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The legacies of the Leave EU vote

The UK'S decision will have ramifications beyond its borders and deal a blow to the shared project that EU signified.



Stuart Elden

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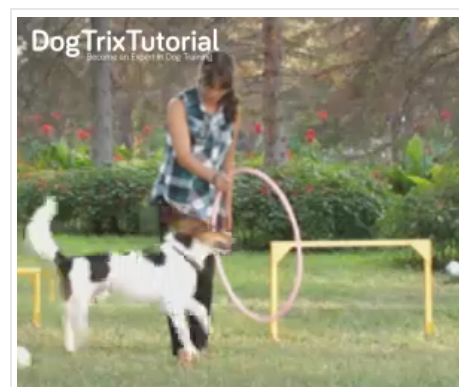


Let's get some things out of the way immediately. I voted remain, and am hugely disappointed by the result. But, though close, it wasn't that close. This was a referendum without a turnout threshold, without a percentage for victory other than a simple majority. It is advisory and non-binding, but it is hard to believe any politician or party could get very far ignoring it. So, appealing though calls for a second referendum are; tempting though it might be to dismiss the choice; frustrating as it is to hear of people who regret how they voted, or that they failed to vote this is the situation, and someone must deal with it.



Stuart Elden

The domestic and international consequences of the vote have been quick, and are changing on a daily, even hourly, basis. David Cameron's resignation as prime minister, to take effect as soon as a new leader for his party can be elected, came almost immediately. Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, made it clear quickly afterwards that Scotland did not want to be pulled out of the European Union against their will because of a vote by the English and Welsh. She is therefore exploring options for a new independence referendum from the UK and a basis to remain in the EU. Northern Ireland is another tricky question. While Sinn Féin's call for a vote from the whole of the island for their political future will be denied, the status of that part of the UK is one of the most pressing issues to arise from this.



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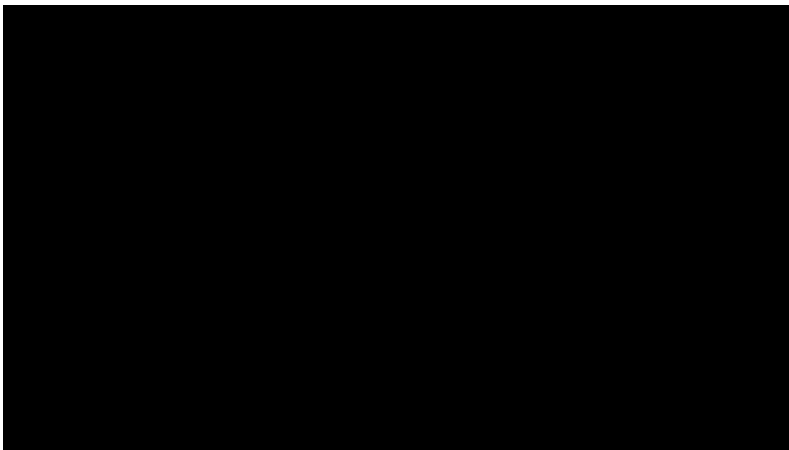
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The reason is a geographical one. As and when the UK leaves EU, the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will become an EU external border. This will immediately become a crucial political issue, especially given the concerns raised about migration. If Britain leaves the single market, then it becomes an issue for trade as well. If Scotland becomes independent, then the border between it and England will present similar issues. Of course, only a generation ago there was a civil war in Northern Ireland, and all sides will be desperate to prevent a return to that.

The UK's island nature makes its other borders somewhat easier to define and defend. But with the Channel Tunnel and the cross-Channel ports, much of the processing work is done in Calais rather than Dover. While the French government has said this will not change-it is due to a bilateral agreement, not an EU one-local authorities in Calais have already raised the question. Why should they have to deal with the problems and the refugee camps, instead of the UK? Spain has already called for shared sovereignty over the disputed territory of Gibraltar, a region which voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU.

Before the referendum, there were widespread, and likely genuine, pleas for the UK to remain part of the EU from international leaders. But now that it has voted to leave, many EU members want it to do so quickly. There is a lot to decide, and work needs to begin. Members are worried about elections in their own countries, pressure for similar referenda, and concern about instability and the possible contagion from the UK's economic problems. Those problems would be the basis for another piece. A breakup of the whole EU is not inconceivable, and it would be catastrophic. So, while there might be some self-interest from EU members, as the UK remains a significant market for their exports, they will also want to discourage other states from going the same way. So the ideas that the UK can retain access to the single market, but without freedom of movement; be bound only by rules of its choosing, when it has elected to leave the political machine; and protect the status and benefits of its citizens living in other EU countries, while not allowing reciprocal arrangements-well, these are going to be exposed for the delusions they always were.

