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Work and Thought in Action

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"If at first you don't succeed…" : Why a second Brexit referendum is a serious danger to

British democracy

I'll never knew exactly why I got interested in politics. There was never really one thing

or one moment that I can point to for certain that sent me down the path of wanting to be

involved in it. Even so, it's seemed that whatever I do I always end up back here, studying

politics. I suppose my first true introduction to the political was the combination of the 2012

presidential election and an American government class when I was 14. Back then, politics was

something more abstract and distant from my life as a middle schooler. But it was adult,

important, and interesting, and for some reason all this stuff about laws and civics and

campaigning made more sense than geometry or physics ever did.

I have to think that 14 year old me couldn't even imagine that only about 6 years later I

would be completing an internship in Parliament; walking the halls where some of the most

important political decisions in the United Kingdom were being made at that very moment. From

the second I saw that a Parliamentary internship was a possibility when coming to London, I

knew that I wanted that. I had no idea what to expect coming in to it-- this was my first

experience at an internship and working in an office setting in general, let alone the fact that I

was going to be doing so in a foreign country. At first, it was difficult to know what to do and what people expected of me. My very first day I had to endure a crazy advice surgery full of angry people yelling at me when I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing in the first place. However, once I got a hang of things I enjoyed most of my time immensely and I genuinely looked forward to the time I got to spend with my coworkers.

A large part of my job consisted of sorting and logging incoming constituent emails onto a database that would then allow the MP to respond to their inquiries. And given the period of time in which I was interning, a huge majority of these emails had to deal with the proverbial elephant in the room: Brexit. Specifically, Brexit and requests for a second referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union.

Ever since the result of the first referendum in 2016, there has always been talk of potentially having a second "confirmatory" vote on the issue of EU membership. However, as the planned Brexit date (formerly March 29th, 2019) grew closer, these cries grew louder and more numerous. In regards to my internship, this mostly took the form of the many many hundreds of emails that would appear every week in the parliamentary inbox. Many constituents, some several times within the same week, would send out pre written emails from websites like 38 Degrees (a petition site that helps people contact their representatives). Although in general sites like these are a good idea because they help regular people contact their elected officials, I don't think people really know what the result of this is on the representatives-- namely, 300+ versions of the same exact email that have to be logged onto the system by unpaid interns.

Regardless, the message was clear: the people (or at least a very vocal few) wanted the chance to vote again on whether the UK should be part of the European Union or not, and were

willing to pester their representatives and turn up by the million to protest for it. However, over the course of my internship and my further studies into British politics, I have come to the conclusion that such a referendum would not only be infeasible, but an actual threat to the very foundation of British democracy.

Now I know that may sound extreme and perhaps even apocalyptic, but I would argue that this issue has become the most important political event of our time in UK politics and thus such statements about the potentially huge results of this fight are not completely unreasonable. We'll get to all that. First, however, it's impossible to understand the dilemma of a second referendum without first understanding why there was even a first Brexit referendum, and to understand that, one first has to understand the history of the European Union itself.

The story of modern Europe really begins in the years following the second World War from 1945-1959. After the chaos that had been wrought upon most of mainland Europe due to the complex series of alliances and military buildup that triggered the first and second world wars, many countries were eager to come to an agreement that would not only make future wars in Europe difficult but would also lead to easy trade and sharing of resources. The result was the European Coal and Steel Community, founded in 1950 by Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. This economic alliance was the first incarnation of the European Union and also heavily served as a counter to the growing Soviet economic bloc in the east. Take note, however, of the fact that a certain specific country is absent from the list above-- the United Kingdom was never a part of this first european union and declined invitations to join. [1]

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[1] "A history of the UK's EU membership"

Europe evolved again with the creation of the EEC. In 1957, the Treaty of Rome created something called the "European Economic Community" between the member countries of the alliance: something which would become better known as "the Common Market." This agreement did away with customs fees between member countries, and centralized control over agriculture and food production. All of this was seen as part of creating the ultimate anti-war alliance-- the theory was that if all of these countries shared resources and trade, it would make it very difficult for one of them to go to war against the others. The huge economic growth of Europe in the 1960s also lends credibility to the idea that such an alliance is good for generating wealth in economic blocs as well.

By 1961, many in the UK were beginning to warm to the idea of a European economic alliance and the very appealing Common Market, including Conservative PM Harold Macmillan. It was this year that the UK submitted its first application to join the EEC. However, it wasn't to be-- in 1963, French President Charles De Gaulle vetoed the UK's application. Many including De Gaulle still had concerns about the UK's financial position post-war, particularly how much money Britain owed to the United States. De Gaulle was concerned that the US might use the UK as a way to leverage control of Europe and compromise the whole system. The UK again applied for membership in 1967, and again De Gaulle vetoed the application. However, supporters of joining Europe in the UK did not give up, and submitted a third application for membership. If not for De Gaulle's death in 1970, it's likely this third attempt would have also failed and the UK may have never entered into the EEC, which would later become the EU.

