

EU Enlargement: Lies, Damn Lies and Brexit

by rpinto_anglodeutsch - Wednesday, June 01, 2016

<http://anglodeutsch.eu/eu-enlargement-lies-damn-lies-brexiteers/>

The European Union (EU) referendum to decide whether Britain will remain in the EU is less than a month away and the “Brexiters” (those in favour of leaving or “British Exit”), complain that their opponents, the “Remain” campaign, are making every effort to scare the electorate (“Project Fear”) so as to get a vote to stay in the EU. The Brexiters cannot complain, as far as I can tell, because they are busily bending the truth while also cranking-up the pressure (“Project Fear”) on the poor average British voter.

To illustrate this let us consider the way the future enlargement of the EU is being handled.

The Balkan Horde Cometh

Ms Theresa May, the Home Secretary, was the first to bring-up the issue of EU enlargement even though she is superficially in the Remain camp: *“The states now negotiating to join the EU include Albania, Serbia and Turkey – countries with poor populations and serious problems with organised crime, corruption, and sometimes even terrorism. We have to ask ourselves, is it really right that the EU should just continue to expand, conferring upon all new member states all the rights of membership?”* (emphasis added)

Iain Duncan Smith formerly the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and one of the leading Brexiters, immediately jumped on the enlargement bashing bandwagon: *“The Home Secretary is right to warn of the dangers of countries like Albania and Turkey being allowed to join the EU. If these countries are let into the EU’s open border system it will only increase the pressure on our NHS, schools and housing. It will also vastly increase the risk of crime and terrorism on British streets.”* (emphasis added)

Boris Johnson, the former Mayor of London and the most prominent of the Brexiters, was his usual self. He said whatever came to his mind that sounded vague humorous while paying scant regard for facts. He can be relied upon to say the exact opposite at a later point in time if it suits him and can help to position him to become the next Prime Minister.

The supposedly most intellectual of the leading Brexiters, Mr Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Justice, then capped it all in [his widely reported article](#) about possible future enlargement: *“Albania is on course to join the European Union — alongside four other countries, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. The already unwieldy group of 28 is due to become a throng of 33” ... When (they) join the EU, another 88 million people will soon be eligible for NHS care and school places for their children. And what will even more immigration from the EU mean for access to housing across the UK? ... What will it mean for jobs and wages?” ... “And allowing millions more people to come here from the Balkans and Turkey is too much.”* (emphasis added)

Unusually for the Brexiters, they went on to be very specific about the [implications](#) of a future EU enlargement connected with the five countries:

- Turkey, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia could join the EU in 2020;
- They forecast 3,1 to 5,2 million extra immigrants coming to the UK from the 5 countries;
- Britain would face an influx the size of population of Scotland by 2030.

The Sun, Telegraph, Mail, Express and the other pro-Brexit newspapers widely reported the enlargement claims and forecasts. The image conjured up was one of 5,2 million extra immigrants (the population of Scotland) beating a path straight to the UK, bringing crime and terrorism to our streets, along with making all our public services unsustainable. Since the Brexiteers keep constantly suggesting that British public services are already at “breaking point” due to EU immigration, it is not hard to imagine what life would become like for the long-suffering Britons, once the Balkan hordes have descend upon the green and beautiful land in 15 years’ time. Thanks so much for the timely warning!

So I though you might be interested to read the perspective of someone who has worked in all the Central and South East European countries that are now part of the EU (e.g. Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia), as well as the five current EU accession countries.

I know that the mere fact that I have worked in all those countries, including the European Commission as a client, will mean for some that I am disqualified from commenting on the issue of EU Enlargement. They will automatically dismiss me as someone who is “benefitting from EU funding” with the implication that I must be totally biased and am somehow being paid to write something in favour of the EU. I notice this particular argument frequently emanating from the Brexit camp whenever someone has the temerity to call the case for Brexit into question. I can only say that if first hand experience of EU accession is not relevant to a debate about EU accession, then that is a bit of a Catch22, right? Perhaps it is those that know absolutely nothing about the countries or the process of enlargement that are best placed to comment (like some ministers I could mention)?

