

**Brexit:**

***A failed project  
in a failing state***

A man in a dark jacket and glasses is seen from the back, reaching up to stock a high shelf in a warehouse. The shelves are filled with boxes of cereal, including brands like Corn Flakes, Kellogg's, and Quaker. The man's jacket has 'ARMOUR' written on the back. The entire image has a purple tint.

***Danny Dorling***



## About the author

**Danny Dorling** is a professor in the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. He was previously a professor for a decade at the University of Sheffield, and before then at the University of Leeds. He has also worked as an academic in Newcastle and Bristol. He was born and brought up in Oxford. In 2020 he published *Slowdown: The End of the Great Acceleration—and Why It's Good for the Planet, the Economy, and Our Lives* and in 2021, jointly with Annika Koljonen, *Finntopia: what we can learn from the world's happiest country*. His 2023 book is titled *Shattered Nation: Inequality, and the geography of a failing state*. Danny is a patron of the road crash charity RoadPeace, of Heeley City Farm in Sheffield, and of the educational campaign group Comprehensive Future. In his spare time he makes sandcastles on beaches with clean streams and the right kind of sand. He errs towards being optimistic about the future, because his academic work suggests, to him, that this is the most rational stance to take – despite what you may see around you.

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## Editor's note

It is an honour to introduce Danny Dorling's refreshingly opinionated and honest take on the United Kingdom's torturous exit from the European Union (EU). In this provocative and lucid contribution, Dorling puts the decision to 'leave' in the context of four decades of bad policy making, which has accumulated a host of social and economic problems. Brexit was, in part, a response to these failures and their mounting grievances – but has failed entirely to answer a single of these problems. But Brexit was also – as Dorling rightly emphasises – a story about the radicalisation of a particular form of reactionary English nationalism, which drew heavily on anti-immigration and 'sovereignty-ist' sentiment, in a wave of rule Britannia nostalgia.

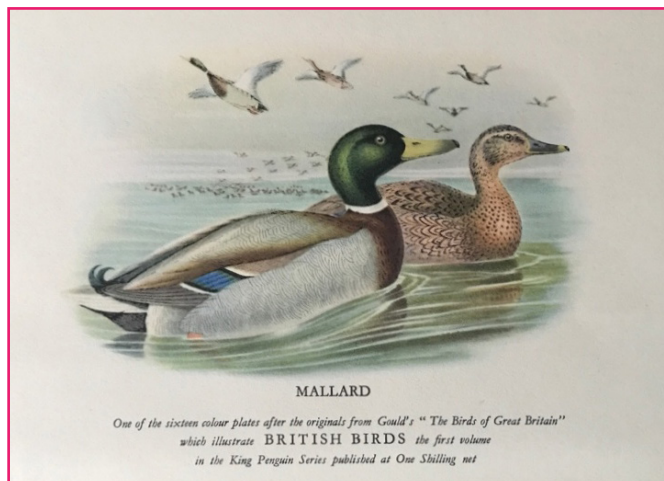
Whereas the political establishment has gone quiet on the Brexit question, public opinion has moved on markedly, and a passionate 'rejoin' movement continues to flourish, despite the present lack of political buy-in from the mainstream. While the political class do not want to reopen the Brexit question, traumatised as they are (from various perspectives) by the 2019 General Election, the pandemic arriving in 2020, the government of fools of 2021, the imposition of two new Prime Ministers in 2022, rapidly rising destitution including the bankruptcy of Birmingham and so many other places and institutions in 2023 and the aftermath of all of this, the public continues to move against Brexit in spite of the absence of mainstream political support.

Opposition to Brexit is one of the few issues that unites a broad coalition of supporters, from the trade unions to the business community, the progressive left, and swathes of middle England – including those in so-called 'blue wall', traditionally conservative seats. It's hard to see how the mantra of 'make Brexit work' can survive the reality of the on-going Brexit problems as well as the clear shift in public opinion. This means that those developing Brexit-critical policies, advocacy and campaigns can expect progress under what will possibly be an incoming Labour government next year.

This report is published as part of the Brexit Spotlight project, a collaboration between Another Europe Is Possible and the political foundation, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung London. By shining a light on the problems and challenges of Brexit, we aim to contribute to political education and evidence based public debate on the EU. We also seek to maintain – despite the UK exit from the EU – the links between UK-based pro-European campaigners on the left and centre-left and the European progressive family. The report is an important contribution to this transnational dialogue.

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# Introduction



Picture of a mallard, 'King Penguin K1 Book No. 1', Penguin, 1939, painted by John Gould [Wikimedia Commons](#)

*'Fifty years on from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county [cricket] grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers, and—as George Orwell said—old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist.'*

John Major's speech to the Conservative Group for Europe, 22 April 1993

Thirty years ago, the Prime Minister suggested we had little to fear, that Britain would still be a country in which county cricket would be played in a weird English game where nothing much happens and no one really cares what the result is (when the match is 'county', meaning not international). He was describing the antidote to what was becoming an increasingly competitive and driven world, a society with increasing aspirations for excellence and productivity. County cricket implies that good enough is good enough, that it is OK to 'coast'. Warm beer is good enough.

Warm beer may be an acquired taste and often not excellent, but it was our taste. Suburban housing was the least efficient way to house people ever invented, but it was our invention. Our British dog breeds would remain loyal and obedient, just as long as we followed Barbara Woodhouse's advice, a darling of the 1980s British media, who promised 'no bad dogs' for followers of her books and television shows. We had British birds and British trees too, and when the middle class bought their children books they included titles such as 'one hundred British insects and invertebrates to identify in your British pond'. A few such items still exist from that past and some new posters are made each year for those who like them.

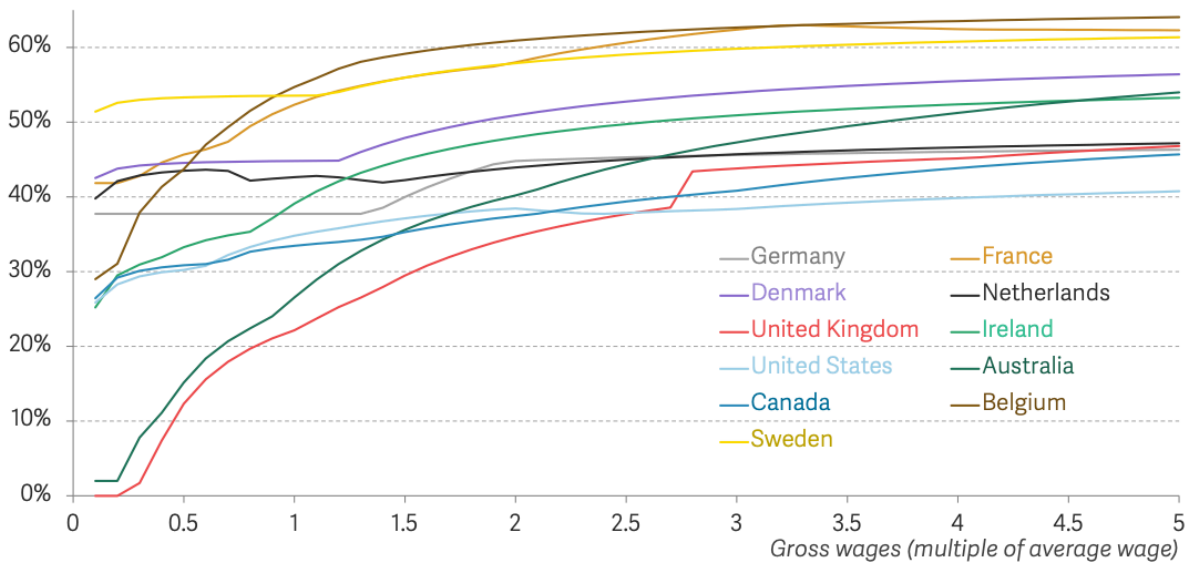
Old maids could cycle happily and pray contentedly because they were English, and England was that country which Mary Whitehouse was keeping safe from smut.<sup>1</sup> We were part of the European Economic Community, but that would all come to an end shortly before Christmas 1993 after which we became a member of the European Union. We were also, and continue to be, the lowest social spending and (for the affluent) the lowest tax regime of any large country in that Union. Only Spain shortly after Franco had been in charge, and Greece shortly after the junta of the generals, spent less on public services.

As the Resolution Foundation explained three decades later, "Tax policy choices help determine levels of inequality", and UK politicians had not, in the immortal words of Wham, chosen life,<sup>2</sup> they chose instead, inequality.

The social failures of Brexit are, in one sense just part of a long history of social failure in a Britain dominated by England, an England dominated by the richest subjects of the monarch, people who mostly have at least one home in London.

In no other large country in Europe did people pay so little in direct taxation as in the UK in 2016 when the referendum was held. The poor paid very highly in indirect taxation, including through VAT and taxes on some particular goods that they more often consumed. But the poor in the UK had so little money that those taxes did not raise enough to sustain a well-functioning state in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Things were slowly falling apart. And we blamed the foreigners, the immigrants, immigration, and the European Union for allowing that immigration and all its weird rules (the ones that mostly only ever existed in our imaginations). We have a tendency to remember the past

Effective tax rate



Effective tax rates by wage level (relative to the average wage) in selected countries, 2020. Across the distribution, UK taxes are low by international standards. Note: the well-off pay very low taxes in the UK too, those earning 4 times average incomes pay the least in Europe. Resolution Foundation

differently to how it really was, and to see aspects of places as being unique which are actually much more universal. John Major in 1993 claimed that England was a country of long shadows, but the shadows were no longer than elsewhere in the remains of the day of our youth, and no different to shadows elsewhere in the world at our latitude. There are no special British shadows.

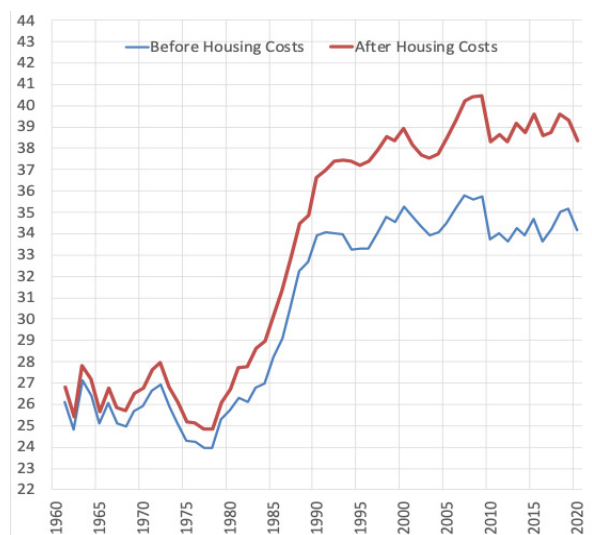
So too with the morning mist that he mentioned in the quote that begins this report, the dogs, the beer, the greenery. Suburban gardens in England are not some special and unique British green. But in one way Britain was already very different from other European states by 1993. No other state in Europe had just experienced such a huge rise in economic inequality – not one – and the social repercussions that followed from that.

John Major had been the last of Margaret Thatcher’s string of Chancellors of the Exchequer, the last of the men who presided over the fastest recorded tearing apart of the social fabric of a nation. He had followed in the footsteps of Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson. None of these Conservatives saw how they had cast dark shadows on a society to the extent that there was, in Thatcher’s own words, no longer such a thing as society (‘...There are individual men, and women, and there are families’ – she said, and too few asked why she thought that).

Conservative Britain was the imagined corner of a cul-de-sac, separated from its neighbours by a small stream, that would forever remain the same. Tory England, they believed, would be

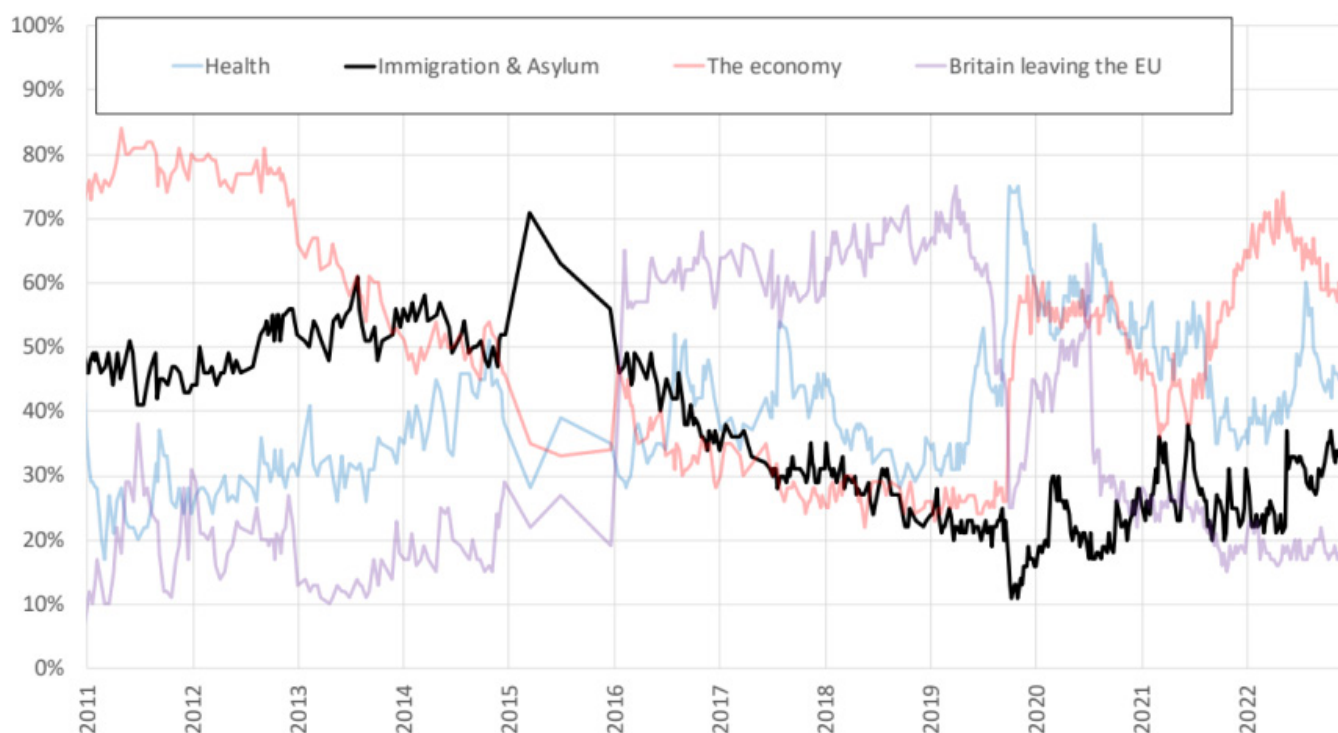
forever a powerful sceptred isle, another Eden, a demi-paradise, home to a happy breed of men, the envy of less happy lands, a blessed plot, a teeming womb of royal kings, of the true chivalry and of all those so numerous Christian religious services towards which old maids rode on cycles in the mist.

