Europe Inside Out

"Things we lost in the Fire"

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Introduction

Regardless of views on the outcome the EU referendum and the Government's interpretation of this as a mandate for an extreme form of withdrawal from the EU's diverse institutional structures and arrangements, the country is surely engaged on one of the most unusual paths ever trodden by an ostensibly advanced liberal democracy. The situation is all the more bemusing to many inside and outside the UK given our long history of political pragmatism, disdain for extremisms, and penchant for incremental societal change. Many historical and comparative political analyses have concluded that the latter approach to organising our affairs (including in planning)[i] has generally served us well. The notion of 'muddling through' is not *always* invoked with a negative connotation and sense of frustration! There is something uncanny and even un-British about the 'extremism' (some may prefer 'radicalism') of so-called 'Brexit' - at least if one accepts the above view of Britain's political culture. Of course there are also those who cite in contrast the 'buccaneering' spirit which also apparently defines our history. Though, whether led by private, or state initiative, the 'buccaneering with a plan' of previous periods seems qualitatively different from the mishmash of frustrations, prejudices, nostalgia(s), promises and hopes that brought the UK to its present historical juncture. The aftermath of the EU referendum has instead, revealed the State's lack of preparedness for the eventuality of a Leave vote. Perhaps this is what lies behind the May administration's approach to starting the process of negotiating with the members of the bloc it seeks to leave which seems to veer from bouts of passive-aggressive grandstanding and rhetoric to bizarre uncoordinated back of the envelope initiatives.[ii] In 40 years it seems a section of our political elite have still not learnt that the art of doing a deal in Europe resides in compromise and making friends rather than hectoring and foot stamping. Meanwhile, internally the UK is riven by a level of division and a lingering bitterness on both sides of the leave-remain divide which is unprecedented in recent times. This first edition of a new T&CP feature 'Europe Inside Out' reflects on the aftermath of June 2016 from the perspective of some planning and place-related themes.

This thing called Democracy…

It is rather common in British Parliamentary democracy for administrations to be formed by parties with a vote share between 35 and 40%[iii]. The lack of representativeness is historically seen as being compensated for by the potential for stability and a clear programme of government. If more people opted for one programme than any other, even if an absolute majority did not chose it, the logic has been to let those who stood on it 'have a go' at delivering it, with the assurance that there is a scheduled chance to vote again. The mandate is thus time limited and (crucially) accorded to a pre-specified programme set out in party manifestos. Of course circumstances change and governments make compromises sometimes changing tack and dropping manifesto pledges. But they are held to account though ongoing Parliamentary scrutiny and the prospect of having to stand on their record at the next general election held no more than five years later. The excoriation of the Liberal Democrats and collapse in their support following their U-turn on university tuition fees under the 2010-2015 Coalition government is a recent example of these logics in action. Yet their translation into the EU referendum - in which the electorate was presented with i). an unclear mishmash of versions and visions of a post-EU UK; and ii). no guarantee of when there might be another chance to again express a view on our membership of the bloc, explains many of the difficulties which have arisen in the aftermath of the vote – principally around defining exactly what so-called 'Brexit' is/means and building consensus around whichever version of it may eventually emerge. All this is against a backdrop of the fact that the Leave campaign may have carried the day 'on the day' with 52% of the votes cast to 48% for the Remain leave campaign, but this represented only 37% of the overall electorate.

There are ways to address these kinds of democratic issues and deficits which can arise with the use of the referendum – a tool whose use has been decried by British politicians as diverse as Clement Atlee (*"I could not consent to the introduction into our national life of a device so alien to all our traditions as the referendum,.. which has only too often been the instrument of Nazism and fascism"*); and Margaret Thatcher (*"a device of dictators and demagogues"*)[iv]. Yet the appeal of 'direct', or 'participative' democracy is strong and if used appropriately it is often seen (not least in planning) as being a useful tool to supplement more representative democratic mechanisms. The value of participative approaches as with any form of democratic process is, however, bound-up with the thought that goes into their design (e.g. to avoid unwanted side-effects such as the tyranny of majorities, or minorities). It is not beyond the wit of woman, or man, (though it was apparently beyond that of Cameron), to design and configure such processes to avoid some of their potential pitfalls. One mechanism is to build-in some kind of threshold of support which must be met before the proposition placed before an electorate is implemented. Ironically, the Trade Union Act, 2016 introduced the Tories does precisely this, and requires that a threshold of 40% of all members eligible to vote be reached before industrial action can be taken in the health, education, transport,

border security and fire sectors. These are doubtless important sectors where some might see a case for safeguards to mitigate against disruptive action only supported by a minority. Yet apparently post-2015 UK governments were incapable of foreseeing the need for something similar to prevent a minority choice dictating a once in a generation decision about our relations with our closest neighbours and the EU. This seems particularly unfortunate given that the decision to leave the EU is one which is not as easily reversed or 'rowed back on' as a purely 'domestic' decision (e.g. a referendum on changing the Parliamentary voting system, or on sub-state devolution of powers etc.), as it involves a complicated process drawing-in other nations and organisations. Though until the point at which we actually leave the EU it seems highly likely we could stop the process.

