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## THE BLOG

# Brexit: It's About More Than One Union

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*By Benjamin Thom, MA Student at the College of Europe*

As a British student who has been studying in Europe for the last few years, this referendum really matters to me. I feel passionate about it, and I'm deeply worried that my younger compatriots may in future not be able to enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities that I've enjoyed across the European Union.





I thus care profoundly about the referendum, as no doubt do voters on the other side of the argument, but there are also those who invoke the economic facts connected to Britain's membership within the EU. They point to the fact that Britain will be detrimentally affected by leaving, with a probable 2% reduction in GDP. They argue that jobs will be lost, as uncertainty linked to our continuing participation in the single market might lead companies to up sticks and move to the continent.


There are, however, those who take the opposite view, and claim that Britain could prosper outside of the EU. It could, they say, negotiate its own trade deals, would be free of European-level regulation, and would still be able to enjoy the benefits of the single market. Of course, any membership in the single market would actually require the UK to adhere to its rules, without having any say in their formulation. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that there are people making economic arguments on both sides of the referendum debate. Indeed, the official referendum campaign to remain -- Britain Stronger in Europe -- is led by Lord Rose, an economic heavyweight and formerly chairman of Marks & Spencer's. On the other side, Vote Leave (perhaps the largest exit group) is chaired by the former chancellor, Lord Lawson. We therefore have two different economic opinions, promulgated by two Lords with extensive economic experience and financial acumen.

The situation we have here is that passionate voters are found on both sides of the argument, and economic considerations inform the remain and the leave campaigns. Therefore, undecided voters are left in a quandary as to who to believe.

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One issue which -- up to now -- has been relatively neglected, is the impact of a leave vote on the UK's geographically sovereign area, at home and abroad. Both passion and economics are involved here, as the EU referendum could have a profound impact on the identity, and livelihoods of millions of people living around the world. From Scotland, to Northern Ireland, and Gibraltar, people will be affected in a manner potentially far more pressing than the rise or fall of a few percentage points of GDP.

Scotland is widely considered to be the most pro-EU part of the United Kingdom, and a recent poll showed that 66% of Scots desire to stay in the EU, whereas the same poll found that 51% of English people wanted to leave. As a result, a potential Brexit would occur against the will of a sizeable majority of people living in Scotland. A Brexit would risk precipitating a second referendum on Scottish independence, as the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, has stated that taking current polling suggests that a new Scottish referendum would generate a strong vote to leave the UK, with 54% of respondents stating that they would vote for independence. The direct effect of Brexit on Scottish voting intentions is plainly seen, as in the 2015 independence referendum 55% of Scots voted to stay in the UK.

The impact of these voting intentions is clear. In short, Brexit will in all likelihood lead to the break-up of the UK, and the end of a union which has lasted since 1707.

Northern Ireland provides a less clear-cut, but potentially still more hazardous example of the dangers of Brexit. Ireland represents the UK's only land border with an EU country, a 300-mile stretch of land, and there are fears that post-Brexit, this could become a 'hard border'. The threat to the economic, cultural, political and historical ties which cross the border was also highlighted by Ireland's Prime Minister, Enda Kenny, who argued that Northern Ireland could face "serious difficulties" were a Brexit to occur.

Indeed, the notion that the Irish peninsula would soon contain one of the EU's external borders, generates the very real worry that any form of customs controls or immigration checks could have a grave effect on the economies on both sides of the border, and on the particularly fragile balance between religious communities in the area. The Good Friday Agreement is now 16 years old, and some argue that Brexit would serve to isolate Northern Ireland from Ireland. This development could weaken the foundations of the peace agreement as concrete borders would have a profound impact on Unionists and Republicans alike. Ultimately, a new EU border, hard or not, would starkly emphasize the increasing differences between Britain and Ireland for citizens.

In actual fact, the EU has been particularly active in Northern Ireland, with £180 million to integrate the Catholic and Protestant communities confirmed for the 2014-2020 period through the PEACE IV scheme. Furthermore, EU initiatives have facilitated people living near the border to go to whichever school or hospital is closest to where they live, regardless of whether these hospitals or schools are in their country of residence. Initiatives such as this might be halted should a Brexit occur, with the result that communities along the border would begin to have more and more experiences which define them as different.

Just as with Scotland, exiting the EU could be used as an opportunity by political parties pushing for independence from the UK. Sinn Fein sees this as a "constitutional opportunity" (Martina Anderson, Sinn Fein MEP). We are therefore

not just dealing with Brexit, but with a referendum that may bring into question the continuing territorial integrity of Great Britain.

Finally we have Gibraltar, a British overseas territory which joined the European Economic Community under the UK in 1973. Gibraltar has only one land connection, to Spain, and as a result it has a vested interest in maintaining relations with the EU. Indeed, ten thousand Spaniards cross into Gibraltar every day to work, whilst many more on both sides of the border travel next door for shopping or leisure activities.

Gibraltar is not part of the Customs Union, Common Commercial Policy, Agricultural Policy, or Common Fisheries Policy, and is not obliged to levy VAT. Furthermore, like the UK, it is not a part of the Schengen Area. However, just as Spanish opposition played a role in Gibraltar's exclusion from the Customs Union in 1973, so too there is a fear that Brexit could leave Gibraltar adrift outside the EU, and cut off from the mainland. This has happened before, as the border, Gibraltar's lifeline, was closed for 16 years from 1969 by the Spanish government. The freedom of movement principle enshrined in the EU treaties now makes such a closure legally contentious, and yet were the UK to vote to leave, suddenly Gibraltar's border crossing might again be up for debate.

It is, as a result, not surprising to note that Gibraltar's Chief Minister, Fabian Picardo, asserted that the fact that Gibraltarians, who are noted for considering themselves more British than the British, are so concerned by Brexit, shows that this year's referendum on the 23rd June, would have a profound impact on Gibraltar, and on the identity of its inhabitants. Ceded at the Treaty of Utrecht, in 1713, The Rock (and its patriotic citizens) may well come to re-evaluate its relationship with a post-Brexit Britain, as the EU is so fundamental to its stability and wealth.

Ultimately, we can see all too plainly that a potential Brexit would combine passions and economics, as lives are altered, identities changed and economies transformed. The question whether to leave or to remain, thus extends far beyond whether we are a member of the EU or not. It determines what it means to be British for voters from Scotland and Northern Ireland, to sunny Gibraltar.

Their sense of their Britishness could be fundamentally altered, and as a result the nature of this United Kingdom and its passport holders could be changed irreparably. The vote should ultimately be just as much about Edinburgh, Belfast, and Gibraltar as about Brussels. We may not have enjoyed the closest relation with the EU and its institutions, but our longstanding links to those who share our passport, language, culture and outlook is something that should not be underestimated. Voting to leave the European Union may also, in the long run, represent a vote to leave behind our compatriots who are so closely connected to our identity.

Do we really want to take a risk that threatens our identity, and could transform our family of nations? Picture the moment as I arrive at passport control, and present my brand-new bright red English passport. Such a scenario may seem far-fetched, but it is a possible result of a vote that has the potential to affect my life, and those of other members of my generation, for decades to come. Voting to leave is a threat to my generation's future prospects, economically and culturally, and it is one that would jeopardize our United Kingdom's commitment to be a family of nations. A vote to leave could thus be a vote to abandon two unions: the global economic

powerhouse that is the European Union, and the stability -- providing, identity-defining union that is our United Kingdom.

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