

TEXT 1



Is the UK bucking Europe's trend of moving to the right?

Emma Graham-Harrison

Labour's landslide victory gave hope to progressives worldwide but may be as much practical as ideological

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Labour's landslide victory was hailed as a beacon of hope for progressives worldwide after a surge in support for far-right parties in Europe, and with Donald Trump currently slight favourite to become the US president in January.

But Britain's bulwark against the populist, extremist tide sweeping through European capitals may be as much practical as ideological. Nigel Farage's rightwing Reform party got a 14% share of votes nationwide, not far behind the 16% claimed by Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in recent elections for the EU parliament.

AfD is now sending a significant bloc of MEPs to Brussels. By contrast under the UK's first past the post system, which rewards only the winner in each constituency, more than 4m votes for Reform produced just five seats in parliament.

Reform's small grouping will try to pressure the government and certainly influence the Conservative party as it reconstitutes its leadership in the wake of last week's crushing defeat, but wield little real power.

"If the UK had a different [polling] system, we would be seeing a level of fragmentation similar to other places in Europe," said Marta Lorimer, lecturer in politics at Cardiff University. "Some tendencies are just masked by the way the electoral system works."

The nature of Britain's voting system doesn't only dent the political impact of votes cast for smaller parties – whether Reform or the Green party – it likely also deters some potential supporters from backing them in the first place.

In European elections, voters know that even a few legislators from a small party can form part of a coalition, giving them more incentive to choose with their hearts rather than their heads.

"Coming out of 14 years of Conservative government, if [British] voters were looking for change, they knew they had to choose between left and right," Lorimer added.

Stefanie Walter, professor for international relations at the University of Zurich, said: "The relative success of smaller parties in the UK election – despite these structural constraints on them achieving power – are driven by the same political trends that are reshaping Europe."

“Even though there are such strong electoral incentives to vote for the two main parties in the UK, the vote is splintering more, and with more impact.”

She said: “This reflects a wider splintering we see across Europe, where the political spectrum used to be uni-dimensional, with parties lined up on the left and right. In the last 20 years a second dimension opened up, around nationalism and openness in particular, so there is more room to compete, more room for parties with different political profiles.”

This, however, does not only benefit populists or the right. The UK’s Green party and Liberal Democrats made significant gains on Thursday, and systems of proportional representation have also recently returned leftwing governments in Europe, even if the rise of the far right has been a focus of media attention and political concern. Spain’s socialists held on to power last year after a snap election gamble in the wake of damaging local polls. Meanwhile in France, which does not have proportional representation, a leftwing/Green alliance was projected to form a majority in Emmanuel Macron’s snap election, with Marine Le Pen’s far-right National Rally consigned to third.

Farage has also been largely a single-issue campaigner, albeit one who has been extraordinarily successful in pushing for a Brexit referendum, said Prof Amelia Hadfield, founding director of the Centre for Britain and Europe.

He may draw inspiration from the success of populists in Europe, and has vowed to create a “mass national campaign” by the 2029 elections. But counterparts across the channel spent years expanding their appeal, accumulating experience in government and shaping broader policy platforms.

Hadfield said: “The question is, can Farage transfer some of the impetus from Brexit. He now needs to convert what is a leadership and individual driven construct. It will be a top down attempt by Farage to build it along the lines of more established populist parties.”

If the election result was not a straight-forward victory for progressives, or shift away from populist trends, the handover of power that followed on Friday morning was an unequivocal triumph for democracy.

Rishi Sunak, the outgoing Conservative prime minister, and Jeremy Hunt, the outgoing chancellor, acknowledged both Labour’s win and Starmer’s commitment to public service – despite their political differences on how best to serve. Starmer responded in kind.

Surging support for the far right has been accompanied in many places by assaults on the institutions of democracy. The 6 January attack on the US Capitol appears to have done little to dent Trump’s chances in November’s presidential election.

So these mutual, perhaps even choreographed, statements of respect for British democracy and the will of British voters are likely to have been welcomed in the bipartisan spirit in which they were made.

“A sense of cordiality has long been a part of British politics,” Hadfield said. “We have not seen it very much in evidence in recent years, and the British populace has a long memory and they resent the loss of civility.”

TEXT 2

THE CONVERSATION

From Brexit to 'Bregret': ten years later, bitterness still prevails over the UK's vote to leave the EU

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Laëtitia Langlois

On June 23 2016, a majority of Britons chose to leave the European Union after a referendum campaign driven by the promises of supporters of the "Leave" camp, spearheaded by Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson. Built around the slogan "Take Back Control", the pro-Brexit campaign promised to restore the country's sovereignty, regain control over migration flows, and boost economic prosperity. Ten years on, hopes have given way to a bitter sense of disillusion that the British refer to as "Bregret", and it is a divided, weakened, disenchanted country who is about to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the referendum.

The Brexit shock

There are few events in a country's national history that constitute such an immense and profound shock as Brexit. The announcement of the results, that indicated a 51.9% victory for the "Leave" camp, sent shockwaves across the world. After 43 years of a relationship that was often turbulent and confrontational, the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union and open a new chapter in its history.