Threshold provisions similar to those outlined above on strike ballots govern referenda on constitutional change in a number of other countries. Meanwhile most decisions in the EU Council of Ministers (composed of politicians from the EU Member states) need a 'double majority' with support from 55 % of the Member States (16 countries) and from Member States that represent 65 % of the EU's population. And the directly-elected European Parliament has a say too. By contrast in the EU referendum the bald fact is that 63% of the UK electorate failed to endorse the decision to leave the EU which has effectively only been supported by around 28% of the population and 50% of the territories of the UK. Which system of governance looks like it is suffering from a 'democratic deficit' now? Without the checks and balances of a carefully considered federal constitution to set out clearly the relations and rights of the constituent territories of a state such as the UK, these issues can be obfuscated but are increasingly difficult to ignore in an 'asymmetrically' devolved and increasingly quasi-federal system – the tussles over the May Government's failure to provide a meaningful response to the Edinburgh administration's 'Scotland's Place in Europe' document[v] and over the next Scottish independence referendum are cases in point.

Perhaps theory can help us in gauging the democratic 'quality' of the EU referendum campaign and its aftermath? As many readers will be aware, much planning theory over the past 40 years has been inspired by Jürgen Habermas's ideas of communicative rationality and action. These posit that democracy thrives on 'undistorted communication' which is comprehensible, truthful, sincere and legitimate, and that outcomes should reflect the 'force of the better' argument. Such communication is viewed as precondition for any true democratic participation. Contemplating the referendum campaign, and indeed the whole British debate on Europe over recent decades, in light of such ideals (even if they are often criticised as being unrealistic) is sobering. Those who criticise the communicative and collaborative schools of planning theory for failing to adequately address the 'distorting' effects of power on communication may point to the ways in which Eurosceptics over the decades, and the Leave campaign in the referendum, were able to shape and (surely even many of them would admit this) 'distort' the language and 'discourse' of the UK's debate on Europe. They were able to define the language and even the 'arena' in which the debate took places (e.g. by panicking David Cameron into calling the referendum) precisely because of the

agenda setting discursive power they enjoyed, partly due to the control of key mass media sources by billionaire media moguls sympathetic to their cause. The attempts at providing more balanced coverage from some media organisations (notably the BBC) failed to offer a corrective. Afraid of being accused of bias, and feeling compelled to give equal billing and platforms to positions which (often wilfully) sought to distort the truth, they forgot that 'balance' and 'impartiality' are crucial *inputs* to objective reflection on an issue (e.g. in journalism, or indeed a process like planning) but that the *outcome* (e.g. a version of the 'truth', or an appropriate course of policy action) may legitimately *not* be balanced across all positions without this meaning it is necessarily biased.

The referendum and its outcome also raise difficult questions for planning practitioners as well as theorists. Planning is ostensibly underpinned by substantive principles - e.g. environmental protection, social justice, sustainable economic opportunity, heritage protection etc.; that may be instilled as part of a professional credo, but struggle to find 'majoritarian' support in specific cases of planning. Furthermore, if a vocal minority opposes, or demands, a course of planning action, but this constitutes a *majority* of those who have actively engaged with the process (e.g. by voting, or objecting to a proposal), then with what legitimacy can planners uphold certain values of 'good' planning which may privilege normative objectives such as those listed above? Sticking to one's guns and arguing, for example, that protecting a particular ecological site, or perhaps a heritage asset, is in the 'wider common/general/public interest' even if expressed/'vocal' local opinion is opposed to this course of action, may (does?) leave professionals open to accusations of being anti-democratic, out of touch and aloof, and part of the clique of experts that Michael Gove tells us we have all had enough of.