All of this leads to a pivotal moment: January 1st, 1973, the day the United Kingdom first enters the EEC along with Ireland and Denmark. This was the first expansion of the European

community beyond its founding members and seen as a momentous triumph not only for the UK but for the EEC as well. However, victory was somewhat short-lived-- only two years later things took a turn in the form of the United Kingdom European Communities membership referendum of 1975.

The 1975 referendum is vital to take into consideration for a great many number of reasons. It was not only the first country-wide referendum on Europe, but also the first referendum vote the United Kingdom held in general. It was also to be the only referendum the country held until 2011's referendum on alternative voting. So right off the bat, the fact that not only one but two of the UK's very few nationwide referendums have been about Europe indicate that there is something important and uniquely controversial about the question of the European Union. At first glance, this referendum seems to mirror the modern one; after all, it's the same issue with a similar question being posed. But although the 1975 referendum is similar to 2016 one in many ways, it's also a complete reverse in others. First of all, the result was different-- the UK voted to stay in the EEC, with 67.23% of votes for remain and 32.77% voting for leave[2], as opposed to 48.1% of votes for remain and 51.9% of votes for leave in 2016.[3] However, that's just the surface of the differences between the two.

Notably, turnout was lower in 1975-- only 64.62% of voters showed up in 1975, compared to 72.2% in 2016. That change in turnout indicates an increase in interest in the issue in the several decades since the result of the last referendum, or at the very least that campaigning in 2016 was more effective in getting people to the polls. Additionally, party positions were reversed in 1975. The Conservatives, including a pre-premiership Margaret

[2] Miller, *The 1974-75 UK Renegotiation of EEC Membership and Referendum*
[3] Electoral Commission | EU referendum results

Thatcher, were campaigning to stay part of the EEC, while Labour was campaigning for leave.

The Conservatives' main concern was free trade, and at the time the EEC seemed like the best

deal in town. Being part of the Common Market was beneficial financially and seeing as the UK

had just officially given up its empire that same year, it needed stable trade relations to replace

the ones it was losing by cutting trade links with former colonies.[4] Labour, on the other hand,

was deeply concerned with the question of sovereignty and the impact that being part of the EEC

would have on jobs in the UK.

The Leave campaign of 1975 claimed that being part of the EEC was a slippery slope that

meant giving up significant portions of the UK and Parliament's autonomy, and effectively

sharing sovereignty with the eight other member nations. They were concerned that being part of

Europe would hinder the ability of Parliament to govern effectively and make the decisions that

were best for the UK individually.[5] If that sound familiar, that's because it is-- the Leave

campaign of 2016 made many similar arguments about how the UK no longer had autonomy or

control over many of its assets, namely the border and who would be allowed to come in or not.

Remain, however, argued that the benefits of being part of the Common Market

outweighed any potential downsides. Free trade and the expansion of capitalism were of the

utmost importance. It's also important to remember that in 1975 the Soviet Union and the threat

of communism were still very much on people's minds, so a strong economic alliance with

nearby countries seemed pretty appealing.

At the time, everything regarding Europe and the Common Market was still very new and

any claims of the future very much conjecture. The UK had only officially been part of the EEC

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[4] Wheeler, *EU referendum: Did 1975 predictions come true?*
[5] Wheeler, *EU referendum: Did 1975 predictions come true?*

for two years, so the argument could be made that nobody really had any idea what exactly they had signed up for. Claims that being part of the EEC would destroy Parliament or cost millions of jobs were all based on playing off the fears of the people. Nobody really knew what was going to happen in the future with regards to Europe or the UK. It was impossible to know exactly what the future would hold or how circumstances would change.

This change in circumstances in the 40+ years between the referendums is perhaps the single biggest factor that led to the change in outcome in 2016. First of all, in 1975 the Soviet Union and the Cold War were looming threats and seemed immutable. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the breaking up of the Soviet Bloc could not have been foreseen when the people were voting in 1975. The removal of this threat thus removed the need for the UK to be part of a strong economic union with nearby countries to fight communism. Additionally, the UK was doing much stronger economically in 2016 than in 1975.[6] The UK economy had been experiencing a slump in the early to mid 70s, so being part of a strong economic union may have seemed significantly more beneficial at the time. In 2016 however the UK economy was doing pretty well on its own while the EU was being dragged down by in-debt countries like Greece. Thus seeing the UK strike out on its own and not be hindered by the financial failings of other European countries may have appeared to be a better option.