Almost a decade after John Major had tried to reassure the English that joining the European Union would alter nothing, at a private dinner in Hampshire in 2002, Margaret Thatcher was asked what her greatest achievement had been. She replied: ‘Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds.’ New Labour then did nothing of any substantial effect to reverse the huge rise in inequality that John Major and his predecessors had socially engineered. Resentment and mistrust of others festered and grew.



Graph of income inequality rising in the 80s IFS (2022)

# Immigration



Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time? (All issues that ever had majority concern.) *YouGov archive*

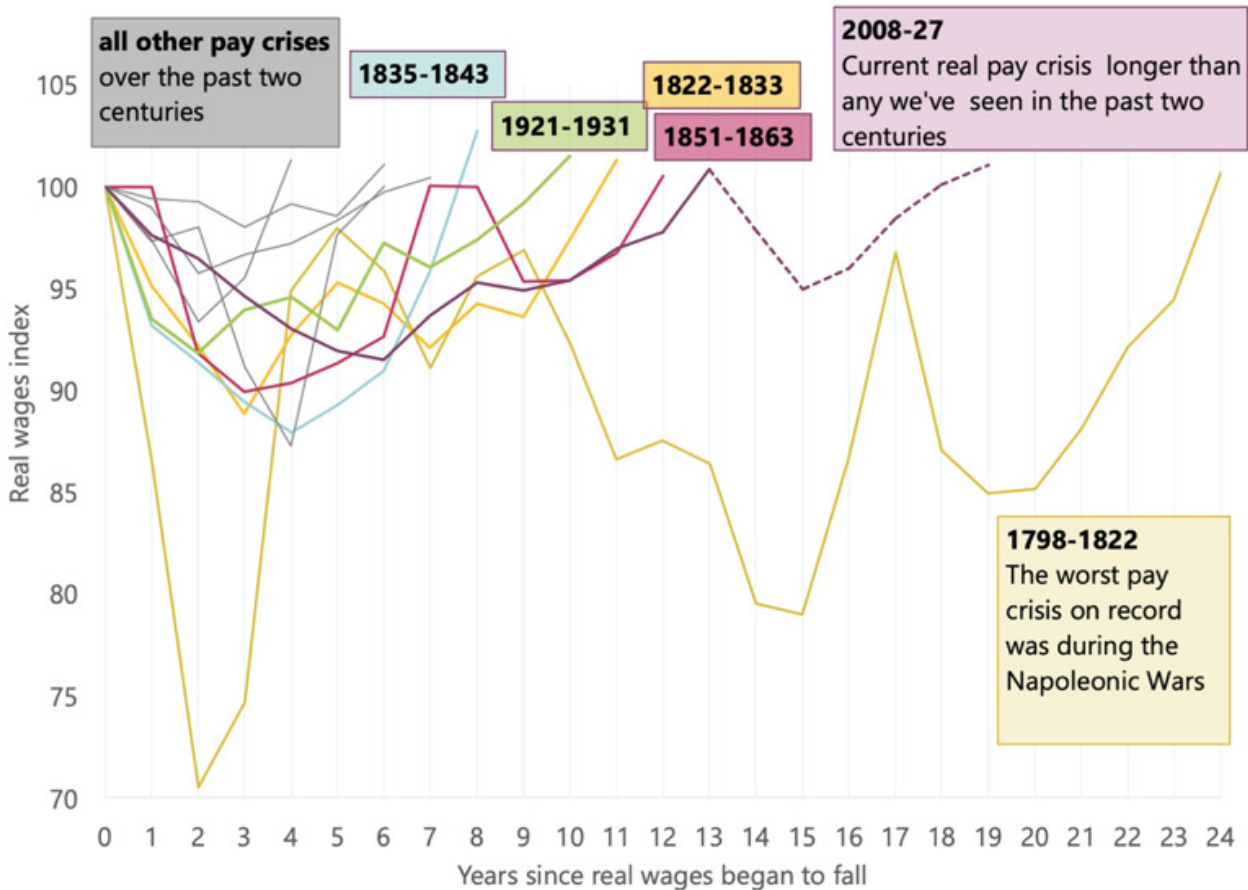
Unequal countries are also unhappy countries. In the years leading up to the decision to hold a referendum on the EU, the UK faced a series of challenges.<sup>3</sup> However, since 2011, only four issues were ever mentioned by a majority of people as being in their top three most important issues. This concentration on four was remarkable given the 416 YouGov polls that asked this question.<sup>4</sup> These four top issues are shown in the graph above.

For many decades, the issue of immigration had been the first or second most salient issue at the time of any British-wide general election. Only the economy could supersede it, and the economy rarely did, until the global financial crisis of 2008. Even then, the economy only topped the polls through to 2013, after which immigration and people seeking asylum was stirred up to again be the greatest concern of the highest number of voters.

Britain fared spectacularly badly in that 2008 crisis because of earlier financial deregulation (the Big Bang) in 1986 that had diverted so much investment into finance and, subsequently, because of the continued support of those polices to favour

banking, including the support from the New Labour government of 1997-2010. But the public were told all that mattered less than the migrants, and not to worry their inferior little heads about other more complex things.

Quite why roughly half the population of the UK believed that immigration and asylum ranked as one of the three most important problems facing the UK in the period 2011-2015 is an issue covered extensively elsewhere by studies of racism, popularists and journalism. In summary, those politicians and their paymasters who wanted a minimal 'night-watchmen' state had for over a century seen blaming immigration for problems as beneficial to their cause.<sup>5</sup> If you believe in securing power, but interfering or intervening to improve the lives of people as little as possible, and in diverting attention away from rising inequality and the real reasons that there are growing problems with schools, housing and health, then you both blame and condemn immigration and you especially persecute asylum seekers and label them as 'illegals'. You try your hardest to make people afraid of very small boats.



People in the UK are now suffering the worst pay squeeze since the Napoleonic wars. Slide 122, Danny Dorling, *Shattered Nation*. Sources: BoE, ONS, TUC analysis

By June 23rd 2015, only a minority of the British public listed 'the economy' as one of the top three issues that most concerned them. As the chart above showed, immigration fears rose dramatically in the year before the 23rd June 2016 referendum. Because we do not have data for 1905, when the antecedents of the British Union of Fascists were involved in similar behaviour, or during the 1930s when Oswald Mosley was the leader of the equivalent group, we do not know if this was the highest level of incitement to hatred ever attained in the UK; but it could have been. However, Brexit was not caused simply by a social failure to welcome others coming to help your country function. Nor was it the direct result of the UK having become the most unequal large state in Europe (by income) and then the most unequal of all apart from Bulgaria. It was partly the result of a reaction to having already lived for eight years with falling standards of living and thinking that leaving the EU might solve that. However, in the event, Brexit helped both prolong and then accelerate that fall in living standards. The actions of the brief 49

days of the Truss government of 2022 now mean that the current pay crisis is very unlikely to end in 2027, as the TUC predicted earlier in 2022 and again in 2023 – because until September 2023 prices were still rising faster than wages, and inflation is not slowing as quickly as it was thought it would in March 2023, so it will take many more years than we thought to get back to our levels of prosperity of 2008.<sup>6</sup>

To what extent (if at all) did the promises of Brexit seek to really address these perceived problems? There are many other problems and opportunities than these. The greatest of these for the future of the UK is the future of the union itself, but I will return to that at the very end of this report because it is not what most people in the UK see as terribly important. Just as British people could so easily, after decades of rising inequality and fear, be made to be so concerned about migrants, they could also mostly be made complacent about the union and which parts of it might split off first. "Will never happen," I am repeatedly told – but only where I live, in the South of England. Thus, it makes



sense to concentrate on the four problems that a majority of people in Britain determined to be in their top three. On these four:

**1)** The traditionally greatest problem of all – the economy. Few people claim Brexit has helped, although some will claim that this is because it was ‘betrayed’ or that it will ‘take decades to show its true wonders.’ I concentrate on the economy in much of the rest of this report. After the issue of the future of the union, for me (and for a majority of British people when polled) the economy was the most important substantive issue both before and after the Brexit distraction – how were we going to reach the ‘sunlit uplands’? The future of the union never features highly in these polls because they are dominated by the English electorate – which knows little of what is going on outside of the borders of England.

**2)** What had been the second greatest ‘problem’, immigration and asylum, was never a problem, just a fabricated bogeyman. Had it not been for immigration, the health service would not be adequately staffed, the population would have declined, schools would neither have enough pupils nor enough staff in all employment grades to run them well, and most new British housing would not be built and maintained.

**3)** The third greatest problem – health – became briefly the top concern just before the referendum was called. This is hardly surprising as Britain was dropping rapidly down the European ranks by health outcomes. Austerity was killing people. Health in 2023 became the second greatest concern of the people of Britain, after the economy.

**4)** And, finally, after 23 June 2016, ‘Britain leaving the EU’ became the most important problem for almost four years. Here the problem for most of those people became that they thought Britain should not leave. A fifth still listed it in their top three greatest issues of concern in 2023, long after we had left and when there appears to be little prospects for returning to the union any time soon.

As is well known, immigration rose after Brexit, especially from outside of the EU. This more than compensated in absolute numbers for the decline in in-flow from the EU, but it did not compensate for the skills lost.<sup>7</sup> Whether the UK might gain in the long run from this shift in terms of who arrived is

outside the scope of this report. Similarly, to what extent the new migrants have benefitted is also not addressed here, and to what extent the places that they have left have benefited (or have not) is also difficult to weigh up.

The one thing we can say is that immigration has not fallen ‘to the tens of thousands’ a year following Brexit. This is further proof that migration controls in the UK are always trumped by the actual demand for people to replace the children we have not had. For decades it has been relatively easy to predict future net migrant number to the UK simply by looking at the record of births in the UK in the past.<sup>8</sup> According to that logic, the main reason for the recent increase in in-migration was that it compensated for past years in which birth rates were lower than replacement rates (in the 1980s and 1990s) and additionally, for what occurred in very recent years in which migration flows were also lower than they should have been – as they were during the Brexit uncertainty years, when people from the mainland were deterred from coming.

**If you believe in diverting attention away from rising inequality and the real reasons that there are growing problems with schools, housing and health, then you both blame and condemn immigration**

# Cost of living

The argument that Brexit resulted in higher prices in the UK had by mid-2023 been well rehearsed. It is hardly surprising that leaving a common market should do this. Furthermore, the weakening of the national currency of the UK associated with Brexit increased the prices of imports and super-charged the cost-of-living crisis. There are numerous examples of how Brexit hurt the economy and of how countries in the EU control food prices better than the UK does (see box).

One of the promises of those arguing for Brexit was that it would secure a better economy for future generations. After the vote was taken, I gave roughly one hundred public talks on Brexit, almost all in areas of the South of England where a majority of people had voted to leave (as most of the South of England did – given that it was home to a majority of leave voters despite housing a minority of the UK electorate). What I learnt was that the old, who were the folk most likely to come to such talks, voted Leave for the sake of their children and grandchildren – not for themselves. They could not see these generations having a better future unless something changed. And they were only offered one option for change – to vote Leave. For most of them (not living in marginal seats) their vote in general elections was highly unlikely to have an impact due to the perverse and now internationally extremely unusual voting system in the UK.