The reasons for the shock were manifold: first, it was an unprecedented event that raised many uncertainties and fears about the future of the United Kingdom and the European Union alike; the shock was also explained by the completely unexpected nature of the victory, given that the main polling institutes were predicting a close election, giving the "Remain" camp a slight edge; finally, the vote in favour of Brexit represented a political and ideological victory for Nigel Farage, the then leader of the far right populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) which was fiercely hostile to the European Union, immigration and multiculturalism.

Previously considered more of an outsider, Nigel Farage then went on to become a central figure in the British political landscape, unanimously recognised as the main architect of Brexit. His campaign themes – which revolved primarily around the fight against immigration, restoring national sovereignty, and defending British national identity – emerged as the dominant themes in the national debate. Boris Johnson, another central figure in the "Leave" campaign and future prime minister (2019-2022), also contributed to the rise of populist ideas by placing them at the very heart of the Conservative Party.

Brexit thus normalised and mainstreamed populist discourse, which had long remained on the fringes of the public sphere, contributing to an unprecedented dynamic for the far right and a major recomposition in British political life. This is the great irony of this referendum: originally put forward by David Cameron in 2013 when he was prime minister to strengthen his authority over the Conservative Party and stem the rise of UKIP, the referendum had the exact opposite effect.

Not only did the Leave vote precipitate Cameron's downfall, but, above all, it contributed to major political upheavals characterised by the erosion of the two traditional parties, the overwhelming rise of the far right and the polarisation of public debate around questions of immigration and national identity. The referendum was supposed to appease and unify the country; on the contrary, it deeply destabilised and divided it.

Bitter tomorrows: the disillusion of Brexit

A few hours after the announcement of the results and while euphoria was still strong among the supporters of the "Leave" camp, a first interview with Nigel Farage on the ITV Good Morning Britain program caused general astonishment. He told the two journalists that the promise to pay the amount of the contribution to the European budget to the budget of the National Health Service (NHS) – the British public health service – will "probably not be delivered".

By reneging on his campaign's key promise, Farage was betraying a commitment that weighed heavily in many voters' decision to vote for the "Leave" camp. The NHS, set up after World War II to ensure that all Britons would have universal access to health care "from the cradle to the grave", is an iconic pillar of the welfare state. However, multiple reforms to make it less expensive and more effective have seriously weakened it and it is now facing many problems, including chronic underfunding, a shortage of staff, or excessively long waiting delays.

Aware of the NHS's place in the hearts of the British people, the pro-Leave campaigners heavily promoted the argument that, in the event of an exit from the EU, the money previously allocated to the EU budget would be channelled directly into funding the NHS. Boris Johnson criss-crossing the country in his red bus bearing the slogan "We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead" was one of the campaign's most emblematic images.

Inevitably, this argument struck a chord with a large section of the British electorate, who were concerned about the decline of such a national institution. Nigel Farage's sudden U-turn felt like a massive betrayal and highlighted, from the very first hours following the vote, the gap between promises and reality.

The other major theme of the pro-Leave campaign was the fight against immigration. On this point, too, the gap between promises and reality led to a deep resentment among voters.

For years, Nigel Farage had been repeating that because of its membership of the European Union, which advocates the principle of open borders and free movement of people, the UK lacked the capacity to control its borders or to prevent mass immigration. A few days before the referendum, Farage unveiled a campaign poster called 'Breaking Point' which showed a crowd of migrants from the Middle East – exclusively men – gathered at the Croatian-Serbian border like ready to "invade" Europe. The caption on the poster read, "The EU has failed us all."

Following the outcry caused by the poster, UKIP was forced to remove it immediately. But the argument had a major impact in a country where immigration – especially from Muslim countries – topped British concerns. Farage's campaign strategy also consisted in presenting the vote for Brexit as an identity and civilisational issue by presenting immigration – encouraged according to him by the European elites – as an existential threat to British identity and the nation's future.

The victory of Brexit has been partly analysed as the victory of gloomy passions – fear of others, hostility toward foreigners, resentment against multiculturalism – and interpreted as a sign of a growingly inward-looking country. But while the wish of much of the pro-Brexit electorate was to see the country being totally closed to foreigners, that was far from the case. Indeed, even after

the United Kingdom officially left the European Union on January 31 2020, immigration figures continued to rise, reaching an absolute record in March 2023, with net migration approaching one million. For a large part of the public opinion hostile to immigration, these figures gave the impression that immigration was out-of-control and that governments were powerless in the face of migration flows, reinforcing anger and resentment toward political elites.

Another main promise of the pro-Leave campaign turned out to be a failure. In this context, and if you add to that sluggish economic growth and rampant inflation, it is not surprising that the latest polls indicate that a majority of Britons – about 56% – say they regret leaving the European Union.

A broken society

At a time when the British are about to commemorate the ten years of the vote in favour of Brexit, feelings of regret, bitterness and betrayal prevail among the public. These sentiments fuel immense anger against political elites, resulting in a loss of confidence in both traditional parties and an unprecedented rise for the far right party Reform UK, led by Nigel Farage.