A little respect goes along way

The first point is that those countries are far from perfect. There are criminals, there is corruption, there is fraud, there is terrorism and there is much else besides such as imperfect democracies and questionable treatment of human rights in the EU accession countries. All true but if that were not the case, they would probably already be part of the EU. It could be argued that a similar litany of woes applies to Britain, Greece, Poland, Hungary... indeed all 28 EU countries; it is merely a matter of degree.

The whole point of trying to join the EU is to develop rules, regulations, policies, standards, norms, etc. through adoption of the EU’s body of rules (called the [acquis communautaire](#)) that will enable those countries to become more democratic, transparent, productive, competitive and wealthy and thus developer a higher quality of life. Yes, this does indeed happen by preparing to join and then being part of the EU: it happened in Ireland, it happened in Greece (their implosion was due to joining the EU, which is why the Greeks have absolutely no desire to leave the EU) and it happened in Britain for those that remember the country prior to joining in 1973. **For the citizens of the EU accession countries, the EU remains a bright beacon of hope.** As a consequence they are willingly going through a painful and drawn-out process of reform and change across all elements of laws, institutions and practices, so as to approximate the EU framework.

To then be singled out for misused in a British debate which tars them with the brush of all current British

public fears, is an affront for people and countries that also have their national pride. **Shame on you Brexiteers, for your smug, holier than thou attitude, as well as your lack of respect towards the people of those nations.**

Not only is it offensive to project a future EU enlargement far into the future and couple it with “crime, corruption and terrorism on British streets”, it is also a **wilful and malign mischaracterisation of the nature of the people concerned**. I have worked with and enjoyed the company and hospitality of Turks, Serbs, Macedonians, Albanians and Montenegrins (as well as Kosovars, Bosnians and others who aspire to join the EU). **I feel privileged to consider many of them to be my colleagues and friends**. My experiences have never been anything short of positive in those countries. (As an aside, it so happens that I am writing this post in Tirana; the UK Ministers in question will no doubt be relieved to find out that I have yet to be kidnapped, robbed or terrorised.) In contrast to the calculating Brexiteer portrayal of these people, I am reminded time and again of their warmth, friendliness and positivity in the face of their everyday challenges as they make the slow, painful transition towards alignment to the norms of the EU.

They are as European as the rest of the EU. **They have the right to aspire to become part of the EU, as long they fulfil the extremely rigorous conditions connected with EU accession**. That applies equally to Turkey, a small part of which is undeniably a geographical part of the Balkans and thus Europe. **The EU is not forcing any country to join: those countries wish to be part of the EU and it would be wrong to deny them the opportunity**, just as Charles de Gaulle was wrong in vetoing the UK’s efforts to join the EU, twice. The Balkans is undeniably the next, obvious phase of EU enlargement, even if the Turkey question remains highly politically charged.

Every European should be aware of the fractured history of the Balkans. It is totally indefensible for one Brexiteer after the other to chuck them all into one big basket and then proceed to attach to them the most negative stereotypes imaginable. As if the EU does not suffer from some of the same problems. There has always been more than enough crime, fraud and terrorism in the original EEC/EU6 and there still is in the enlarged EU28, as far as I can tell.

I doubt that the Brexiteers have been to the countries that they so disdainfully dismiss. **For Europe to turn its back its Balkan neighbours (including Turkey) would be a mistake of epic proportions** (let us not forget Europe twiddling its thumbs during the collapse of the ex-Yugoslav Republic and its aftermath) **that would reverberate through decades to come**. The EU understands this intrinsically, hence the process of Balkan enlargement. Ms May, Mr Gove, Mr Duncan Smith and Mr Johnson: **your cheap political points are calculated to instil a dreaded fear of those countries, those people and the process of EU enlargement**. In my eyes, all of you have forfeited your status of being serious, thoughtful and responsible politicians.

Playing a different tune, again

It is important to stress that **Britain is now playing a very different tune in terms of its position on EU accession**. For decades the UK was one of staunchest advocates of EU enlargement. In 2004, it allowed all new EU countries (Poland, Slovakia, etc.) to have access to the UK’s labour market a full seven years before it was required by EU [transition provisions](#) to do so. This is because the British economy was booming at the time. Many EU citizens responded to the UK’s invitation and came to the UK, thus maintaining the growth of the British economy. However, when the global economy faltered badly during

2007/8, the very same people which Britain had encouraged to come, who had paid their taxes and who had contributed to our wealth generation, were suddenly [persona non grata](#).