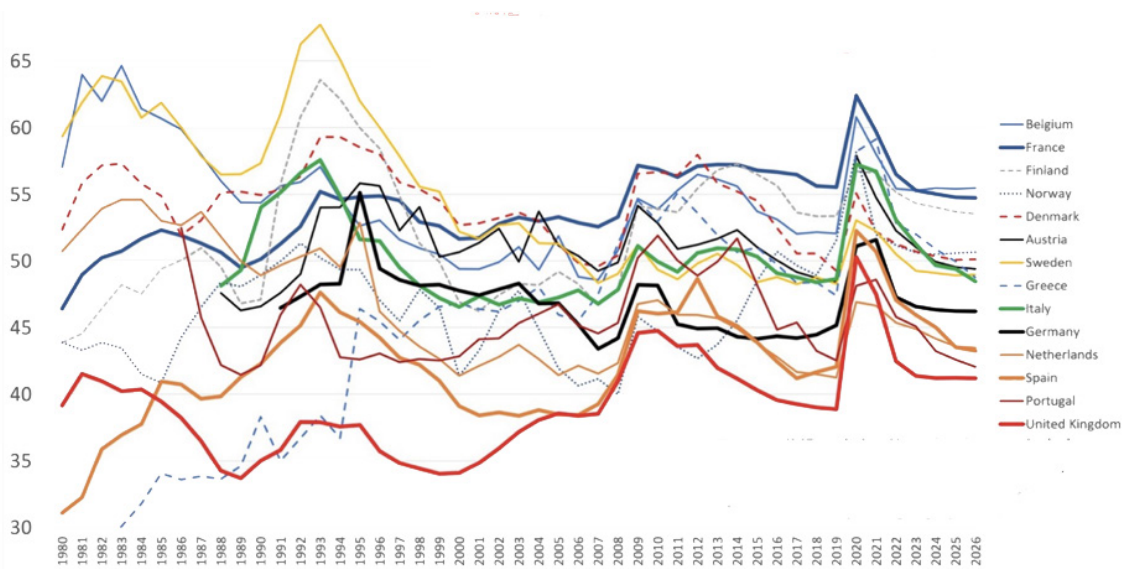
Two years after Brexit, the UK languishes economically. More than a dozen EU or single market members are richer or far richer than the UK in 2023. In terms of GDP per capita, measured using purchasing power parity (PPP) for comparability, at the time of writing, these are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. People in those countries are unequivocally better-off than their counterparts in the UK and the gaps in all cases have been widening continuously with the UK post-Brexit.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the entire Euro area is now 3% better off in real terms, despite that including a great many countries poorer than the UK in average GDP per capita terms. Those southern European countries that have not yet been ranked above the UK at least have better weather and are less affected by fuel price hikes.

GDP per capita is a statistic which makes the UK look better than it is. Having a higher level of income inequality than any of the EU27, with the possible exception of Bulgaria, means that more people in the UK have an income very much lower than that implied by UK GDP per capita. Nevertheless, despite the statistic flattering the UK, the UK still ranks lowly and is falling down the ranks. This would be less serious if income inequality were to fall in the UK. The European countries that have almost identical GDP per capita

In 2014, a cap was introduced on Greece's beaches to stop greedy proprietors trying to charge more than €1.15 for a cheese toastie. By 2022 price controls on basic foodstuffs had been extended to the food and drinks sold in airports, cinemas, theatres, bus stations, hospitals, clinics, archaeological sites and museums, passenger ships, trains, sports grounds, courts, nursing homes, universities and schools. The items affected included bottled water of any kind, which was capped at half a euro for half a litre. A single Greek coffee was capped at €1.20, French filter coffee at €1.30, an espresso coffee at €1.45, a frappé at €1.30 and English tea at €1.30. Passengers in first class could be charged more. The point of these regulations was to stop exploitation. By 2022 the price of a toastie had risen by 10 cents to €1.25, or €1.45 if it also contained ham.



Slide 60,  
Danny Dorling,  
*Shattered Nation*



In 2023 France and Belgium will spend 55% of their GDP on public services, followed in descending order by Finland, Greece, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany and Spain, and finally both Portugal and the Netherlands at 45%, with the UK at only 41%. This is two percentage points higher than the 39% spent in 2019, reflecting the costs of debt repayment and a further increase in military spending. (Note that Spain and Greece had unusual governments in the distant past, and Ireland is not included here.) Slide 21, Danny Dorling, *Shattered Nation*. Source: IMF statistics

to the UK are Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Italy, Malta, and Slovenia. If you want to travel to a place that is most economically similar to the UK in Europe, these are the places to travel to. However, Slovenia, being far more equitable than the UK, is home to far fewer people living in poverty. Note that two former colonies of the UK are in this list. All Western European countries have taxed more and spent more on public services than the UK has since at least 1993, when John Major spoke his soothing words about dog lovers and old maids. This remains true despite the UK tax-take having to increase in recent years to react to the various crises and because demands on the state rise as the population ages and especially where illness is more common.

There are now only twelve EU members with lower GDP per capita (PPP) than the UK. Ordered by how much the position of the UK would have to worsen to equal them in future, these are: Lithuania (13%), Estonia (14%), Spain (16%), Poland (22%), Portugal (25.1%), Hungary (25.3%), Latvia (29%), Croatia (30%), Slovakia (30%), Romania (32%), Greece (34%) and Bulgaria (46%). Given the current relative economic decline of the UK, it might be sensible to assume that – economically – the British state is currently headed towards being placed somewhere between, say, Spain and Portugal. But it will be a more cloudy and dismal in-between cousin to these two once also ancient imperial powers.

How could the possible benefits of Brexit turn this trajectory around? There are three areas of the UK economy which have been growing since

Brexit, very likely partly as a result of the decision to leave and its implication on their finances.

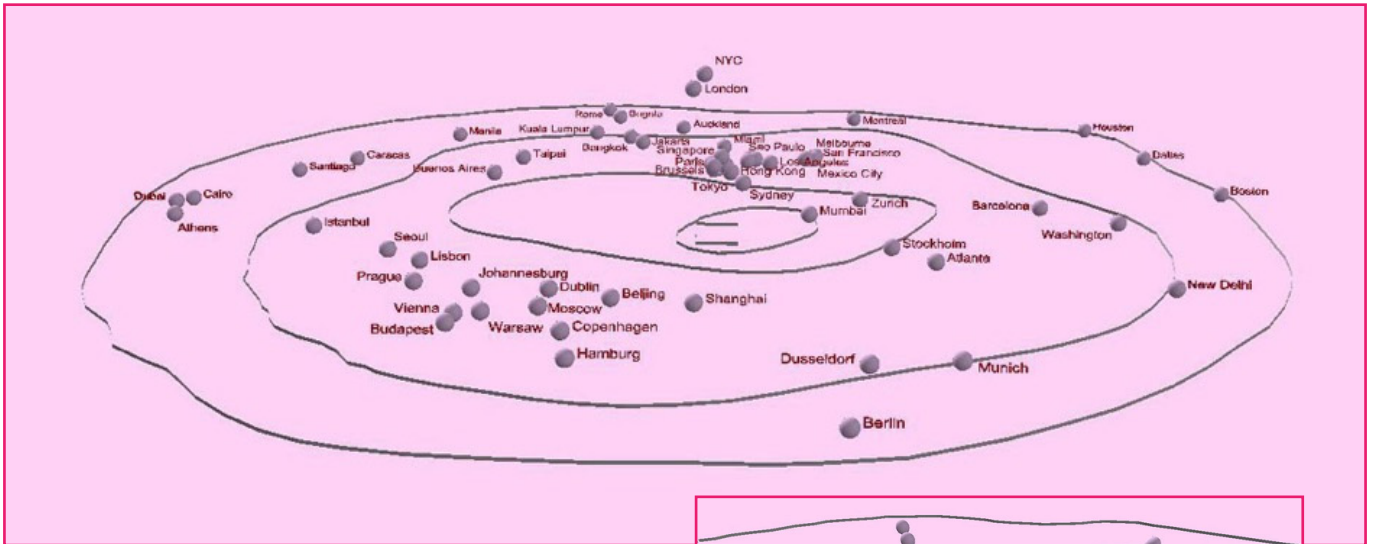
The first one of these was foreseen, but two were hardly mentioned at all in the run-up to the referendum. The three are: Banking, Gambling, and Higher Education.

Later in this report, I will turn to these sectors and ask how much they have actually grown and with what possible social benefit? Was it simply ‘project fear’ that suggested our banks would suffer because they would be able to do so much less work in Europe? And even if they are doing well – is this of great social benefit within the UK?

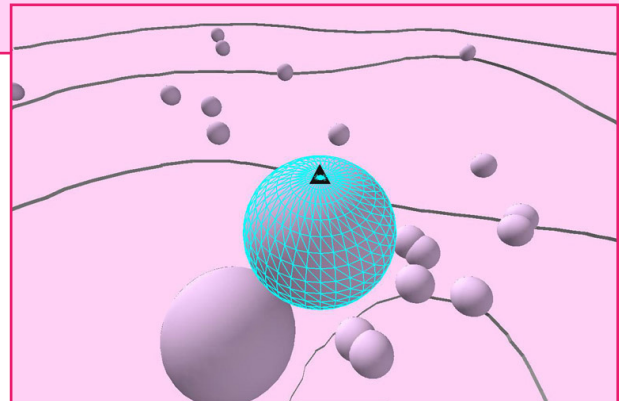
However, first it is important to address the issue of counterfactuals, the ‘what if’ questions. Can we really know what might have happened had the UK not left?

This has been attempted by the deputy director of the Centre for European Reform in London, John Springford, in his work on attempting to estimate the parallel universe simulation, of what might have occurred to the UK had the Brexit decision gone the other way, had the recommendation made in the referendum not been accepted by the British Parliament. Dubbed ‘Welcome to Doppelgänger Britain – A World without Brexit’ by the *New Statesman* magazine on 16 September 2023, this assessment suggested a far better present would be the result. But: ‘Springford stopped running his model altogether earlier this year. “The further you get away from 2016, the more shocks that come along that affect countries differently. In the end, the energy-price shock killed the model,” he said.’

# The problem of too few planets



An image of the world city system drawn in 2004 when London and New York were the twin stars around which the world economy orbited (they have been moved up here). Inset: A version of the image looking down from just above London and New York



The problem of too few planets is the problem that we only have one Earth and only a few dozen affluent countries on our one planet to compare with each other.

Two decades ago, a student and I drew the images above of how the world then centred, financially, around London and New York. We were using data from the Globalization and World Cities Research Network.<sup>10</sup> London was both the financial heart of Europe and simultaneously the twin star, alongside New York, around which the world system of cities orbited.

There are many different ways of seeing the world, many alternative ways of measuring how well a city or a country is doing, and endless arguments about what is actually happening, let alone what might have happened had things been different.

Creating a statistical model to understand many of the possibilities and counterfactuals would, I think, be impossible. The problem is that we have a lack of otherwise sufficiently similar countries – there are just too many factors to try to take into account in any economic model. Hence why John Springford gave up trying to continue his simulation in early 2023. At some point a statistician needs to calculate the number of planets we would need, and the degree of variation between them, to have enough countries with enough independent outcome variables to be able to make predictions with confidence on certain issues – such as how much Brexit was to blame for any particular issue becoming worse (or better).

We would need to know what would have happened had Brexit occurred without the



The princedoms of Europe in 1648, a land of tribes, wars, and chaos

pandemic? What would have happened if Brexit had simply come out of the blue, and not been promoted for a quarter of a century via political chaos within the English Conservative party? What if John Major had not been repeatedly stabbed in the back by those he called ‘the bastards’, those who were so fearful of the European continent they were in – who always claimed to be ‘brave’? What if another country had left the EU first? Say, Greece, making it obvious that sharing a border with Bulgaria (still in the EU) created such problems that no state with a land border would ever think of leaving after that? There are simply too many what-ifs.

One solution to the ‘too few sufficiently similar countries problem’, the too few planets conundrum,

**The problem of too few planets is the problem that we only have one Earth and only a few dozen affluent countries on our one planet to compare with each other**

is to say that it is not a problem. This is because countries are in no way independent of each other or of their own histories. Trying to ascribe agency to countries is as fruitless as looking at the many princedoms of Europe in the year 1648 and trying to suggest that some did well because they were Catholic and others because they were Protestant. What mattered was all the changing relationships between them; and their position in relation to all the other princedoms; and eventually which were nearest to the Americas.

Just as someone cannot understand the solar system without considering all the planets going round the sun together – as each has a small effect on the orbits of every other one – so too we cannot really ‘take out’ Brexit as a single process and say what would have occurred had it not happened. We do not yet know how the Brexit outcome will eventually influence the future of the Union that makes up the UK, the subject on which this report ends. But most considering commentators believe Brexit makes break up more likely. Similarly in the long list of known unknowns, it is quite probable that had the UK voted to remain, the outcome might have been even worse. There would have been a protracted war of attrition. A second referendum would eventually have been secured, maybe in 2026, but only after a decade of brutal political infighting and yet more demonising of immigrants. We will never know the answer to that question now. We can only ever know where the route we have chosen has taken us, and even then only in the future.

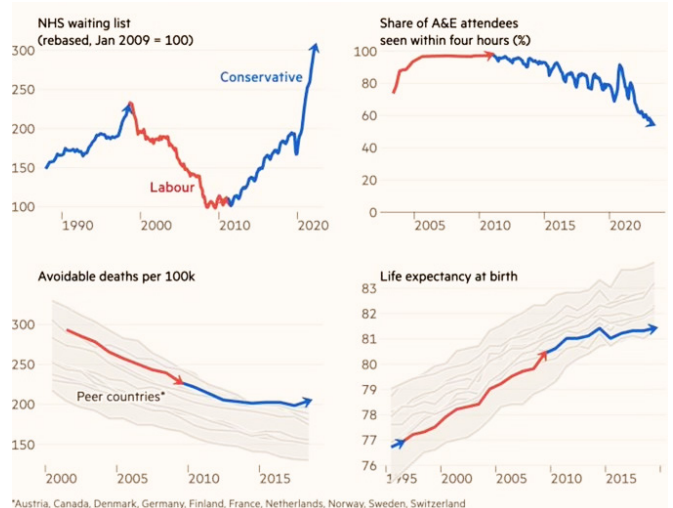
# The problem of too few parties

It is possible to believe that the three major political parties of England are very different, and to select graphs and data, and talk about a few trends, which highlight the differences; but it may be more accurate to say that they were far more similar to each other than many parties in Europe were. The Liberal Democrats, of course, were in the Conservative coalition that led up to the decision to have a referendum. It was not their plan to contribute to that outcome, but they certainly did contribute by aiding the party containing the most politicians who wanted that referendum. These graphs (see right) were published just before last Christmas in the *Financial Times* to highlight apparent political policy differences between Labour and the Conservatives.