But regardless of personal views on whether, the choice of 37% of the electorate and 50% of the UK's territories to opt for some version (or other), of exit from the EU, is the authentic 'will of the people', the point is that one can hardly be surprised at the ongoing controversy the issue generates. And perhaps this is the most important principle. Individual democratic moments/events may achieve different levels of democratic 'quality', but at the core of democracy is the notion that any decisions reached are always contingent and open to ongoing debate, scrutiny and potential reversal. Populations are allowed to change their minds, there should always be a 'next time', and (yes) we do keep on voting until we get the 'right' answer, but (and here's the thing) even when we get it we still go on voting!

What of places and place-based policies in all this?

Almost by definition so-called 'Brexit' is nationalist in its inspiration, focus, and spatial imagination. Yet the issues surrounding the EU referendum and its aftermath take on a particular inflexion when viewed from a sub-national 'place-based' perspective. In the run-up to and since the referendum, for example, many have wondered why some of the regions whose real economies are more integrated with and dependent on EU trade than London and the South East[vi] and which also benefit most from EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs) seemed to be more Eurosceptic and voted to leave the EU in June 2016. By contrast, the majority of metropolitan centres and urban cores voted to remain in the EU. In the north west of England, for example, Liverpool and Manchester voted strongly to remain in the EU[vii] (Figure 1). Yet, whilst it is true many less prosperous areas had a leave majority amongst those who voted; geographer Danny Dorling points out *"Contrary to popular belief, 52% of people who voted Leave in the EU referendum lived in the southern half of England, and 59% were in the middle classes, while the proportion of Leave voters in the lowest two social classes was just 24%"*. Since the referendum however analysis of the result has tended to emphasise the notion that the result was due to a 'revolt' of the 'forgotten' or 'just about managing' people – who live in 'forgotten' or 'neglected' places'. Regardless of whether or not these places are suffering from a form of territorial 'false consciousness' as some have suggested, the challenge they face now is to try and make sense of what the future holds in a context of great uncertainty about the future of the UK and its relationship with the EU.

The fate of the spatially-targeted funding programmes the EU supports is obviously a key concern. The probable loss of these seems particularly unfortunate given that the UK was instrumental in helping establish a European regional policy in the 1970s. EU regional policy went on to provide invaluable support to the UK's economically struggling regions and the communities over the following decades [viii] and European structural fund support had significant effects in helping to regenerate the physical environment and ameliorate social conditions in many places. The European Investment Bank (EIB) has also played an increasing role in the UK over recent years investing billions of pounds in the energy, water, transport, health, education and housing sectors [ix]. In February 2017 the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund (NPIF), was launched with £184 million of the £400m being made available provided by the European Investment Bank[x] - a fact reported in the *Hull Daily Mail*[xi] but not it seems in the national publication which shares a similar title. In response to these realities, one of the arguments of 'Leavers' is that such monies are 'only our money that we get back anyway'. Once the UK 'took back control' after leaving the EU the story was that this could be then redistributed internally. But the mechanisms and political trade-offs involved in how any government chooses to spend public resources across the territories under its jurisdiction reflect a complex interaction of national priorities, the success of places in lobbying, and of course how much there is in in the coffers 'centrally' to allocate. As it stands there is no clear commitment on whether levels of support comparable to those that areas like Wales and Cornwall might have received from the EU post-2020, will be maintained.

A new Industrial Strategy? - *"Yes, Minister!"*

The Industrial Strategy Green Paper published in early 2017 does not provide much more clarity simply stating in rather Sir Humphrey Appleby fashion that "We will also carefully consider the future of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs) alongside the wider future funding environment following the UK's exit from the European Union."[xii] It will no doubt be very reassuring in places which enjoy significant support from EU Structural and Investment Fund programmes that the issue is being "carefully considered" especially "alongside the wider funding environment". This is clearly better than the alternative – the future of ESIFs being carelessly considered outside the wider funding environment.

The Industrial Strategy document even has a cover which hazards an approximation of a map of the UK (Figure 2)! Is this (finally) a step towards the long called for UK spatial framework, policy map, or vision[xiii]? Closer inspection suggests come caution is needed before jumping to this exciting conclusion. The Isle of Man finds itself represented with a factory symbol (presumably to represent its many heavy industries…); there seems to be a new island off Eastern Scotland where they make hollow boxes (or is this just Bass Rock displaced by some geological shift?); the famous pencil and spanner factory in Aberdeen is represented, though not on the same scale as the bigger one in Manchester which is also shown; then, who can forget the big globe making factory that straddles Norwich and Great Yarmouth (is this where 'Global Britain' is being manufactured?); Liverpool Bay has been filled-in perhaps to punish those Scousers for voting Remain; there are the wonderful new motorway bridges which set-off from Northern Ireland and Orkney to either and/or the USA or Norway (pick your social model); and, finally for a huge handshake you can head to Edinburgh (though this seems unlikely on present form to be between Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May). Whilst the strategy is snappily titled 'Building our Industrial Strategy' is it possible that HMG has actually forgotten *where* the industry is in the time since it last showed a sustained interest in such matters?

