

## In the U.K., a Disaster No One Wants to Talk About

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There's a growing understanding in Britain that the country's vote to quit the European Union, a decisive moment in the international rise of reactionary populism, was a grave error. Just as critics predicted, Brexit has led to inflation, labor shortages, business closures and travel snafus[...].

5 According to the U.K.'s Office for Budget Responsibility, leaving the E.U. has shaved 4 percent off Britain's gross domestic product. The damage to Britain's economy, its chairman has said, is of the same "magnitude" as that from the Covid pandemic.

All this pain and hassle has created an anti-Brexit majority in Britain. According to a YouGov poll released this week, 57 percent of Britons say the country was wrong to vote to leave the E.U., and a slight majority wants to rejoin it. [...]

10 This mess was, of course, both predictable and predicted. That's why I've been struck, visiting the U.K. this summer, by the curious political taboo against discussing how badly Brexit has gone, even among many who voted against it. [...]

"It's so toxic," Tobias Ellwood, a Tory lawmaker who has called on his colleagues to admit that Brexit was a mistake, told me. "People have invested so much time and pain and agony on this." It's like  
15 a "wound," he said, that people want to avoid picking at. The London mayor, Sadiq Khan, one of the few Labour Party leaders eager to discuss the consequences of leaving the E.U., described an "omertà," or vow of silence, around it. "It's the elephant in the room," he told me. "I'm frustrated that no one's talking about it."

Part of the reason that no one — or almost no one — is talking about Brexit's consequences lies with  
20 the demographics of the Labour Party. Somewhere between a quarter and a third of Labour voters supported Brexit, and those voters are concentrated in the so-called Red Wall — working-class areas in the Midlands and Northern England that once solidly supported Labour but swung right in the 2019 election. "Those voters do not want to have a conversation about Brexit," said Joshua Simons, the director of Labour Together, a think tank close to Labour leadership.

25 Sheer exhaustion also contributes to making Brexit talk unwelcome: Between the vote to leave the European Union in 2016 and the final agreement in 2020, the issue consumed British politics, and many people just want to move on. Simons argues there's also a third factor: a sense that the results of a democratic referendum must be honored. He cites a point that a mentor of his, the political philosopher Danielle Allen, made after the 2016 vote. "In the end, in democracy, sometimes you all do crazy things  
30 together," Simons said. "And what becomes more important is not whether the crazy thing was a good or bad thing to do. It's that you're doing it together."

[...]"You've got to respect the referendum," said Khan. "What you can't have is never-endums, referendum after referendum after referendum. That disrespects the electorate."

35 Still, he argues that without facing the harm that Brexit has caused, the country can't move forward[...]. Britain is not, at least in the near term, going to rejoin the E.U. But both Khan and Ellwood argue that it can still forge closer trade and immigration ties than it has now, and perhaps eventually return to the European single market[...].

One silver lining to Brexit is that it offers a cautionary tale for the rest of Europe. [S]upport for leaving the E.U. has declined in every member state for which data is available. As governments across  
40 the continent move rightward, the E.U. itself is moving in a more conservative direction, but it's not coming apart.