Does politics in Britain really change when the party in power changes? Look at the graphs more closely. NHS waiting lists fell in 1997 and 1998, despite the Labour Party sticking to Conservative spending plans for its first two years in office. Perhaps the waiting lists partly peaked in 1997 because of the huge 1919 birth cohort, the largest the UK has ever had, by far, which was aged 78 then – often being so ill then, and not yet dead?

NHS waiting times stopped improving under Labour in 2008, when the global financial crash struck. The Conservatives certainly cared less; but were they that different? Look at the top right graph above. A&E waiting times certainly improved under Labour, and Labour did begin spending a lot more after 1999 on health and social services, but there was also a drastic fall then in the number of elderly people as so few had been born in the 1920s, during another, much earlier, period of prolonged austerity and falling absolute living standards including falling real wage rates.

The graph in the bottom left quadrant shows that the UK always had more avoidable deaths per 100,000 people than most OECD countries, regardless of the party in power. Five or six decades earlier, the situation was very different. Back then the UK had the highest life expectancy of any large country worldwide, regardless of the party in power.<sup>11</sup> Yes wages, investment and health spending has been worse under the



Comparison of the impacts of Conservative and Labour governments *Financial Times*

Conservatives, but none of the trends in these indicators were good under New Labour (other than only superficially for a very few years when Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, when GDP fell so that some spending, as a % of GDP, appeared to rise).

It is so easy to pull out data charts to suggest 'haven't we done well' – as Conservative MP, Harriett Baldwin did recently:

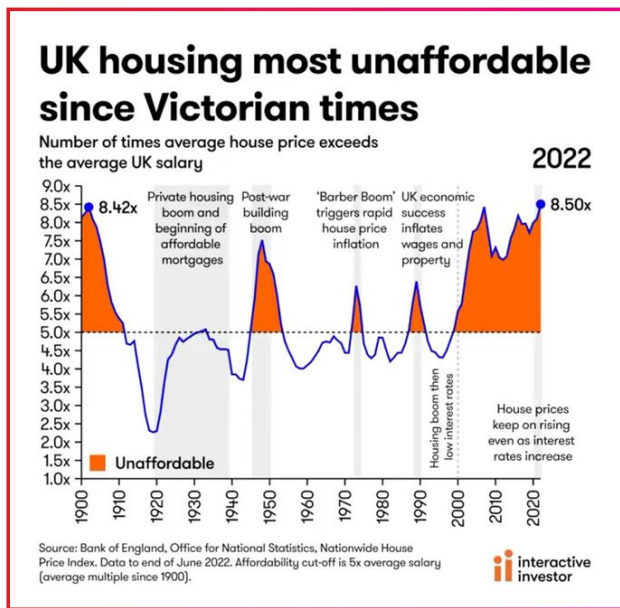
Harriett Baldwin MP @hbaldwin  
 May 1 2023  
 'Wow! Did you know that the UK has cut CO2 emissions more than any other country since 2010? More to do but we are on a path to Clean Energy Security'

The graph shows per capita CO2 emissions from 2010 to 2021 for the UK, Japan, Canada, United States, Germany, France, and Italy. The UK shows the most significant decrease, reaching approximately -40% by 2021. Other countries show smaller decreases or increases. The graph is sourced from Our World in Data.

Yet, this was easily and quickly rebuffed as a misleading claim by journalists:

*Ed Conway: 'Certainly an achievement. But important to note the flipside, which is that the UK also deindustrialised faster than any other major economy. Emissions fell not just because we switched away from fossil fuels but because we lifted energy costs and disincentivised heavy industry.'*

There is bias in all accounts. For another example of social failure dressed up as success, note the suggestion made in the graph below that the unaffordability of housing in the very late 1980s was due to some kind of success. The graph below has a label 'UK economic success'. One commentator who spotted this implicit bias also wrote: 'Those two tiny blips in the 70s and 90s are why Boomers complain about how hard they had it.'<sup>12</sup> That text box in the graph below could just as invalidly been labelled: 'UK housing market benefits from our early membership of the European common market'. Adding a text box comment to a graph appears to add authority to speculation.



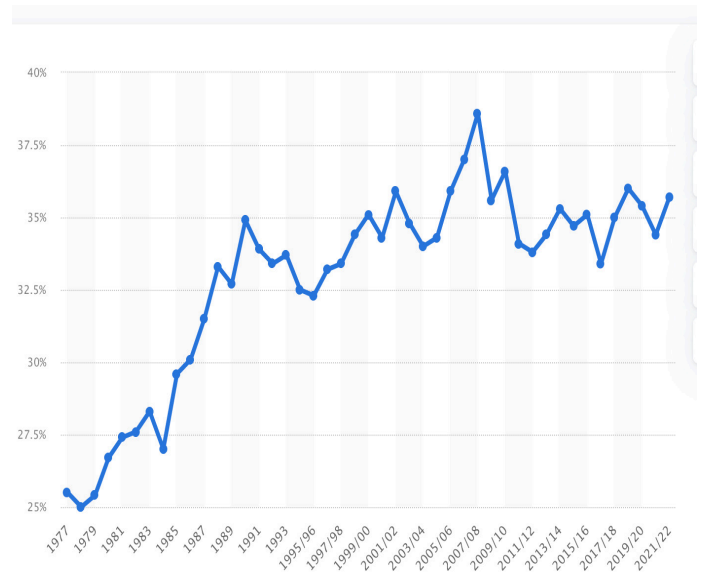
An example of bias in labelling. *Interactive Investor*

The problems of too few directly comparable countries, and too few political parties in the UK that are sufficiently different from each other, makes it almost impossible to partition the difficulties of the UK by allocating a proportion of the blame for each new difficulty to Brexit. Similarly, the claim that one or other of the two main political parties caused, through its policies, the situation

in which Brexit became the only popular option for a majority of people to vote for; cannot easily be sustained either. It can be suggested that when Tony Blair and his sofa cabinet friends moved Labour to the right after 1997, they forced the Conservative party even further right and hence all of us into Brexit-land. Where Brexit is concerned, a plague can be seen to have sat upon both their houses in the years leading up to 2015, and the years after 2019. Both Labour and Conservatives officially opposed Brexit before the referendum. Both now say that they will live with it or even that it is actually a force for good.

Other probable reasons why the UK continues to perform so badly after Brexit include continuing to have the nearly highest income inequality in Europe, and possibly the highest in Europe in 2023/24. Income inequalities may have peaked around 2018, and may some measures were even higher in 2008 (see graph below). We may argue about exactly when we were most unequal for many years to come.

Other reasons include the pandemic, how it was handled and how health was worse in an already weakened country than elsewhere in Europe.<sup>13</sup> They include our colonial history being different to other countries in Europe, the British Empire being so much more extensive and as a direct result of that above all else the UK being unique in the world – having only so very recently been the centre of the largest and richest human empire this one small planet had ever known.



Gini coefficient of the UK from 1977 to 2022. An alternative measure of income inequality to the series published by the OECD. *Statista*

The acute social problems the UK now suffers from might even be partly blamed on a list of factors which could include among them: the pound and trying to maintain it as a world currency, on unusual levels of assortative-mating and in-breeding amongst the British upper classes and aristocracy, on ridiculous levels of deference being maintained and the class system remaining so unchallenged – which the graph on school spending below illustrates, on the decline of unions, on the English language and monolingualism, and on the bizarre public school system in Britain that no other European country even begins to emulate in any way whatsoever. It is probable that several of these factors actually played no significant detrimental part, but that others combined to great detrimental effect. It is very likely that there are dozens if not hundreds of other factors that could be added to that list of those which did also harm us. We will never know for sure. This is all because there were only 28 countries in the EU, and hundreds of explanatory variables. It is the problems of too few planets, too few political parties, too few alternative policies and alternative voices.

I like to think that if the UK had not left the EU, then another poorer and smaller country would have, and would likely have rapidly found itself in a far worse position. I like to think that we “did our bit” – we provided the prime example in Europe of what not to do.

Before turning to three possible successes of Brexit, and then finally to the future of the Union, this section ends on the five traditional ‘evils’ regarding: education, poverty, unemployment, housing and health; and the kinds of questions I would like to have addressed, but which it is hard to find definitive answers to because of both too little data and too few directly comparable countries.

**1) Education:** What evidence is there of Brexit adding to any shortage of teachers in schools and Further Education colleges? Or was Brexit the reason we were able to re-nationalise our Further Education colleges in 2022 (because we could not afford *not* to, because the economic situation had become so bad due partly to Brexit)? Have more experienced teachers from the European mainland been replaced with less experienced (both British and other recruits?) Fewer qualifications are now required to be a teacher in Britain. How bad has the effect been on British universities? Is there any evidence of actual detriment rather than senior staff being annoyed they cannot take part in large EU research programmes as much as they

## I like to think that we “did our bit” – we provided the prime example in Europe of what not to do

recently used to, which had given them such a dominant and domineering effect on European science? We have only very recently crawled our way back, on our knees, into the EU ‘Horizon’ research programme, but is that an example of how the countries of the UK will eventually return – piecemeal? On undergraduates, have we begun to replace more able students with those who can afford overseas fees but are not able to access universities in their home EU country because they cannot pass entrance tests based on aptitude rather than wealth? Is higher education in the UK now becoming the ‘Swiss finishing school of Europe’? Is this a bad thing, or something to be, given that we have to be good at something? I could find some actual numbers on each of these issues; but whether you believed the implications of that evidence might depend as much on your prior beliefs as what I could show.

**2) Poverty and inequality.** Has the UK diverged since the Brexit process began from its European neighbours in terms of trends in these areas? A date for the beginning of any divergence could be 2014, when the Conservative Party, having formally left the centre-right European People’s Party grouping in 2009, fought their first European Election with far-right allies as part of the European Conservatives and Reformists bloc. What have the rising poverty trends been from 2014 to 2023 in different parts of the UK and to what extent can Brexit, directly or indirectly be connected with this? For example, is the rise in the cost-of-living higher in the UK for poorer groups than it has been elsewhere in Europe, and is that due to rising costs of imports being higher than elsewhere in what is now ‘the EU without UK’? Does this outweigh any bonus received from more jobs being done by people born in Britain? However, again, whatever



I found, your response would probably depend on your prior beliefs. In the UK, which has become so polarised, you might agree with me; but probably will not if you did not already. You might just believe that some people are not trying hard enough not to be poor (especially in South East England where a higher proportion of children are now poor than in either Scotland or Northern Ireland). You might no longer believe the official child poverty statistics. You might believe that high levels of economic inequality are one of Britain's strengths. Some of those that try really hard to become rich very often only achieve this by impoverishing many others. You might say that industrialisation of the UK was associated with rising living standards, but living standards fell in India when British trade was imposed there, and conditions in almost all of the colonies, including Ireland, but especially across Africa, in the Caribbean, and the far and near east as well, were often terrible. And the children of Britain became more stunted when the factories boomed. This year, in 2023, we learnt that they had become more stunted again by height, but that the stunting had begun in the early 2000s under a New Labour government that was claiming, but failing, to remove a million children from poverty. The stunting worsened after the Coalition government of 2010 came to power. In social statistical hindsight it is less surprising people voted in 2016 for 'anything but this', for their grandchildren who were no longer growing tall.

**3) Unemployment**, low-wage employment, the rapidly growing gig-economy with fast food now delivered by young men on bikes, the rising economic inactivity among older people (often attributed to ill-health): to what extent are unusual aspects in these things related to Brexit? Did Brexit make it easier to force poorer young people to take any job going? We already had the lowest unemployment benefits for young single people in the EU (compared to average wages). Evidence in these areas is often sporadic and hard to compare. And to what extent is the increase in immigration to the UK from the rest of the world really filling gaps that underemployed or unemployed people could fill? Is it the start of a mass guest-worker division in British society where increasingly we have multiple tiers of subjects and non-subject 'guests'? Has anywhere else in the (now) EU-27 seen anything similar? I don't think so.

**4) Housing**: Can the increase in private rent prices, especially since 2022, be related to Brexit in any

way? This was not predicted by "project fear". It may be entirely unrelated or related in a complex way, with Brexit leading to decisions by the British government which resulted in increasing interest rates which resulted in landlords increasing rents. More mundanely, what has happened with the fears of not being able to import enough bricks, enough builders, enough other construction workers? Are housing associations and residential care homes able to operate as well without some of their EU staff? Can we actually replace the school and hospital roofs where the concrete might at any time collapse? Do we have enough people with the skills to do so in the country any more, let alone the money to pay for it? Can we keep our public transport bus fleets running without enough skilled drivers and mechanics who do not live where we need them to live because the cost of housing is now so high? I could search for evidence – again it might be scant. And, yet again, I suspect you would only be convinced if you already agreed with my views in general. We do have growing evidence that people are sticking their heads in the sand, many insisting these things do not really matter; unlike, apparently, refugees crossing the English Channel in small boats, which is a story that never compares well to the story of refugees arriving from Europe a century ago and then helping to improve life so much and in so many ways in the UK. And later, at least at the time of the kindertransports – we were not stopping small boats arriving. What have we become?