The chapter on 'Driving growth across the whole country' intriguingly uses 'continental' comparators like Germany and France to point out how much better we could be doing and even references potentially seditious Euro-material such as 'ESPON' research[xiv]. We are then told "This industrial strategy proposes a framework to build on the particular strengths of different places and grasp the opportunities that could enable faster growth in each of them". A vision of place-based development that could have been lifted from any number of EU reports on economic, social territorial cohesion. So some continuity then! One wonders if the people at the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have got the message that 'Brexit Means Brexit'?

Housing means Housing?

The publication of the Housing White Paper [xv] also suggests that certain quaint pre-EU referendum traditions like producing such a document *prior* to a Bill being introduced to Parliament may also survive! Why not simply produce a Bill that basically states 'Housing means Housing' and gloss over the nitty gritty of what kind of housing to build, for whom, where to build it, and who will build it! Details, details! In fact the White Paper adopts a rather 'traditional' approach marshalling some data and evidence to justify its positions. Though generations of planning and housing 'experts' (sic.) have previously tried to draw governmental attention to much of this, the document provides a welcome respite from the current post-factual political atmosphere. Alongside an acknowledgement that 'experts' (them again) suggest we need to be building between 225,000 to 275,000 new homes per year, there is a recognition that our *'population could stop growing and **net migration could fall to zero**, but people would still be living in overcrowded, unaffordable accommodation'* (added *emphases*). Quite an admission from the government of 'hard Brexit'. There is even a recognition that, as planners have long sought to point-out, there are far more extant 'consents' in the system than are being 'built out' by private developers (a third of new homes granted planning permission between 2010-11 and 2015-16 have not yet been built).

Aside from the White Paper's obvious importance for housing and planning, it reminds us of the cautionary tale of housing policy in the UK. The housing crisis has crept-up on the nation as a result of a complex set of ideological, collective and individual choices and a failure to act and take difficult decisions in the face of mounting evidence and the counsel of experts. It can be read as a salutary tale of the outcomes of ideologically driven, fact-denying, expert disdaining, and ad hoc policymaking. In focussing attention on the housing crisis the White Paper also represents an eruption of 'the real' back into a national political life following the EU referendum. Here is a genuine and serious societal issue which affects the lives of millions of people in relation to an absolutely essential human need and right; that of shelter, rather than a political problem manufactured by an obsessional section of the nation's political class. Paraphrasing words once written on a German and Polish made red bus one might even say – 'Brexit is a black hole for resources and political attention – let's solve the housing crisis instead'

Conclusion

The process of leaving the EU has not yet reached its Bryan Adams - 'Can't Stop this Thing We Started'[xvi] moment, but following the triggering of Article 50 we seem to be shuffling towards the Exit. With so much as yet unknown about what kind of state the post-EU UK will turn out to be, and its relations with the EU and the rest of the world, it is hard to be sure about effects on places and planning. The future of environmental policy and planning is an area already receiving attention[xvii], whilst the focus above has been on the health of our democratic culture, and place-based issues following the referendum. It is ironic that over recent decades EU programmes helped to ensure that many places which voted leave were given greater attention than might otherwise have been the case. It is now highly likely that access to such territorially targeted EU investments[xviii] will be one thing lost in the Brexit 'fire'. In addition, as is typical with fires, it will have the effect of sucking the air out of the room, in this case impacting the political attention available for other issues. The potential opportunity costs of diverting resources and focus from authentic national policy challenges – for example, around housing[xix], social and health policies[xx],, and a diverse range of important areas of government policy from Higher Education to the environment are likely to be high and impact disproportionality on those places and communities that can least afford to bear them. The question then becomes what form and scale of place-based support (or 'firebreaks'), can such areas and populations expect in a polity that has fallen into the hands of Tory Eurosceptics, who - in contrast with (pro-EU) Tories like Michael Heseltine, may be more predisposed to ideological scepticism and disdain towards such intervention? The stark reality is that slogans such as a post-Brexit economy that "works for everyone"[xxi] (Theresa May, Conservative Party), or "'Labour Brexit' that works for everyone"[xxii] (Jeremy Corbyn, Labour Party) will not replace the committed decades-long territorial support of the EU to Britain's development areas. The key question is what level of enthusiasm will be mustered and resources committed domestically to take on its mantle in future?

