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Breaking Down Brexit

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On June 23, 2016 a vote was taken to determine whether or not the countries in the United Kingdom would remain members of the political-economic organization known as the European Union. Ultimately, the vote decided that the countries that comprise the United Kingdom would seize the opportunity to make their exit. “Brexit” short for “Britain’s exit” – prompted me to explore the history of U.K. and Irish politics while I studied and interned in Dublin, Ireland. In addition to the historical implications of this vote, I also considered how Brexit will affect the U.K. and its people in terms of economics, internal stability, and trade.

During the summer of 2015, I spent time in London and Northern Ireland, critiquing the Northern Ireland Troubles as a means to understanding peace and conflict. This summer, I studied in Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland, interned at the Local Government Management Agency and took a class on Irish history. I found that in Ireland, popular topics for conversation include politics – American and Irish –, sports, travel, and the weather.

The most exemplary encounter I had was with a fisherman on his perspective on Irish politics. As I dangled my feet over the murky water, at a marina in the town of Kinvara, I began talking to a fisherman about politics and The Brexit. In the span of five to ten minutes I learned that he used to live in Shenandoah, Virginia, which is a mere two hours from Richmond, and about his perspective on European politics. “The Brexit is great for the Irish economy,” he said. “Now Ireland could be the only English speaking country left in the EU, which means that international trade into Europe would be focused more on Ireland instead of remaining focused on the U.K.”

His pro-Brexit sentiment encouraged me to further research the issue, and I found that the outlook for the Republic of Ireland post-Brexit is not as clearly positive as my fisherman friend confidently asserted. According to the Irish Times, as of July 25, 2016, consumer and business sentiment in Ireland has plunged in the wake of Brexit. Consumer sentiments are people’s evaluations of whether or not buying climates are suitable. Business sentiments are people’s assessments of finances, the general economic outlook, and the labor market. These two positions are essential to gauging the economic atmosphere. It is also highly important to consider the political atmosphere throughout countries in the U.K.

**COUNTRY DIVIDES AND POLITICAL NEGOTIATIONS:**

At the Local Government Management Agency in Dublin, my line manager, Maeve Bourke, said that European politics were not easily measured on the same scale as American politics. Holding out her hands as a means of reference, Bourke further said that the European center was comparable to the American left, and the European left would be so far left in American terms, that it would not be on the scale. The European right would similarly be close to American right-wing moderates.

The popular vote determined the outcome of the Brexit decision, with a total of 52 percent of the U.K. population voting in favor of Brexit, according to BBC. The BBC also reported that 72 percent of all U.K. citizens voted in the referendum. In terms of individual countries, England and Wales voted to leave, while Northern Ireland and Scotland voted to remain. This has affected the countries throughout the U.K. because it has created a vocalized divide among them.

Feelings about the Brexit may continue to look incongruous throughout the U.K. According to the Irish Times, Northern Ireland has demanded that the Belfast Agreement and Irish peace be legally protected before the U.K. permanently leaves the EU. “The Belfast Agreement, also called the Good Friday Agreement, dates back to the 1990s and among other things stated that Northern Ireland and its government are secure in its separate relations to both the U.K. and the Republic of Ireland. The agreement was created to acknowledge that a large portion of people in Northern Ireland wanted to remain a part of the U.K., which granted them sovereignty from the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, Northern Ireland operates as a devolved government of the U.K., similar to how Scotland and Wales operate. Devolved governments obtain their powers from a centralized government that has granted the particular country, such as Northern Ireland, the ability to enact legislation for themselves.

In a related notion of dissent, some people in Scotland are considering seced-
in order to return to the EU. According to the Irish Times, such secession could mean the greatest certainty for Scotland in the wake of Brexit.

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The EU provided a host of benefits to the U.K. that are now in jeopardy of being surrendered because of Brexit. Those benefits included trade deals and economic considerations. The European Union has 28 member states that span across the continent of Europe. Membership in the EU ensures that member states are able to participate in a single-market economic system that guarantees free movement of goods, services and labor throughout the countries. According to Europe, by diminishing the physical barriers to trade, prices have become more reasonable in Europe, people have access to education outside of their home countries and the EU has worked to ensure that such benefits do not undermine fairness, consumer protection or environmental sustainability. This is beneficial for member countries because they share the Euro as a single currency – though England continues to use the pound – and member countries are able to regulate their tax rates as they see fit. However, according to USA Today, As a result of Brexit, it is quite possible that the U.K. will no longer be able to benefit from the EU economic structure.

Member states in the EU require that there be equal opportunities concerning access to goods and services. According to BBC, EU membership guaranteed that EU nationals were able to establish permanent residence after they lived in the U.K. for five years. Should the U.K. leave the EU permanently, this right will be subject to negotiation, thus limiting freedom to move around many of the countries in Europe.

In order for the U.K. to leave the EU permanently, it must invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. The Lisbon Treaty is the constitutional basis for the European Union and no country has yet chosen to invoke it. The article allows two years for each side – the seceding country and the EU – to negotiate the terms of their split. These negotiations will address how they will conduct economics, politics and immigration as separate cohesive entities. According to BBC, EU law still applies to the U.K. until this process is completed, and the U.K. is still involved in treaties but is unable to take part in decision-making.

IMMIGRATION CONCERNS

With the reverberations of making a certain country great again clanging in my mind, I could not help but ask my fisherman friend if the U.K. left because of rampant xenophobia in Europe. To that question he said, “Everyone thinks that the U.K. voted to leave to control immigration and that is part of it but the main reason was economics.”

The fisherman also noted that when population demographics are observed about who voted to stay and who voted to leave, age group demographics split votes most decisively. “The older U.K. generation questioned entering the EU about 40 years ago but they still decided to join,” he said. “Since they had a new opportunity to leave, this time, they took it.” That statement encouraged me to continue examining the history of European politics and economics. It appeared that it was true that those who were pro-Brexit believed that membership in the EU stagnated growth.

However, it is also true that many of the critics of the EU and those who voted to leave were unhappy with the idea that immigrants were often coming from poorer countries to richer countries for opportunities. A study from the National Center for Social Research titled, “30 Years of British Social Attitudes,” showed that of participants who reported that they have some racial prejudice, 92 percent agreed that immigration levels should be reduced. Likewise, the study also concluded that of participants who reported that they have no racial prejudice, 72 percent agreed that immigration should be reduced.

While this does not address xenophobia directly, similar to the fisherman’s sentiments, it does show that various people are displeased with high immigration levels in the U.K. One benefit of leaving the EU would be gaining the exclusive right to dictate who is able to work and live inside of Britain.

UNCERTAINTY AS A NECESSARY CALL TO ACTION:

Amongst things such as secession and border negotiations, trade agreements would be the most difficult element to renegotiate in terms of a permanent Brexit. According to BBC, trade was a major breaking point for the U.K. because many citizens felt that the EU was imposing too many rules and fees on businesses, while offering too few benefits in return. In regard to impediments on free movement and trade, it is my sincere hope that communities will not suffer at the hands of isolationist policies, especially regarding economics and politics that purposefully try to be exclusionary. In the midst of uncertainty, one thing is for sure: with four countries trying to decide what factors are best for their economic growth, political atmospheres and immigration policies, change will be the only constant factor in navigating Brexit.