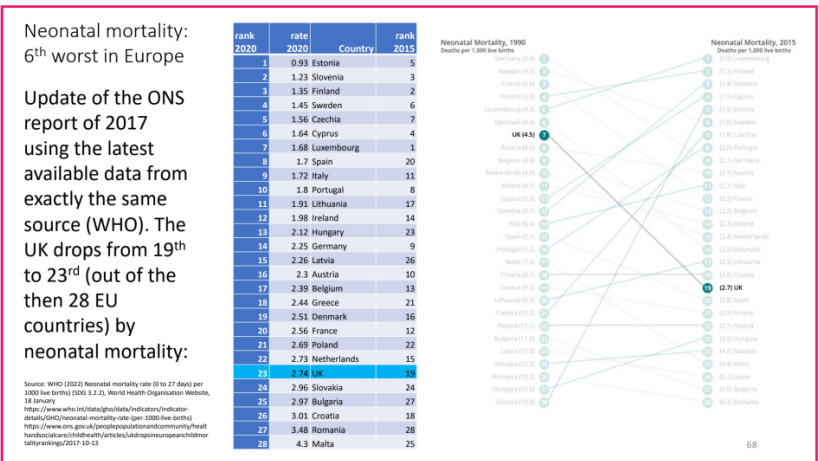
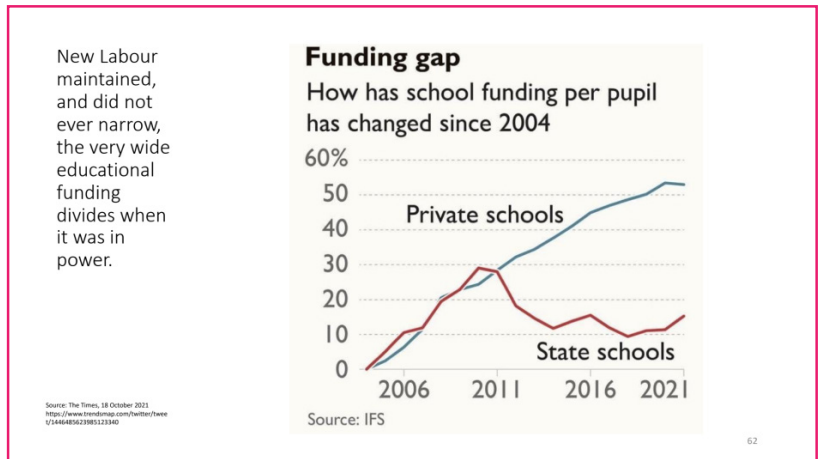
**5) Health**: to what extent is Brexit adding to our shortage of nurses, porters and doctors, but especially of dentists? Is there any evidence of changes to visa requirements having an effect? Or is that offset, in terms of what causes the very poor health of people in the UK and those who join us, by the disadvantage of moving to a country that clearly does not really want you being treated as an equal? What effect, if any, has the loss of young healthy migrants had – especially those no longer coming from mainland Europe? Have we seen any of the feared 'geriatrics returning from the Costa Del Sol' or more likely, people in old age not moving so much to France and Spain and Malta? And did our doctors and nurses go on strike in ways they have never done before, ultimately because of pressures made worse by Brexit? Just how many of the doctors and nurses that we train within the NHS leave? How many leave forever to work in the private health sector? How many leave the country to work in conditions where they can do

their job properly? To what extent will the crises in the health services in the coming winters of 2023, 2024 and 2025 have been worsened by Brexit having occurred, and which places will be most affected? At one point before 2016 a third of midwives working in central London were EU but not UK citizens. The graph bottom-right shows how the UK ranked by neonatal mortality rates then in Europe. World Health Organisation data released since then shows that the position has since worsened.

It is easy to ask question after question. Will Brexit have had an effect on the unbelievable extent of regional inequalities in the UK as shown in the graph on the next page? Probably not, as membership of the EU did not cause them. All other EU members managed to ensure their countries were all so much more geographically equal – try to identify the second longest bar in the graph on the next page if you doubt this claim.

Is there some irony (and joy to be had) in that Brexit resulted in such high non-EU, non-white, immigration? We could celebrate how Brexit has increased net migration and the diversity of migrants. But we should also remember how many now die in the 'small boats' which are also a part of its legacy – and then ask why, if we now have both very high immigration and are freer from EU regulations, has business investment not returned to the trajectory it was on between 2010 and 2016, which itself was not great?

How come the banks were becoming more successful and yet they were not aiding investment? From where were they making their extra money? So, let's turn to banking as one of the apparent social successes of Brexit.



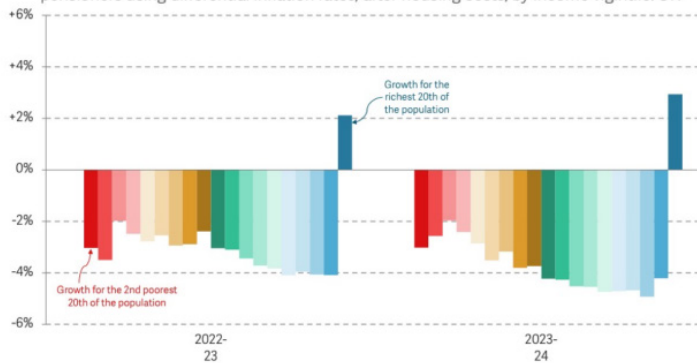
Slides from *Shattered Nation* by Danny Dorling (from top left): slides 102, 62, 115, 59, 64 and 69. See all the slides at [www.dannydorling.org/books/shatterednation/slides.html](http://www.dannydorling.org/books/shatterednation/slides.html)

‘The only part of the income distribution where incomes grow is in the top 5%, where households benefit from higher interest rates.’

(Resolution Foundation 2023)

FIGURE 32: Low-income households face larger income falls in 2022-23 and 2023-24 when differential inflation is accounted for

Annual real growth in average equivalised household disposable income for non-pensioners using differential inflation rates, after housing costs, by income quintile: UK



NOTES: We exclude the bottom 5 per cent, due to concerns about the reliability of data for this group. SOURCE: RF analysis of DWP, Households Below Average Income; and RF projection including use of the IPPR Tax Benefit Model, ONS data, and OBR forecasts.

Source: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-living-standards-outlook-2023/>

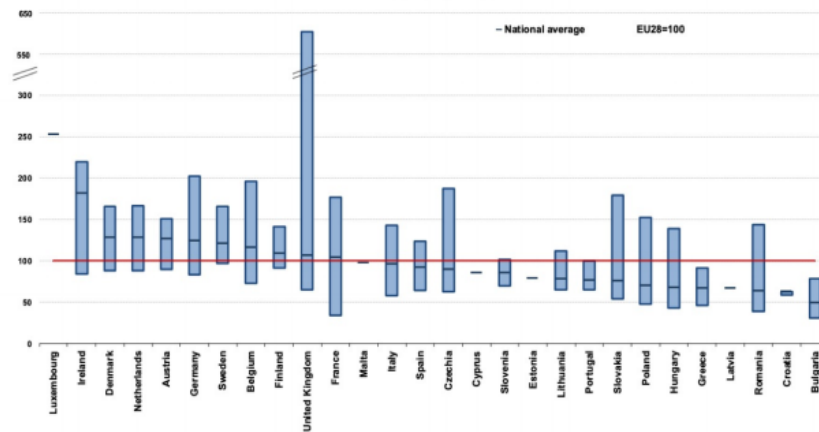
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The UK had the widest geographical inequalities of all European Union countries when it was a member.

In 2017, regional GDP per capita, expressed in terms of purchasing power standards, ranged from 31% of the European Union (EU) average in the Bulgarian region of **North-West**, to 626% of the average in **Inner London - West** in the United Kingdom.

As the graph below shows, there is a considerable variation both in the EU and within the Member States. This information is taken from data released by Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union.

Variation of regional GDP per capita within EU Member States in 2017 in PPS, EU28 = 100



Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/-/1-26022019-ap>

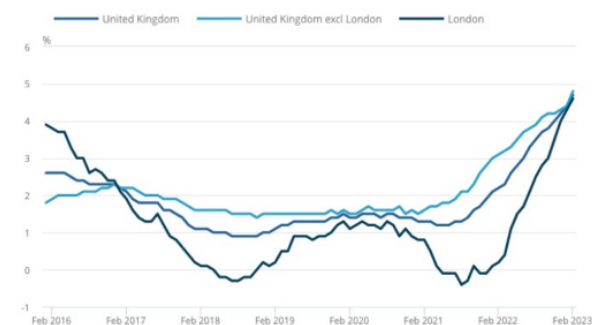
The bar shows for each Member State the range from the region with the lowest value to that with the highest value.

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In September 2022, over 1,000 mortgage products were withdrawn from offer in the UK as interest rates surged. In February 2023, ONS reported the largest rise in UK average rents since their time series began (heading to 5%). The cost of new housing per square metre in the UK is highest of any country in Europe. Rates of homelessness and precarity in housing are rising. More homes are revealed to be unfit for human habitation.

Rapid increase in housing precarity from 2022.

Index of Private Housing Rental Prices percentage change over 12 months, UK and London, January 2016 to February 2023



Source: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/indexofprivatehousingrentalprices/february2023>

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# Banking a bonus

By April 2021 it had been estimated that some 440 financial services firms in the UK had responded to Brexit by relocating part or all of their business, staff, or legal entities to the EU. This was estimated to involve 'more than £900bn in bank assets (roughly 10% of the entire UK banking system).'<sup>14</sup> When the UK had been a member state, two fifths of all its financial services exports were to the EU. This was possible because of passporting rights (automatically allowing cross-border operations) within the European Economic Area, which largely ceased on 31 January 2020 with Brexit.<sup>15</sup>

Given that this was predictable, it was odd that the UK banking sector was so remarkably quiet during the Brexit debate. Although some of the funding of the mainstream 'remain' campaigns came from the City of London, and insofar as those more establishment bankers said anything about the potential benefits of Brexit, it was nearly always negative. However, while the pro-Brexit hedge-funders received more publicity as theirs was a more evocative story, and some in other parts of UK finance may have seen an opportunity, other bankers did badly. Although is having to move to the mainland a bad outcome?

It is likely that more than 500 top paid bankers (earning over a million euros a year) may have moved to EU countries in 2021, but the UK banking sector as a whole also saw very high profits from the kinds of banking it did which translated into higher pay in the UK.

By the late 1990s the UK was already home to three quarters of all the highest paid bankers in Europe (according to the EU banking statistics of 2021).<sup>16</sup> The UK may now have more 'top-end bankers' being paid even more today than it did before Brexit – we do not know because, having left the EU, these numbers are no longer collected. But we do know about the overall profitability of the sector by the summer of 2022:

*'Britain's financial sector has taken Brexit "in its stride", it was claimed last night, as figures showed that major UK banks generated more profit last year than their French counterparts for the first time since 2015. The data, compiled by The Banker magazine, showed that the UK's major lenders – dominated by the big six of HSBC, Barclays, Lloyds Banking Group, Standard Chartered, NatWest and Nationwide – reported profits totalling £45.4 billion in 2021. That pipped France's top banks, whose bottom line earnings added up to £45 billion. Germany lagged even further behind at £11.4 billion.'*  
*Daily Mail, 5 July 2022.*<sup>17</sup>

*'Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt unveils new "Edinburgh Reforms" of financial services, to help turbocharge growth and deliver a smarter and home-grown regulatory framework for the UK – that is both agile and proportionate.'*  
UK Government, 9 December 2022.<sup>18</sup>

However, in late spring 2023, contagion spread from the USA to the UK; although UK banks were still reporting record profits made in the most recent year, this did 'little to quell unease among investors in a difficult spring for global banking.'<sup>19</sup> Since 2022 there has been a cross party consensus that relaxing some of the rules put in place after the 2008 financial crisis is foolhardy.<sup>20</sup> The 'Edinburgh Reforms' were a pet project of Rishi Sunak. This was further banking deregulation dressed up for dinner as 'A competitive marketplace promoting effective use of capital'. When this was debated in the House of Lords on May 17th 2023, Labour Lord Davies of Brixton vented his frustration:

*'What does the financial services industry contribute to the real economy—the production of goods and services that go towards serving individual and societal wants? My view is that the*

*financial services industry contributes far less than is typically assumed, particularly by the financial services industry itself, and that it is in a sense a millstone around our economy's neck. It strikes me that it is akin to the resource curse, which is typically talked about in terms of mineral and fuel abundance in less-developed countries and which tends to generate negative developmental outcomes, including poor economic performance, collapsing growth, higher levels of corruption and greater political violence. Well, leaving the political violence and maybe the corruption aside, it is a fact that we are experiencing poor economic performance and have done for a decade and, in my view, one of the contributing factors to that is the overreliance on financial services that contribute nothing to human welfare.'*<sup>21</sup>

While his counterpart, Baroness Kramer of the Liberal Democrats, explained: *'I am also concerned about the Edinburgh reforms because embedded in them is a rollback of many of the safeguards that were put in place after the 2008 crash. In particular, they undermine the ring-fencing of retail banks and weaken the responsibility for wrongdoing and mismanagement in the senior managers regime. I am really troubled when the Government's answer is, "Look, it's not a problem because we have in place resolution regimes that protect the taxpayer if any of these institutions collapse".'*

The Conservative peers who spoke for the longest appeared largely unconcerned. Perhaps this was because, as the campaign group Global Justice Now had explained concerning this bill some nine months earlier: *'in practice it will more likely create more instability and vulnerability, including for pension fund holders, and end up allowing more money to flow into the pockets of rich shareholders, rather than contribute towards genuine investment.'*<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion as regards banking, Brexit has allowed British banks and bankers to make more money overall, despite the losses entailed when about a tenth of the industry was lost. However, while that has the short-term effect of increasing GDP, and hence GDP per capita, the monies only flow to a few and – as we now so well know – 'trickle down' is a myth. More importantly, the future for the vast majority of people living in the UK is made more uncertain because, at some point, the state may well have to try to bail out banks, or pensions, or both, with funds the state does not have.