But perhaps above all else the change in result from 1975 to 2016 can be attributed to the rise in inequality in the UK over this time period. Since 1979 and peaking in the 1990s, a smaller and smaller percentage of people at the very top have been receiving a larger percentage of income while a larger percentage of people at the bottom are receiving less.[7] And the people in

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[6] UK GDP since 1955 | Business | theguardian.com
[7] How Has Inequality Changed? | The Equality Trust

the middle? Their income has stagnated while inflation and the cost of living has continued to increase. Couple this with a rise in levels of immigration to the UK[8] and a sentiment that these immigrants are taking jobs and what you get is an environment ripe for revolt against the current political and economic system. By 2016, the disaffected middle class could see little benefit to staying in the EU.

It hardly needs to be said what happened next. The UK voted Leave on June 23rd, 2016 by a narrow margin, and thus the whole Brexit ordeal was started. Although there is clearly so much that could be said about that specific campaign and all the goings on there, it's instead time that we shift our focus from the past to the present and future. The 2016 referendum happened. It's over with, done, finished, and there's nothing that can be done to change that.

Or is there? That seems to be the question many asking for a second referendum these days seems to be asking. What if we could put this whole Brexit nightmare behind us, and pretend it never happened in the first place? What if we could undo what has already been done?

The way those who are unhappy with the result of the 2016 referendum aim to reverse the decision is to have a second vote. Basically, a "do-over." And it isn't just a few random people on the fringes of politics who are discussing this idea nor is it a homegrown "grassroots" idea either, although those behind the campaign would like you to think so. The Liberal-Democrats, the Green Party, the SNP, Tony Blair, and now the Labour party-- all of these political elite are very much behind the idea of a second "people's vote." Note that phrasing: it's very purposeful. The campaign wants you to see this as a movement for the voice of the people, completely

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[8] Office for National Statistics, *Provisional Long-Term International Migration estimates*

disregarding the fact that there has technically already been a people's vote-- in 2016, when the UK voted to leave the EU.

There are several main arguments that proponents of a second referendum make. First of all, they say, the past two years have shown the reality of what it takes in order to deliver a Brexit.[9] There are so many moving pieces and factors that voters perhaps hadn't accounted for when they voted the first time. Leaving Europe isn't just a simple yes or no-- there's whether the UK still wants to be part of the Common Market to think about, as well as the question of the Irish border. There's a lot to work out when untangling 40+ years of regulations and legislation. As well as that, they argue that a second referendum would serve to put an end to a discussion that people only really started having once the result turned up Leave. All of this Brexit talk is hurting national unity and social cohesiveness, and a definitive second vote could resolve this conversation for a generation.[10] In addition, there is evidence to suggest that many claims that the Leave campaign made in the lead-up to the 2016 referendum were highly dubious or flat out false, like Nigel Farage's famous assertion that "£350 million a week would be spent on the NHS if the UK backed a Brexit vote."[11] In light of all this, second referendum proponents ask, why not put it back to the people and see if they still want to go through with leaving the EU?

Superficially, that question seems fairly harmless, and even logical. Why *not* put it back to the people, just to make sure? It seems that circumstances have changed once again in the two years since the last vote, and since a change in circumstances caused a change in opinion on Europe once before, who's to say it couldn't have happened again?

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[9] Price, *The case for a second referendum*
[10] Cohen, *Hold a Second Brexit Referendum*
[11] McCann, *Nigel Farage: £350 million pledge to fund the NHS was 'a mistake'*

That's all fine and good in concept. However, unfortunately, the reality of a second referendum is a little more serious. I will admit that *yes*, Brexit does seem to be more complicated than many voters were anticipating it to be. Untangling years of regulation and political deals which have bound the UK to the EU was never going to be easy, though. And in retrospect, the fact that leaving the EU is so difficult and complicated does give credence to one of the original purposes of a european union: it was intended to bind the nations of Europe so tightly together that wars like WWI and WWII, which were partially the results of European conflicts, could never happen again. Brexit has proved that this binding and attempts to break free from it have actually worked, although perhaps not exactly in the scenario that the founders of the European Coal and Steel Community envisioned.

Just as there are a variety of arguments people have in favor of a second referendum, there are also a variety of arguments against. Some, usually the traditional Brexiteer crew who voted Leave in the first place, are against it because they're tired of this whole ordeal and after all, "Leave means Leave." That ties into one of the main flaws of the second referendum's whole "people's vote" argument-- the people DID vote. It wasn't as if it was just Parliament or any other specific body that made this decision. A majority of the 72% of people that turned up to vote in 2016 voted leave in a democratic way. Those arguing otherwise are suggesting that they only consider a result to be democratic when THEY are the ones that win, which by its very nature is not democratic.