Outside the UK, other countries will be watching anxiously. Instability in EU will have effects far beyond its borders, and the trade agreements struck between them and EU will, at some point, cease to apply to their economic relations with the UK. More generally, this retreat into a single-nation, and nationalist, vision for the future will be of wider concern. This vote was always about more than EU membership. It was a vote about what kind of UK the people wanted. An open, inclusive, tolerant nation that saw itself as part of a wider world; or a closed one which saw divisions and barriers which it wanted hardened. The nationalistic elements of the leave campaign were deeply reactionary, and out of place in a globalised world and a multicultural society. There are already, disturbingly, widespread reports of a rise in racist incidents.

The EU was far from perfect, and there were serious problems with its democracy, its economic policies, its migration attitude and more. But it was a shared project to say that

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Europe in the second half of the 20th century and beyond could be better, not just compared to the first half of the 20th century but the centuries that came before. People tend to forget why the European Economic Community, which became the European Community and then the EU, was set up in the first place. The original binding together of coal and steel, especially between France and Germany, was both politically important and militarily structured. It was to try to ensure those two countries could never wage war against each other again. Other aspects grew from that beginning. We tend to forget the recent history of Europe and what has been achieved. An EU breakup might seem unlikely to descend into another war like the ones fought in the 19th and 20th centuries, but smaller scale conflicts between existing EU members over disputed territories are much more possible.

The EU, for all its flaws, offered an alternative vision of how things could be organised. A vision of sovereignty shared and balanced, instead of held up as some mystical property, even as globalisation exposed it as a chimera. It may be that this jolt to EU causes it to unravel; more hopefully that it realises the pressure and finds ways to reform. The UK, now, will be outside those discussions and decisions, but it would be foolish to pretend it won't be affected by them.

Given all of these problems, who will really want to be prime minister? Cameron decided that he was not responsible for this mess, and that others should sort it out. After the leave vote he did one thing which he had clearly stated he would not do, and did not do something he had said he would. He said he would stay as prime minister, and that he would invoke Article 50-the legal clause in the Lisbon Treaty which triggers the exit process. Instead, he resigned immediately, staying in the post only until a new Conservative Party leader is selected, and said it was for that leader to serve formal notice. As various commentators have noted, no wonder that Boris Johnson, whose choice to campaign for leave was widely anticipated to be a strategic move to become prime minister, looked so despondent the morning after. Now that the initial shock has worn off, key players are canvassing views and assembling teams. Whether Johnson or some 'stop-Boris' candidate, and whether or not there is a new general election to give that new leader legitimacy, they are going to have to deal with these issues. The opposition Labour Party has turned inwards again, refighting old battles and not listening to the wider country. Cameron will not be the last prime minister of the UK in the EU. He will not be though he nearly was in 2014-the last prime minister of the UK. He is likely to be the penultimate. Who will want that legacy?

Stuart Elden is Professor of Political Theory and Geography, at the University of Warwick, UK and the author and editor of several books, including The Birth of Territory (2013) and Foucault's Last Decade (2016).

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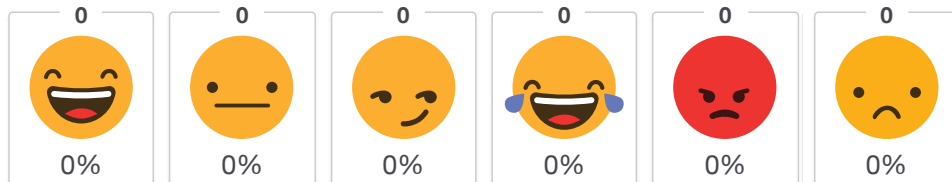
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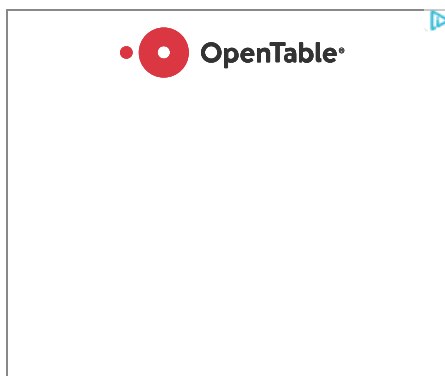
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