**At some point, the state may well have to try to bail out banks, or pensions, or both, with funds the state does not have**

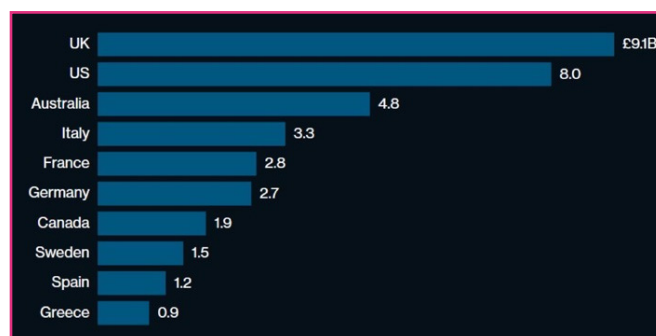
# Gambling capital of the world

By 2022, free from any threat of EU regulation, the UK had become home to the largest online gambling market in the world, and had the world's largest gambling industry.<sup>23</sup>

In 2021 following Brexit, Bloomberg news reported that they had: *'...spent months looking at how Britain became the world's largest regulated online gambling market — the U.K. generates more revenues than France, Germany and Italy combined — and the devastating consequences it's had for punters and their families. Our analysis of public records shows that gambling firms have spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on British politicians and that spending has ramped up significantly since 2019 when the government announced a review of the law. A proposed set of reforms is due anytime but has been delayed at least four times and subject to heavy industry lobbying – key proposals were either changed or dropped in the final days of Boris Johnson's premiership. Attempts to make gambling safer by outsiders have hit the buffers, too. A group of former JP Morgan bankers say they developed a system that would've made it easier to tackle problem gambling, but were completely rebuffed by the industry'* (Harry Wilson, Finance Reporter at Bloomberg, 1 December 2022.)<sup>24</sup>

The story of gambling is not just a story of Brexit, although Brexit is very much involved. The story goes back a long way and Gordon Brown plays a part in it too, when he cut the taxes on gambling; but like banking, it is one of the sectors where our hopes for future prosperity are now placed.

Few people realise that Britain now has a bigger gambling market than the US – which is, on the



Revenue for regulated online gambling, 2021  
*Entain plc annual report*

face of it, completely extraordinary. Links can be found between this huge sector and many of the social problems of the UK, from gambling addiction in the population to a political class that does not understand that if you want to be worthwhile you have to do something that is actually worthwhile. If you have an economy that is increasingly centred on activity concerning exploiting the weakness of others, their lack of financial understanding, their addictions, or their avarice, you end up with a society in which treating others well is not a priority.

In 2019, it was announced that one online betting company that had been using Gibraltar 'obtained a gaming licence in Malta and established a server farm in Ireland so that it can continue to serve European markets with no disruption to its business.'<sup>25</sup> A new bill was introduced in Malta to try to allow companies there to continue to compete with the non-EU UK in the global gambling sector.<sup>26</sup> Politicians across the EU are working increasingly hard to control gambling. The sunlit uplands for the UK more and more look like the dark innards of a tawdry casino. Although the 'massive expansion of Britain's casino industry by the Blair government'<sup>27</sup> hit the buffers in the years before Brexit, online they are now cavernous in size.

And then we in the UK, or at least in Europe, began to gamble on higher education being a great source of export earnings and 'productivity'.

# Higher education 'excellence'

UK universities are now almost entirely private establishments and, in many ways, operate very similarly to private schools, having charitable status in the same way. Recently, UK universities and private schools have seen record growth in their 'Gross Value Added' measure of economic productivity that might well be tied to Brexit. Most obviously, universities no longer have to take EU students at UK tuition fee rates, but can now charge much higher overseas fees to those who come from the EU. In 2014, the universities received a huge boost, partly due to an increase in overseas students arriving prior to Brexit, but mainly because they could now charge all students £9,000 a year fees. They began to do this in September 2012, with all three undergraduate year groups paying at that price by the autumn of 2014. However, after 2014, as university costs continued to rise and fees did not, low rates of 'growth' returned. But then in 2018, and onwards, growth jumped to over £6bn extra a year on the year before. Fees rose to 'only' £9,250 a year for those who were not from 'overseas'.

However, analysis of the effect of Brexit has found that the higher education sector has suffered greatly due to Brexit. Collaboration has reduced, there has been a sharp drop in able EU students arriving in the UK. Some highly skilled UK-based researchers have left – for good – and there has been a decline in winning international grants, in doctoral students of quality, and: 'In addition, the loss of access to European structural funds has slowed the modernisation of UK higher education institutions and reduced their social contributions.'<sup>28</sup> In September 2023 the UK re-joined the EU 'Horizon' programme, but the damage had been done; however as mentioned earlier in this report, that re-joining may be the start of a decades long painful and piecemeal second-class citizen return to the European mainland mainstream fold. Some parts of the UK may choose to return to not pretending we are a mid-Atlantic island more quickly than others – we now just have to watch, wait, comment and see.

## The World's Highest and Lowest Tuition Fees

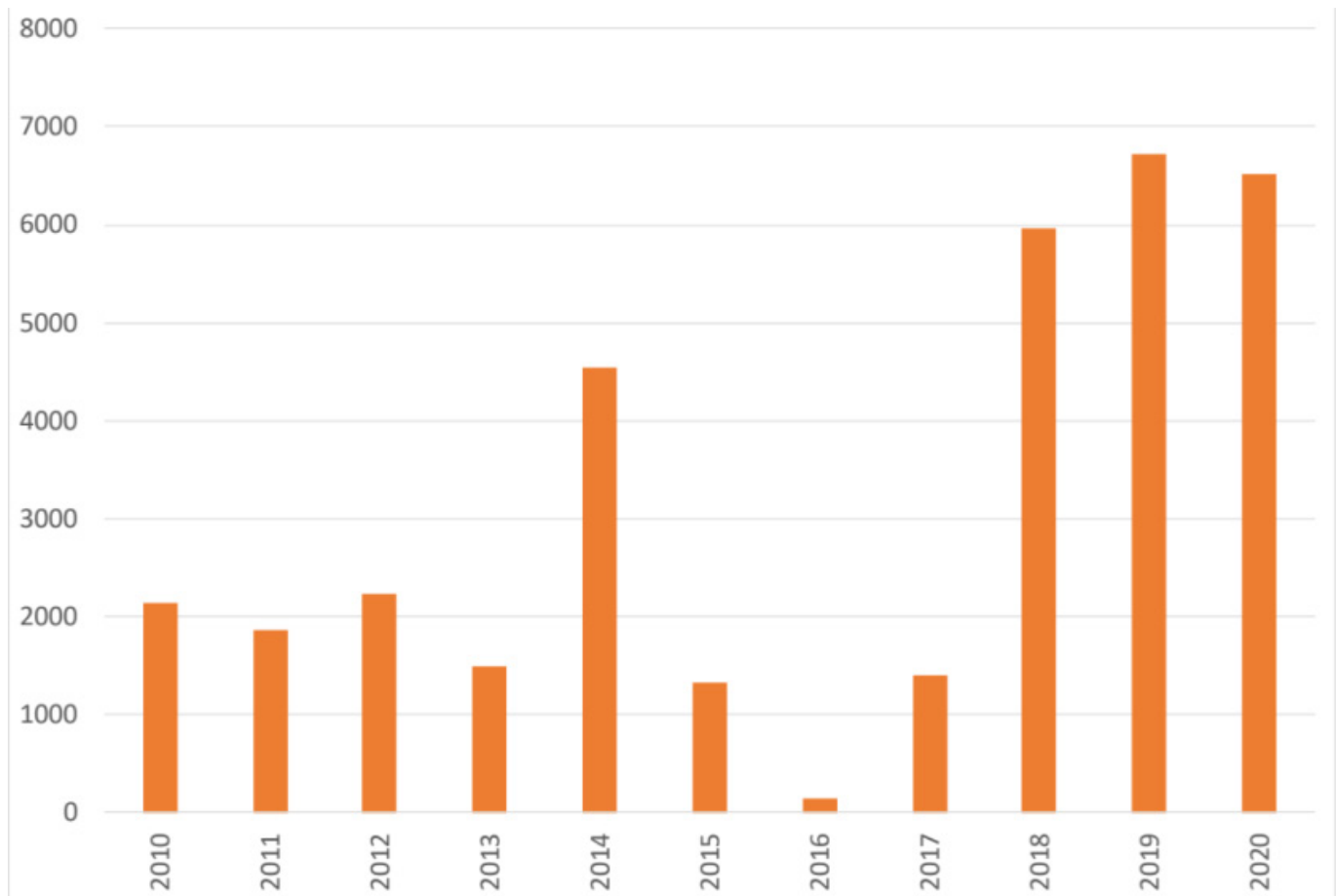
Average annual tuition fees charged by public institutions at bachelor level (2019/20)\*



\* or latest available year. Selected countries. Equivalent USD converted using PPPs. Source: OECD

There were no UK fees for full-time students between 1962 to 1998. New Labour introduced fees of £1,000 a year in 1998, raising them to £3,000 a year in 2004 (rising later in Wales and not so high), but then in England to £9,000 in 2012 and £9,250 in 2017. In Scotland they are zero (for Scots).

*Statista/Shattered Nation slide 13*



Gross value added of 'education', UK 2010-2020 (£m) increase on year before.  
 Source: Analysis by author, using ONS Gross value-added data (2023).

Brexit helped reduce the 'threat' to the business model of the Higher Education sector that the UK would be slowly drawn towards the European norm of minimal or no university tuition fees and a reduction in our educational segregation if income inequalities were to fall in the UK towards hardly any private schools surviving into the medium term. There were a lot of British educational institutions that also had a vested interest in Brexit occurring so that their (highly unusual in a European context) status might not be questioned in the near future. Like banking and gambling, there were many people in our more elite educational institutions who favour Britain leaving; but we managed to paint the situation as if the opposite was the case. If the banks and universities had really been unanimous in their opposition to Brexit, do you really think it would have been permitted?

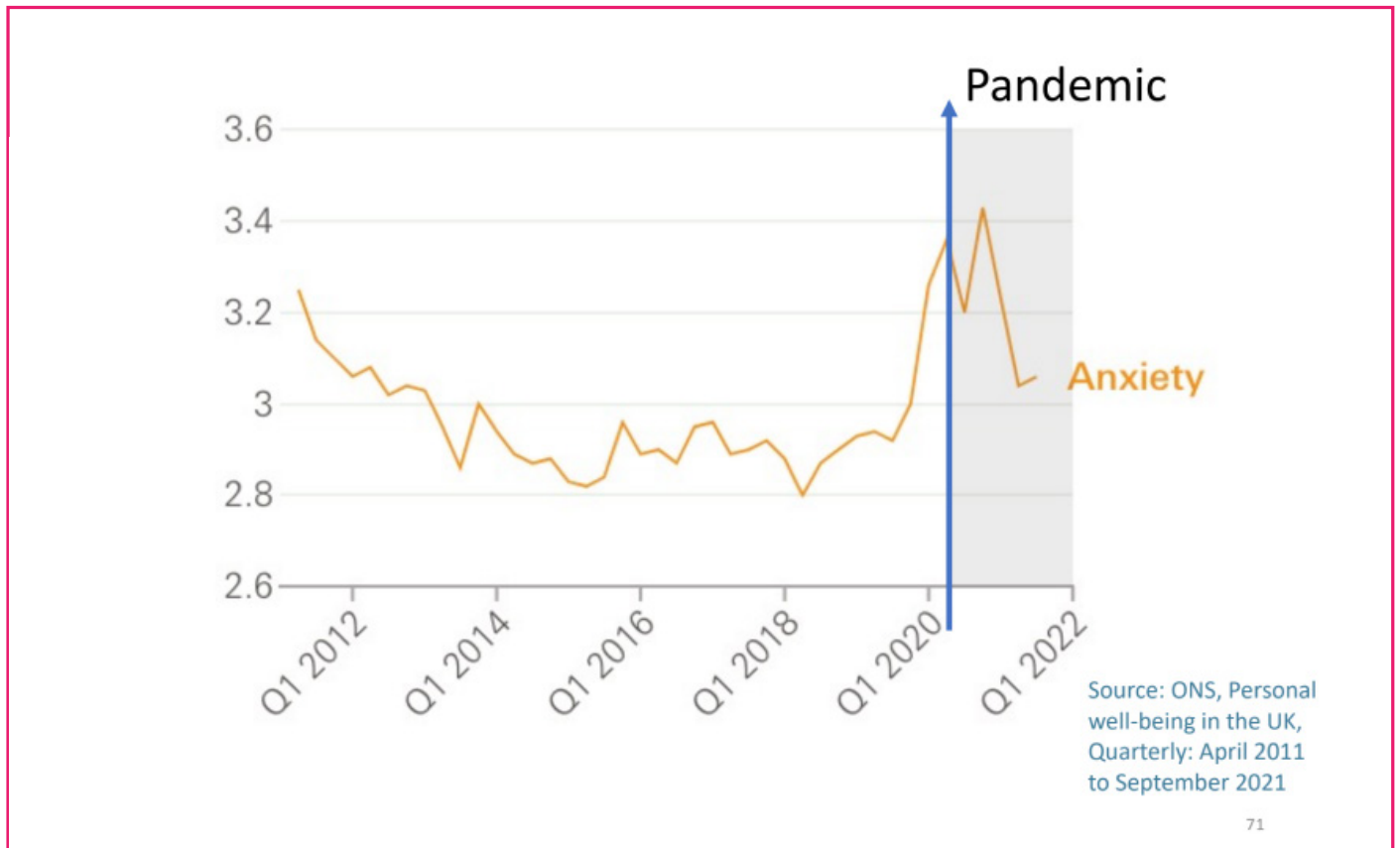
There might have been a fear with some universities that EU student numbers would drop,

and they did fall overall, roughly halving. However, the fees being charged to those that did come to universities rose from £9250 to as high as £38,000 immediately after Brexit, so much more money was being made from EU students than before, despite the halving in their numbers.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, that fall affected some UK universities far more than others. When they are paying more, EU students have more power over choosing where they might wish to study. Elite British universities almost certainly benefitted from Brexit as far as undergraduate and postgraduate fee-income was concerned.