[i] Wray, I. (2015) *Great British Plans: Who Made Them and How They Worked*, Routledge, London.

[ii] E.g. The plan to divert foreign aid from projects in Africa and Asia to try and bribe eastern European EU states into pushing for a Brexit deal more favourable to Britain. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/ministers-uk-aid-divert-africa-to-eastern-europe-for-better-brexit-deal-a7588116.html https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/22/boris-johnson-accused-of-bad-taste-for-calling-brexit-liberation?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Gmail

[iii] The present Conservative Government was elected with a vote share of 36.9% of the votes cast (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results) representing 24.3% of the electorate (http://www.conservativehome.com/highlights/2015/05/lets-not-get-carried-away-the-conservatives-only-won-over-a-quarter-of-all-potential-voters.html)

[iv] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/21/brexit-euroscepticism-history http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/06/27/a-referendum-will-solve-nothing/

[v] http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/12/9234

[vi] McCann, P. (2016) *The UK Regional-National Economic Problem: Geography, Globalisation and Governance*, (Abingdon, Routledge); See also McCann, P. (2016) (video), Why UK city regions have benefited from Europe – and must do so in future https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute/heseltine-conference/; Centre for cities (2017) EU trade deal must be Government's top priority in Brexit negotiations – as new report shows EU is biggest export market for 61 of Britain's 62 cities, http://www.centreforcities.org/press/eu-trade-deal-must-governments-top-priority-brexit-negotiations-new-report-shows-eu-biggest-export-market-61-britains-62-cities/

[vii] http://councillors.liverpool.gov.uk/mgElectionAreaResults.aspx?ID=333&RPID=9562320

[viii] Sykes, O. and Schulze-Bäing, A. (2016), Sykes, O. and Schulze-Baeing, A. (2016), An Idea of Europe? An Idea of Planning?, *Town and Country Planning*, May 2016, pp.208-211.

[ix] http://www.eib.org/projects/regions/european-union/united-kingdom/index.htm Investments in social housing - http://www.eib.org/infocentre/press/releases/all/2017/2017-028-sovereign-secures-european-investment-for-new-homes

[x] http://www.eib.org/infocentre/press/releases/all/2017/2017-039-pound184-million-eib-backing-for-northern-powerhouse-investment-fund.htm

[xi] http://www.hulldailymail.co.uk/8203-400m-northern-powerhouse-investment-fund-opens-for-business-in-the-humber/story-30171957-detail/story.html

[xii] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/586626/building-our-industrial-strategy-green-paper.pdf

[xiii] Green, N., Baker, M., Chang, M., Deegan, J., Goodstadt, V., Graham, V. Gwiliam, M., Ravetz, J., Vigar, G. and Wray, I. (2011) *England 2050? A Practical Vision for a National Spatial Strategy*, London, Town and Country Planning Association. Wong, C. Baker, M. Hincks, S. Schulze Bäing A. and Webb B. (2012), *A Map for England – Spatial Expression of Government Policies and Programmes*, London, Royal Town Planning Institute.

See also: http://www.rtpi.org.uk/knowledge/core-issues/map-for-england/

[xiv] https://www.espon.eu/main/

[xv] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/590464/Fixing_our_broken_housing_market_-_print_ready_version.pdf

[xvi] Adams, B. and Lange, R.J. (1991), Can't Stop this Thing We Started, http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bryanadams/cantstopthisthingwestarted.html

[xvii] Cowell, R. (2017) The EU Referendum, planning and the environment: where not for the UK?, *Town Planning Review*, 88/02, pp.153-171. http://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/pdf/10.3828/tpr.2017.12

xviii http://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/

xix https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/science-and-engineering/news/articles/the-housing-crisis-is-a-really-wicked-problem-in-search-of-real-evidence-based-solutions/

xx https://www.theguardian.com/global/2017/apr/09/focus-brexit-obliterates-social-policy-agenda?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+main+NEW+H+categories&utm_term=221023&subid=10095850&CMP=EMCNEWEML6619I2

xxi https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/conservative-party/conferences/news/79596/read-theresa-mays-full-speech

xxii http://leftfootforward.org/2017/01/jeremy-corbyn-lays-out-a-labour-brexit-that-would-work-for-everyone/