In regards to the claim that a second vote would serve to end the whole Europe discussion that has been tearing the country apart and consuming the political conversation, it's very naive to think that a simple vote would actually end all this vitriol. In fact, another hard fought

campaign would likely increase tensions as each side only becomes more entrenched in their own point of view. To think otherwise displays a serious lack in understanding of the way people behave. People do not simply give up their point of view because you insist that they are wrong. Britain has been lucky so far in regards to the far right in that Brexit is the furthest they've gone. But second referendum backers fail to realize how explosive a reaction disregarding the voice of these people would be. Those who voted for Brexit were angry about inequality, dissatisfied with the government, and felt that they weren't being heard. Can you imagine what their reaction would be if a second referendum was approved? It would be essentially be saying to them, "Oh, we hear your voices. We're just choosing to ignore them." That's sure to go over well.

The largest concern that a second referendum raises for me personally is the precedent it would set for British democracy. It is a unique feature of UK government that there is no codified, or written-down, constitution. Thus, what is and is not acceptable and the way that certain situations are resolved relies entirely on the precedent set by what has come before. Therefore, it's important to remember that whatever way Brexit is resolved will *become precedent*. Having a second referendum and essentially disregarding the voice of the majority who voted leave the first time not ignores a legitimate democratic vote but sets the precedent that any decision that some people don't like can be just be reversed. Philip Cunliffe, a senior lecturer in international conflict at the University of Kent, put it like this:

"A second referendum would erode the very basis of democracy by suggesting that rule by the majority is an insufficient condition for democratic legitimacy, undermining all political decisions for the foreseeable future. It would cast a pall over political life in the UK, undermining national political institutions and delegitimizing the very basis of democracy itself as a mode of collective decision making. It would breed public resentment as well as fostering protest politics and extremism. A second referendum

would not be changing a decision that has been implemented but subverting one that has not been enacted."[12]

Was it a good idea for the UK to leave the EU? Maybe not. I don't think it was. But just because one doesn't like the decision that the majority had made in a democratic way does not mean that there is a basis to call for the decision to be reversed. If such a precedent were to come into play, it would make it difficult for anything to get done, especially if any other referendum were to be called on any other issue. It would allow people to say, "Well, we voted twice on Brexit, why can't we vote twice on this too?" Such a process of voting multiple times on the same issues would make it difficult for governments to enact any significant legislation. Democracies need to have a basis of consistency to maintain legitimacy. The precedent that any decision some people don't like can be reversed severely undermines this.

There are other arguments against a second referendum as well. I've seen people argue that implying that "people didn't know enough about the issue" the first time around is elitist and insults the intelligence of half the UK population,[13] that overall organizing another referendum is "too complicated,"[14] that it would be difficult to even decide what question to hold it on, etc. These are all valid points. However, at least in my personal view, it's the question of precedent and democracy that makes this so dangerous. In the US, we have the Constitution to protect us. There's a certain set of rules and regulations, and although they may not always work, at the very least they exist. The UK doesn't have that. The lack of a written constitution may give the UK a certain amount of flexibility and ability to change in some circumstances, but I think in this one the lack of set procedure is just destabilizing.

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[12] Cunliffe, *The case for and against a second referendum*

[13] Bickerton, *Arrogant remainers want a second vote. That would be a bad day for democracy*

[14] Sandford, *How could a second UK referendum on Brexit be organised?*

I've witnessed how much this whole Brexit process has shaken up Parliament in person through my time there. I was there to see that even the most experienced politicians had little idea of how to handle this situation. From week to week, nobody knew what was going to happen. All of those Brexit emails from constituents I logged on to the system would accumulate for days due to the fact that we couldn't send out an official response because by the time we did, the situation may have changed significantly again. Although it was all very exciting, it was also kind of scary-- here I was in one of the highest governmental bodies in the UK, and even there everyone was just stumbling around in the dark, hoping to find a solution to this chaos yet utterly unwilling to compromise even a little bit. A second referendum would only increase this instability and chaos tenfold, and erode what little faith remains in the people for Parliament to govern. Brexit was disastrous. But trying to vote again would be even moreso. For the sake of not creating a democracy-destroying precedent, it's better to just get on with leaving. Perhaps the result of a second referendum would be different. But for the sake of the country it's probably best not to find out, at least for another 40 years. Maybe then it will be the right time for another "people's vote."

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