By 2023, the Labour party had dropped its historic commitment to return to zero tuition fees, the situation which it had inherited in 1997 and which it had itself dismantled. Had Brexit not occurred, would that have happened? Counterfactuals are easy to imagine, but hard to prove.



# The sunlit uplands lie 'just ahead'



Anxiety rose the most before the pandemic, but was very high before 2012 as well (following the financial crash and the election of the coalition). *Slide 123, Shattered Nation*

Some may view the above three areas as too limited, so I have turned to the *Telegraph* newspaper for more reasons to be optimistic about the potential social benefits of Brexit, and in particular to three highlights from the: 'The *Telegraph's* Economic Intelligence newsletter'<sup>30</sup>. This is a 'from the horse's mouth' approach to trying to understand what has occurred. It is strikingly divorced from reality:

*'That [initial post-Brexit] frosty and petulant stand-off already seems like another world. The UK reached an accord with the EU's North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC) last December on a basis of sovereign parity. This week British ministers are taking part in the North Sea Summit in Ostend as full equals.'*

*'The UK is today shipping more gas to the EU*

*than Russia.'* [there are, of course, sanctions on importing gas from Russia and someone blew up a pipeline under the Baltic sea in 2022]

*'The Windsor Framework has been the clincher ... even if the International Monetary Fund has yet to smell the coffee. Standard & Poor's upgraded the UK's sovereign debt rating on Friday from negative watch to stable AA, citing both the Windsor accord and Rishi Sunak's fiscal cleansing. It is becoming clearer that last year's catastrophism was greatly overblown.'*

Note that as this rhetoric of Brexit optimism grew, the public in the UK became increasingly anxious. The graph above shows how anxiety levels, which had been falling after the 2008 crash, appeared to end in a slump of less worry from 2011 to 2014, and which then levelled out between 2014 and 2018,

# ‘As this winter came to an end, more than 7 million people were waiting for a doctor’s appointment’

but suddenly rose up to a new high when ‘Brexit was won’, peaking just before it became apparent that an enormous pandemic was descending on the world (not at all due to that pandemic as it was not at that point recognised as such). Brexit caused more fear than the coronavirus. This is hardly surprising as more measured analysis found that: ‘...the UK has experienced a significant contraction in its trading capacity in terms of the varieties of goods being exported to the EU due to the TCA [the January 2021 Trade and Cooperation Agreement], which signify some serious long-term concerns about the UK’s future exporting and productivity.’<sup>31</sup> But you will not find such analysis in the *Telegraph’s* ‘Economic Intelligence newsletter’. Instead, you will read this:

*‘The **pound has been the star of G10 currencies** this year, albeit rising from a low base. ... Clearly, the world’s omnipotent reserve managers have not lost confidence in this country.’*

*‘Rishi Sunak has closed off any serious possibility of the UK rejoining the EU single market and the customs union by instead joining the Pacific free trade pact (CPTPP). The fast-expanding CPTPP demolishes the fallacy that the world is split into three hegemonic trade blocs – US, EU, and China – and that any country left outside this structure is a powerless supplicant. The pact will probably be **the world’s biggest trade bloc by a wide margin before the end of this decade**. It does not require political union, or swallowing an *acquis*, or accepting the jurisdiction of a supranational court. It is a club of equals based on the principles of equivalence and mutual recognition. It chiefly wants to trade. It may over time outflank the EU’s trade directorate*

*with a more open regime for digital commerce and services. It sits at the heart of the world’s fastest growing economic region. Membership raises the UK’s implicit bargaining power with Europe by several notches.’*

*‘Mr Sunak is quietly filling in the blank pages of Britain’s post-EU playbook. ... Never underestimate the value of **sheer managerial competence**. This country may yet clatter into a bad recession. But if it does so, it will be in good company, brought down by monetary over-tightening in the US and Europe. Some IMF staffer may think that Britain will be a particular sink of pauperisation in 2023 – worse even than Russia – but sophisticated global opinion has already moved on. The UK has underperformed the eurozone slightly over the last seven years. It may outperform slightly over the next seven. For the first time in what seems like an eternity, I am starting to feel the first flush of optimism.’*

So, there you have it – rising from the ashes of being a member of the EU, the UK is now (supposedly) a force to be reckoned with. And this is what you would think if you confined yourself to reading certain newspapers and watching certain TV channels. But eventually a little balance seeps in, especially with reports from abroad about the current state of the UK.

As a result, the summer of 2023 ended with numerous Conservatives writing books and producing documentary series and podcasts about the terrible state of Britain. Perhaps some of their inspiration came from what was being written about the UK from abroad just a little earlier than they themselves finally recognised the rot.

# The view from the European mainland

Three days after the *Telegraph* published its upbeat analysis of the position of the UK, *Der Spiegel* magazine informed its readers about a very different view of the state of Britain.<sup>32</sup> The quotes that follow are from that article:

*'Food shortages, mouldy apartments, a lack of medical workers: The United Kingdom is facing a **perfect storm of struggle**, and millions are sliding into poverty. There is little to suggest that improvement will come anytime soon.'*

*'As this winter came to an end, more than **7 million people were waiting** for a doctor's appointment, including tens of thousands of people suffering from heart disease and cancer. According to government estimates, some 650,000 legal cases are still waiting to be addressed in a court of law. And those needing a passport or driver's license must frequently wait for several months.'*

*'Last year, 560 pubs closed their doors forever, with thousands more soon to follow, according to the industry association. **Without Oxfam, the Salvation Army** and other charitable organizations that operate second-hand stores, numerous city centres would have almost no shops left at all.'*

*'Last week, the International Monetary Fund forecast that in no other industrialized nation would the economy develop as poorly as in Britain this year. **Even Russia is expected** to end up ahead of the UK.'*

*'Hunger has been the focus of numerous recent stories coming out of the United Kingdom. Stories about a government that was planning on making*

*cuts to the school dinners program before a football star intervened. About how even **UNICEF stepped in** to help feed children in a country with the sixth largest economy in the world. And about the skyrocketing popularity of Asian instant noodles, popular because they are filling and cheap, and because they take almost no time to cook – a huge advantage given that spiking energy prices have made electricity unaffordable for many Britons.'*

*'...in addition to the almost 3,000 food banks in the country – more than three times the number found in the much larger country of Germany – facilities in the UK like churches, museums, public libraries and schools opened up "warm banks" around the country this winter. The needy can also go to baby banks to pick up free diapers and formula, bedding banks for mattresses and down comforters, and fuel banks to receive vouchers for coin-operated gas and electric meters. The Blue Cross also introduced the country's first pet-food banks this winter so that **people with nothing** could at least keep their dogs and cats.'*

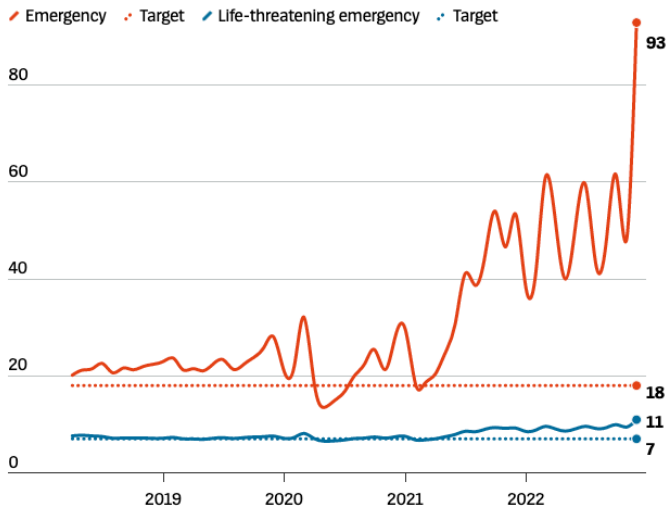
*'In December, heart attack patients were forced to wait an average of 93 minutes for the paramedics to arrive – a record. Some 54,000 hospital patients had to be parked in hallways because there were no free beds – a record. Experts believe that there are hundreds of preventable deaths in the country each week – you guessed it, **a record**.'*

*'This country was already **on its knees before Brexit**, before the endless phase of political trench warfare and before the pandemic. And now, it seems as though it has dialled 999 and is waiting in vain for the paramedics to show up.'*

Der Spiegel also published some graphs:

### Delayed Assistance

Average elapsed time (in minutes) between emergency calls and ambulance arrival in England

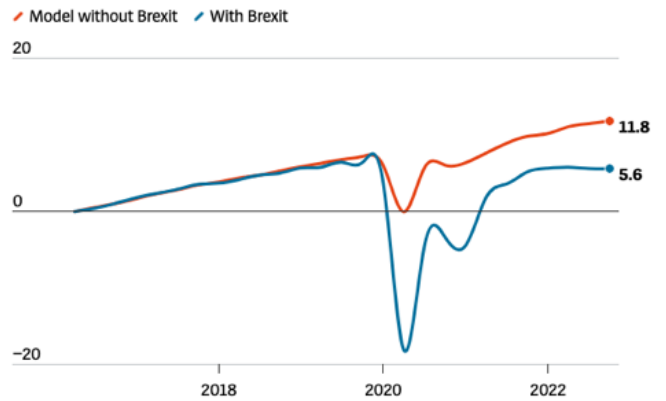


Source: NHS

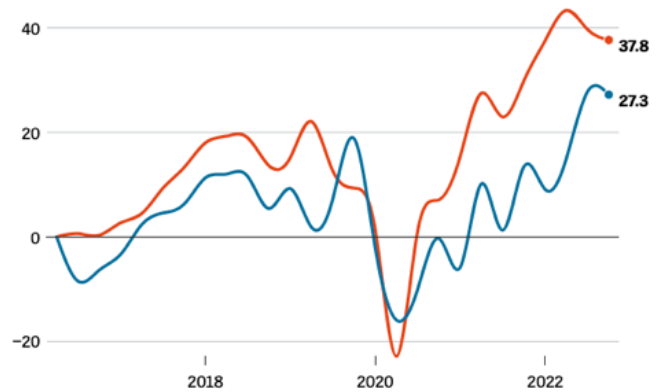
### Expensive Divorce

Effects of Brexit on the British economy, percent change relative to Q2 2016

#### Gross domestic product



#### Volume of Foreign Trade



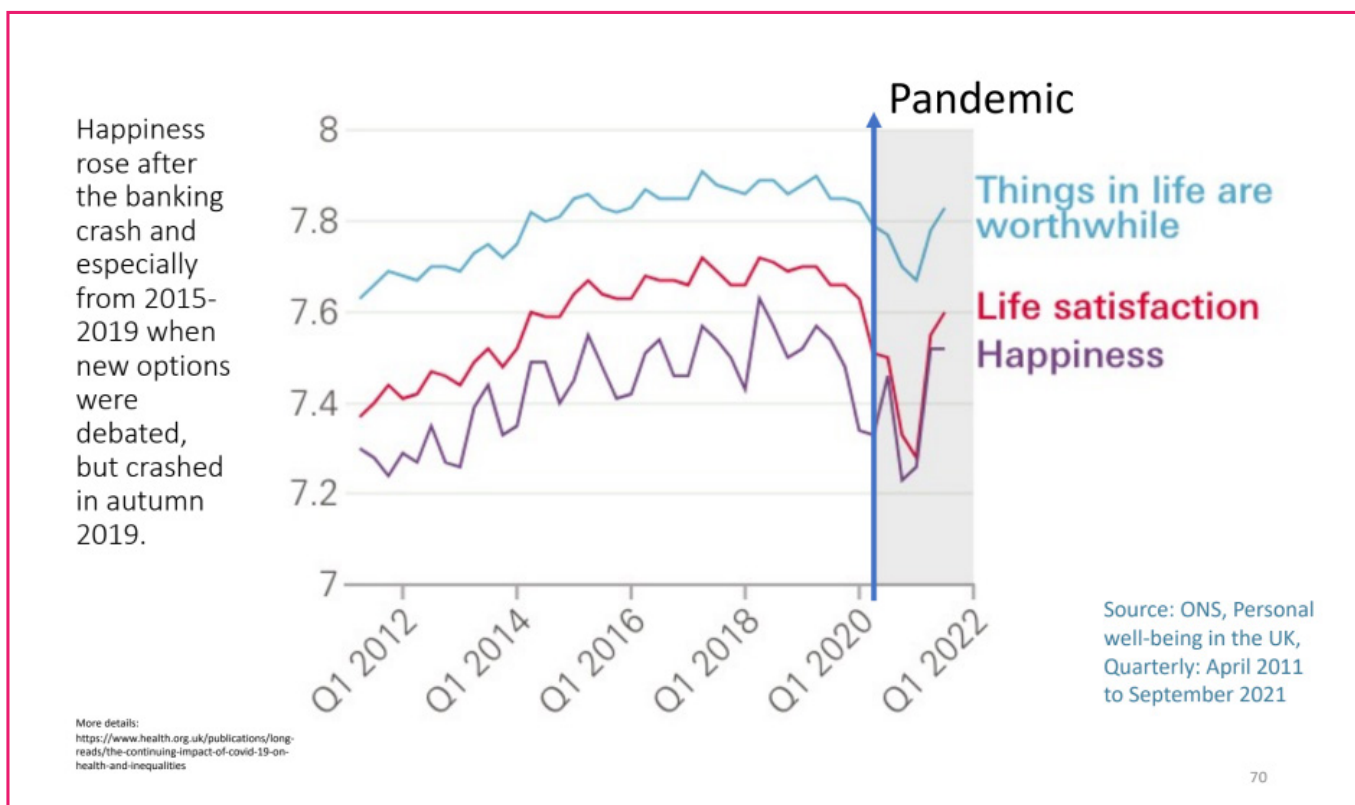
Sources: CER, OECD, own calculations

The above graphs and quotes are just one view from Germany. What about a view from the USA? Nine days after the Spiegel piece, Samuel McIlhagga published an article in Palladium magazine titled 'Britain is dead'.<sup>33</sup> He decided to simply list everything Britain now ranked terribly in, in one handy paragraph complete with 10 linked sources:

*'The overall trajectory becomes obvious when you look at outcomes in productivity, investment, capacity, research and development, growth, quality of life, GDP per capita, wealth distribution, and real wage growth measured by unit labor cost. All are either falling or stagnant. Reporting from the Financial Times has claimed that at current levels, the UK will be poorer than Poland in a decade, and will have a lower*

*median real income than Slovenia by 2024. Many provincial areas already have lower GDPs than Eastern Europe.'*

What he did not say was that the poor of the UK were now usually poorer than the poorest fifth of people in most of Eastern Europe. Stephanie Flanders, head of Bloomberg Economics, did: "The poorest fifth of the population are now much poorer [in the UK] than most of the poorest countries in central and eastern Europe."<sup>34</sup> It may seem like an obscure statistical and pedantic point to make; but there is a huge difference between being as well-off as the average Eastern European; and being poorer than the poorest fifth of Eastern Europeans. Remember when the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, talked about building a 'high wage, high productivity' economy?