Brexit alone is not to blame for all of the UK's woes: the health crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine also partly explain the economic problems the country is facing. However, it is Brexit that has split the population into two opposing – even hostile – camps, which clash over issues ranging from immigration and ethnic and cultural diversity to the definition of national identity. These divisions have created the conditions for the emergence of genuine culture wars, which, a decade after the referendum, continue to tear British society apart.

TEXT 3

Le Monde

'10th anniversary of Brexit referendum marks event long thought impossible in the UK: The rise of the far right'

Philippe Bernard

Widespread discontent over immigration policy, which fueled the 2016 vote to leave the European Union, is now driving a surge in nationalist identity and benefiting Reform UK leader Nigel Farage, notes Le Monde's Philippe Bernard in his column.

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What is going through Britons' minds? Ten years after June 23, 2016, when 51.9% voted to leave the European Union (EU), inflicting a spectacular collective wound, the mystery has only deepened. One thing is clear: Most have changed their minds. "Bregret" – regret over Brexit – is now the dominant feeling, shared by nearly 60% of the public. If a new referendum were held today, leaving the EU would garner less than 40% of the vote. The British choice to "take back control," which thrilled [far-right leader] Marine Le Pen 10 years ago, has given way to a long ordeal.

With stunted economic growth, ongoing political crisis, isolation and loss of global influence, the promises of "Global Britain," which conjured up a return to imperial grandeur, have collided with powerlessness in the face of global conflicts. The claim that the UK could benefit from "freedom from the yoke" of EU regulations quickly faded, replaced by its opposite: "dynamic alignment" with EU rules, seen as the only way to facilitate trade. And the referendum's rallying cry, "Take back control" – aimed at ending free movement for EU citizens and curbing immigration – resulted in a sharp rise in arrivals from Commonwealth countries.

Coming just months before Donald Trump's first election, the Brexit referendum now appears as the first major manifestation of the populist wave that continues to roil the Western world. Nationalism, xenophobia, manipulation of immigration and identity issues, anti-elite demagoguery, campaign lies, the influence of social media and alliances between the very rich and the very poor – all the ingredients of Trumpism and other far-right surges were already present.

The ambiguity of 'Bregret'

But the 10-year anniversary of the Brexit referendum is more than just a date to remember; it marks a development long thought impossible in the United Kingdom: the breakthrough of the far right. The apparent shift by Britons back toward the EU masks another reality. While a large majority regret the 2016 Brexit vote, the figure most closely associated with the break, far-right leader Nigel Farage, is now at the gates of power. His party, Reform UK, leads all polls ahead of the 2029 Westminster elections. For years, the UK's single-round, first-past-the-post electoral system was seen as an insurmountable obstacle for the far right; it now works in Farage's favor, as his momentum mainly comes at the expense of the Conservatives.

How can such a paradox be explained? The answer lies in the ambiguity of "Bregret." Nearly half the electorate – 46% according to polling company More in Common – believe that "Brexit could have worked," but that "politicians have handled it badly." As a result, half of those who voted for Brexit in 2016 now support Farage's party, blaming the Conservatives, who governed from 2016 to 2024, for failing to "finish the job." This phrase refers to the inability of successive prime ministers – including Labour's Keir Starmer, who was weakened and undermined by the by-election victory of his challenger Andy Burnham on Thursday, June 18 – to reduce immigration. Starmer announced his resignation on June 22.

This discontent is fueling a surge in specifically English and white identity-driven nationalism, visible in repeated xenophobic and anti-Muslim rallies. These include events organized by neo-fascist Tommy Robinson, who shares the anti-immigrant hate vote with the more presentable Farage, who nevertheless promises to deport 600,000 foreigners in five years.

In 2016, the referendum campaign was already dominated by immigration, identified as the main motivation for pro-Brexit voters. Since then, it is as if the outcome of that vote unleashed and legitimized the xenophobic rhetoric of the far right. The bitterness, and even anger, over the negative consequences of leaving the EU have only strengthened these views. In a sense, foreigners have replaced Europe as scapegoats, serving as outlets for social anger stoked by rising inequality and insecurity, inflation and the deterioration of the health system.

A subtle analyst of British politics, *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O'Toole has compared Brexit to a "safety valve," letting off some of the pressure from English nationalism, which is marked by resentment toward all those in Scotland or Ireland – but also on the continent and elsewhere – perceived as threats to national greatness. The humiliations stemming from Brexit's failure have only exacerbated this xenophobic surge.

In a country where the memory of victorious resistance to Nazism has fostered the illusion of permanent immunity to the far right, and where Brexit stirred up claims of exceptionalism, these phenomena are swept under the rug. Certainly, the EU's massive popularity among young Britons now fuels the distant hope of a "Breturn" – a return to the EU – for a majority of Britons. The pro-European Burnham's by-election win on Thursday, achieved through the mobilization of an anti-far-right front, is an encouraging sign. But there remains a real risk that the demons of xenophobia, unleashed by Brexit and exploited by Farage, could sweep away any prospect of reconciliation with Europe.