WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN WALES?

Rachel Minto – When the UK politicians are talking about sovereignty, they are talking about British sovereignty – subnational sovereignty is not part of the debate at all. But the issue is live and unresolved.

Michael Keating – The irony of the UK Parliament giving up sovereignty to the people to decide in a bid to “regain sovereignty” from the EU is not lost on scholars here. But sovereignty is a slippery concept, especially in Scotland with regards to who holds sovereignty.

Mary Murphy – The muted debate in Northern Ireland is perhaps a reflection of the fact that sovereignty is part of the conversation, and it is a part of the conversation that Northern Ireland simply does not want to have.

3) WHAT ABOUT THE DEVOLVED PROCESSES – IS THERE THE POTENTIAL FOR A MORE HARMONISED SYSTEM OF DEVOLUTION IN THE UK WHATEVER THE OUTCOME OF THE REFERENDUM, OR WILL IT BECOME MORE COMPLEX AND MORE ASYMMETRICAL?

Michael Keating – Devolution had been piecemeal and ad hoc, and reactionary, with different demands and different resolutions in each of the regions. The logical solution is a federal system, but there is no demand for this in England. There are now separate funding formulas for the devolved institutions, and the UK Government has embarked upon a system of city-region deals which is a very limited form of devolution and one which might result in English demands for better democratisation of devolved regions.

4) IT IS THE UK THAT IS THE MEMBER STATE, AND THE REFERENDUM ASKS ABOUT THE UK’S POSITION – WHY ARE THE COUNTS BEING CONDUCTED IN THE REGIONS SEPARATELY, WHICH WILL ALMOST GUARANTEE A CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS?

Michael Keating – The counts will be done at local authority level. It is an outcome rather than a deliberate ploy, but it wouldn't sell if we didn't know how Scotland voted. We wouldn't see it as a legitimate vote.

Rachel Minto – The regions have called for it for sure, but it also takes into account the multi-territorial aspect of it.

Mary Murphy – This would be sweeping the issue under the carpet rather than facing it head on.

5) FOLLOWING UP ON THAT – THE ISSUE ABOUT DENMARK AND GREENLAND PROVIDES SOMETHING OF A PRECEDENT HERE. BUT THERE IS ALSO THE “ENGLISH” PERSPECTIVE WHICH HAS HAD A LIMITED VOICE IN THE DEBATE. ALSO GIBRALTAR – WHICH WANTS TO STAY.

Rachel Minto – This is a narrative that just does not feature. In the broader context, the devolved question is just not part of the EU debate, but our point is that the EU issue and the evolving devolution question need to be addressed together and not separately.

Michael Keating – Usually these events are not talking solely about the devolved institutions, it just so happens this one is. But you are right about English identity not existing as a singular identity. So this makes England and discussion of England as problematic, especially given the lack of a demand for regionalism/ an English Parliament.

Mary Murphy – Like the others I've been talking about the EU issue, but less about devolution and more about the potential consequences of Brexit, particularly for Irish citizens. There are limited discussions about the dynamics of what happens after the vote whatever the outcome is.

6) WINSTON CHURCHILL TALKED ABOUT A “UNITED STATES OF EUROPE” AND WE’RE NOW TALKING ABOUT BREXIT. WHAT WILL BE THE IMPACT OF BREXIT FOR THE REST OF EUROPE – AS A ROMANIAN, WE’RE JUST IN THE DOOR, AND WONDERING WHY YOU WANT TO LEAVE?

Michael Keating – Brexit would be destabilising for the EU in two ways: one, that EU membership is not necessarily permanent, and two that members will have alternatives.

Rachel Minto – A destabilising of the EU would also destabilise relations within the EU.

7) WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE TO THE EU FOR THE UK NATIONS?

Michael Keating – The “north Atlantic” idea is just not on the table because the Americans are not interested. EFTA looks like the alternative – the Norway option, or the Swiss option, which share the issues of having the regulation but having no say on it. Or a “go it alone” position, taking a lead in the WTO etc. The latter seems like a more coherent position, but the Leave group appear to favour EFTA and bi-lateral trade agreements.

Rachel Minto – These options are “off the peg” solutions, rather than tailored specifically for the UK, and as a result they less-coherently fit with the UK's circumstances.

Mary Murphy - One of the options for NI is of course a Border Poll, and the potential of a United Ireland. This question is altered from historically, in that it now takes on an external factor. Opinion in NI is heavily in favour of remaining in the UK, but would this shift it? I don't know.

8) WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL BE THE TIPPING POINT FOR THE REFERENDUM?

Michael Keating – It is the perception of risk. This was the issue in the independence referendum as well – people will likely vote to remain, but they won't do so because they like the EU but because they are scared to leave. And that opens up questions down the line, and doesn't resolve the issue.

Rachel Minto – I'm less optimistic that we will vote to remain. I think it still hangs in the balance.

Mary Murphy – A reluctant yes, well, Ireland has experience of this. The six week period up to the referendum will be the critical period, but voters are risk adverse, and as Michael suggests, this may lead to a vote for the status quo. But the referendum will be the same time as Glastonbury, so trying to attract the youth vote may be more problematic.

9) I THINK THERE ARE MORE OPTIONS THAN YOU SUGGEST. AND I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT THE ISSUE OF TRADE – I THINK IT HAS BEEN EMPHASISED FAR TOO MUCH IN THE DEBATE. THE EU CAN PROBABLY GO TWO DIRECTIONS – MORE EMPHASIS ON TRADE OR MORE SOCIAL INTEGRATION.

Mary Murphy – I think the problem for the UK is historic one, and the narrative for the UK has always been one of being an “awkward” partner. In that regard, introducing the social integration as part of the UK's narrative is much more difficult – which is why the trade issue, more functional issues, have taken centre stage in the debate. And this makes it difficult for people to find an emotional connection to Europe.

Rachel Minto – The left have taken a bit longer to put their cards on the table, because they see problems with the trade elements of the EU, but are very keen on the social model. For Wales, social issues have perhaps been more prevalent and easier to discuss.

Michael Keating – During David Cameron's negotiations, he intended on *scrapping* the social dimension but he dropped the idea because he wants Labour voters to support staying. But voters elsewhere probably are not voting for his EU, but to stay regardless.

9) I THINK THERE WILL HAVE TO BE ANOTHER REFERENDUM AFTER THIS ONE IF WE VOTE TO LEAVE – IN RESPECT OF WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.

Michael Keating – I certainly agree there are likely to be demands for this.

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