Slide 122, *Shattered Nation*

The feeling that things were worthwhile in life, that your life was satisfying and that you at times felt happy also collapsed across the UK when Brexit was 'done' and upon Boris Johnson being elected leader and then Prime Minister in 2019. Johnson and Brexit had a greater effect on the national mood, darkening it, than the pandemic. Before then all these trends had been rising. Perhaps because some people thought that Brexit could be avoided. Others, in their millions (as seen by how they voted), were greatly encouraged by what the Labour party stood for between 2015 and 2019, with a portion of those millions contributing to the growth of the largest social movement in Europe at that time (a party with over half a million members).

# Conclusion

Can I balance this account out in any way, can I find any way to not end on such a dire note? You might believe that I have not given a fair account so far, but note that as yet I have not turned to the effect of Brexit that we can already measure on the Union, the very basis of what the UK actually is! I will turn to that at the very end, but first let's look to the heart of John Major's England, the country lanes and villages with which this report began.

Around the same time as the mainland European press were writing obituaries of the UK, in April 2023, *UnHerd* magazine, founded in 2017 by conservative British political activist Tim Montgomerie, released a report.<sup>35</sup> However, despite being a magazine on the right, what it had to say was not welcome hearing for Leavers. We had not yet reached the sunlit uplands. Worse still, there was trouble in Surrey – what had been, until recently, the most affluent county of England and one of the better-off parts of Europe (child poverty is now lower in Scotland than South East England). Here again are a few extracts, but now from a right leaning organ:

*'Travelling through Surrey, from the quiet villages nestled in the North Downs to its London border in the north, it resembles not a cliché of suburban aspiration, but a capsule of all England's problems: the demise of its ruling party, a lost generation of millennials, polluted waterways and a cost-of-living crisis. In these leafy streets, decline and affluence have become entwined.'*

*'The south-east has seen the biggest fall across the country in disposable income since 2019, with a gap opening up between median income and house prices that far outpaces the rest of England. More recently, some of the country's most expensive mortgages were among those hit hardest after the Truss Budget. Nor is the county immune from the cost-of-living crisis ...it's not unreasonable to talk*

*about a wave of de-gentrification taking place not just in Surrey, but across the Home Counties.'*

*'Young families are using food banks in Dorking; the River Mole that runs through the Surrey Hills is one of the most polluted in the country. When Ed Davey [Lib Dem party leader] came to visit Mole Valley, he was taken to a swimming pond in Fetcham, which is now, as one local told me, "full of shit". The arrival of England's decline in these once-protected suburban idylls is now as visible as it is pungent.'*

*"Everything went wrong after Brexit," says his opposite number, Jayne Bleby outside an artisan butchers. "But I can't vote for the Lib Dems. There's just something about them that's not quite right." Another gentleman in Bookham is blunter when I try to tease out his views on the county's future: "Surrey is like the rest of England; it's becoming a shithole."*

What are the ongoing issues created by Brexit? And here, finally, we turn to what may well be the most momentous issues of all. The greatest concerns are geographical, starting with Northern Ireland – most importantly peace there, and the future membership of that area within the United Kingdom, or not. More children and adults going hungry matters. A growing lack of adequate homes and shelter matters. School roofs falling in and education failing matters. A crumbling health service and growing poverty matters. But war and violence and avoiding those matters more. The potential for violence in Northern Ireland has been stoked up by Brexit – it is anathema to the Good Friday Agreement. The UK no longer being in the EU also makes the possibility of us engaging in other wars greater.

Scotland is next most affected. Brexit has meant that it is much easier for Westminster to now pass legislation – without Scotland's agreement – that

reduces the effective powers of the Scottish Parliament, and allows UK Ministers to make further changes unilaterally, such as including provision of what should be nationalised healthcare in the UK internal market and what can now be privatised even within Scotland. Giving powers to UK Ministers to intervene directly in matters that used to be within the responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament (again without agreement), and undermining the Sewel Convention may in the long run turn out to be one of the most damaging effects of Brexit of all if you value the Union. This is the convention that the Westminster Parliament will not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters without the consent of the Scottish Parliament and will not block legislation on devolved matters passed by the Scottish Parliament.

Other complaints from Scotland include proceeding with a form of Brexit which the majority of Scotland did not vote for, with major adverse impacts on Scotland's interests and economy; taking forward legislation that puts at risk EU laws on environmental protection, food standards and other devolved matters; taking a direct role in devolved policy and decisions on public spending on devolved matters, bypassing the Scottish Parliament; and reducing funding available to Scotland compared to that expected from equivalent EU funding schemes, potentially by some hundreds of millions.<sup>36</sup> Scotland, thanks to nationalising its water industry, has the cleanest rivers, water and beaches in the UK and the least sewage pollution. Will England interfere in

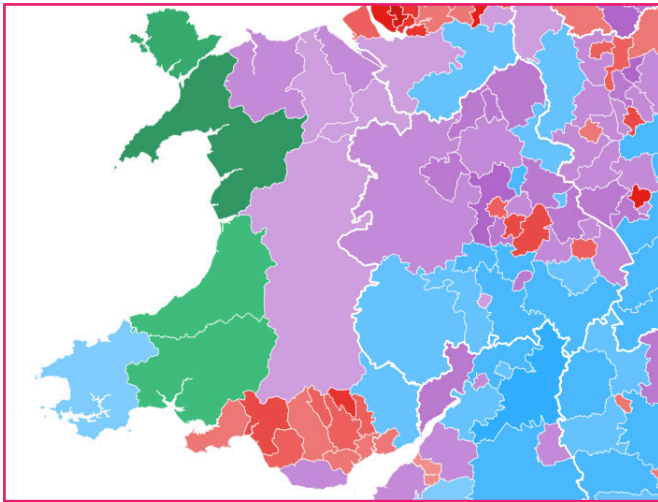
that in future and alter the water that Scots can drink in terms of how safe it is by allowing private companies in to 'the market'? Water is also a major political issue in Northern Ireland as so much of it has to cross the border, multiple times, with the Republic and that requires (and always has required) great cooperation.

On EU laws on environmental protection, even the charity the RSPB responded angrily when this happened at the end of August 2023.

Brexit clearly is not for the birds – but its effects are often complex and it was easy because of the complexities for Sunak, Gove and Coffey to claim that they were not lying when the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) explained that they were (see image, below left). Similarly, on Scotland, it is not that Brexit enabled Westminster to pass legislation – without Scotland's agreement. Legally, the UK Parliament has always been able to override the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales; and often imposes direct control over Northern Ireland. However, until 2018 the Sewel Convention proved effective in preventing that; and the rights being citizens of the EU gave people in Northern Ireland made occasional direct rule from London conditional on respecting those rights. What has happened since 2018 is that the UK Government has taken back control from the devolved parliaments and governments as well as from the EU institutions, and the government in London is now using the removal of EU single-market controls as a rationale to impose sweeping constraints on devolved policy making to the extent that the devolution project is now being fundamentally undermined in all parts of the UK outside of England. Within England the promised devolution that was said to be possible once we had left the EU has turned out to be a chimera. The North East of England has levelled down. The North West may no longer even receive its one new train line. The Westminster government in London, which is essentially now a 20mph city, in October 2023 threatened to try to prevent any local authority outside of the capital from introducing safer road speeds in it. Only the MPs were 'taking back control'.

What limited space the Scottish Government had in the recent past to take a different economic and social path under devolution has been curtailed by the Internal Market Act, which provides far less flexibility than the previous EU regime and which cuts across the lines of democratic accountability which had been established by devolution so that decisions of the Scottish Parliament are now





The 2014 European elections: which party gained most votes in Wales and its borders *Wikimedia Commons*  
 ■ UKIP ■ Labour ■ Plaid Cymru ■ Conservative

routinely second-guessed by UK Ministers. Just as those within so much of England now are. As I write, Europe's largest local authority, Birmingham, is being run by commissioners appointed from London. In 2023 the Scottish government even had to seek UK Government permission for a bottle recycling scheme: 'Ministers wrote to Humza Yousaf confirming an exemption to permit the scheme to go ahead would be granted, but without glass bottles.'<sup>37</sup>

Before Brexit, UK governments were from time to time prepared to negotiate greater devolution, including less-pretend devolution within England. Now, when the Scottish Government sought powers, for example, to implement a set of thoughtful and well-evidenced policies on drugs, the Drug Law Reform proposals,<sup>38</sup> they were dismissed out of hand: 'Suella Braverman slams Scottish Government plan to decriminalise drugs at 'fiery' meeting', reported the *Daily Record*.<sup>39</sup> Just one clinic was allowed to set up an experiment in Glasgow in September 2023, watched over carefully by civil servants hundreds of miles away in Westminster. On matters like that, including Scotland's rural population decline, immigration policy, and the Scottish Child payments that reduce poverty in Scotland, the real-world impact is severe. Brexit makes Scottish Independence more likely with every new English intervention in Scotland. And Scotland is just the place where all this effects the greatest number of people in a single geographical grouping.

In Wales, Brexit is having similar effects, albeit less impactful because the Welsh had fewer devolved powers than the Scots. Although a narrow majority of people in Wales voted for Brexit, an almost identical narrow majority as in the UK as a whole, there has been growing suspicion since the vote that this only occurred because so many older English people had retired to those particular parts of Wales where UKIP recorded its greatest support in 2014.<sup>40</sup> It is very possible that fewer of those people who had been born in Wales, and were still living in Wales, voted Leave than voted Remain. This, in turn may lead to a growing sense of living under the control of an alien nation, and to growing alienation. As was noted back in 2020: 'For Number 10, does "taking back control" mean from Cardiff and Edinburgh as well as from Brussels?'<sup>41</sup> If this is resisted in Wales as well as in Scotland, Brexit fuels the break-up of the UK further still. In the long run that might not, all taken into account, be a bad outcome for the peoples of the British Isles; but it certainly was not the intention of the Brexiters.

The social failures of Brexit are many, the economic, political, health care, educational, housing, trade failures, and so much more, are mounting. But these are all part of a longer-term failure, of a state slowly failing, slowly falling apart, slowly having to come to terms with its actual image in the mirror.

We got Brexit done. Welcome, to the sunlit uplands. We have arrived at our destination – it is not where you were told we would be. As things stand, by 2043, in just twenty years' time, and fifty years after John Major made his prophecy, Britain will be seen by no-one as a country. There will still be long shadows on county cricket grounds, but those playing on them may well be much less self-assured of their place in the world. Although, they will hopefully have a better grasp of world history, learnt the hard way. There will still be warm beer, but possibly more for the tourists – the UK is now a cheap holiday destination. The once invincible green suburbs will still be home to dog lovers, except where no dogs are allowed by the private landlords that now own most of the homes. And old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist will be just as much a memory of something long gone as it was when Major said these words in 1993. It was all, really, just about a memory, a fantasy, an attempt to regain a world that never existed for most people and which never will exist. Only a very few people at the heart of a large empire at the height of its powers actually ever had that degree of 'control'.



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# BREXIT SPOTLIGHT

Brexit – and decades of media feeding frenzy on immigration – was pure ‘distraction politics’. Leaving the EU has completely failed to address any substantial policy problems that the countries of the UK had, and they have had many.

The UK is now languishing economically as the impact of Brexit bites. By 2022 more than a dozen EU or single market members are better-off than the UK by OECD measures, and most of the poorest of Eastern Europe are less poor than in the UK.

Britain’s problems did not start with Brexit, but represent decades of failure for which all three major English political parties bear some responsibility. On housing, education and health, the UK has ranked worse and worse in recent decades.

While it is difficult to definitively distinguish from other factors, let alone account for counterfactual (‘what might have been’) possibilities, most datapoints and trends suggest that Brexit has been an economic and public policy failure of the first order.