First there was Labour's "[British Jobs for British Workers](#)", then UKIP's swift rise shuffled the cards of British politics, leading directly to the decision to hold the EU referendum. The longer this debate has gone on, the more it has become divisive, resulting in a no holds barred onslaught on EU immigrants, emboldened by the Brexiteers insistence on overcoming the deadening hand of political correctness and determination to call a spade a spade. But the simple fact is that **the persistent characterisation of EU immigrants** coming to the UK for [benefit tourism](#), for social [housing](#), for [health tourism](#) and all the rest of the claims about public services such as [shortages of school places](#) (all distorted - follow the links) **amounts to scapegoating people who are hard-working, contributing to the wealth creation of the country and perfectly within their rights as EU citizens**. Blaming all of Britain's long standing public service woes upon the EU and EU citizens, apart from being untrue, lacks class, is unfair and does not reflect the values that Britain and Britons have historically stood for.

British public services have been run down by decades' worth of neglect, underfunding and lack of political will, which is the reason why housing, education, health, transport, etc. are in the state that they are. It has something to do with the recent levels net immigration, granted, but **it is primarily to do with consistent and systemic public policy failures and insufficient funding, over a period of several decades**. It is politicians such as Mr Gove, Mr Duncan Smith and others in Government who were responsible for those public services. The current situation reflects long-term political neglect combined with an unprecedented degree of austerity which is squeezing British citizens beyond the point where the pips squeak. The losers in this process are first and foremost the non-working population, followed by those on low incomes, followed by the middle-income population. **All are feeling the pinch, but it is the EU and the EU citizens are feeling the fall-out.**

It is hypocritical to invite EU immigrants with open arms (certainly during early to mid-2000) when all boats were rising, and then promptly turn our back on the same people, once the recession came along and life becomes harder for most. This is not for the first time. Think back to when the Afro-Caribbean population was similarly invited to keep the British economy ticking over and then made to feel somewhat less welcome in the 1970s and 1980s, when the economic tide turned (as it invariably does). History is repeating itself, though it is no longer a racial matter. Indeed, because they are being squeezed hard by the economic situation combined with the effects of austerity, some of the harshest critics are some of the non-EU immigrants: irony of ironies. But the fact is that by being part of the EU, the EU immigrants who are being derided by the Brexiteers have full and equal rights to be in this country. The very same rights as the very large number of Britons living throughout the other 27 EU countries have. **The issue is how to deal with the public policy issues, none of which are new, not to scapegoat some people while blithely continuing to sit on our hands, rather than responding to changing patterns of demand and supply in public services, including housing.**

Get your facts right

Coming back to the main point, Ms May, Mr Duncan Smith and Mr Gove and others have also got their facts wrong about EU accession.

The five candidate countries comprise an overall population of 88 million, of which Turkey makes up 75

million. Four out of the five are a mere drop in the ocean in the scale of things. If they were to join the EU, they would add 12 million or 2.3% to the population of the EU (currently 508 million). How adding four countries would turn 28 into a “throng” is up to Mr Gove to explain. The greatest concern would undoubtedly be the possibility of adding Turkey, set to become the most populous country in Europe (but see below), potentially adding 7% to the overall population of the EU at some point in the future. But the issue of Turkey has little to do with population and a lot to do with religion. It is not by accident that **Turkey has been an Associate Member of the EEC/EU since 1963 - it has been waiting in the EU’s antechamber for 53 years!** How the Brexiteers can suggest that Turkey will suddenly become a full member of the EU by 2020 stretches credulity. But the Brexiteers’ position undoubtedly has little to do with “Project Fear” or hounding Britons into voting for Brexit by suggesting that the Balkan horde cometh.

The EU has learned from the accession process in 2004 and especially 2007, when Bulgaria and Romania joined. The progress (or lack of it) being made by all five existing Candidate Countries is regularly assessed and widely available for all to see in the [EC website](#). A reading of the annual progress reports makes it clear that **negotiations have only started with Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, but not with Albania and Macedonia**. It is clear that **none of them is making particularly rapid progress and accession will take years, possibly decades**, for them to be assessed as having made sufficient progress for the European Commission to recommend that they be accepted as new members of the EU.

The suggestion that they will all join the EU any time soon, such as 2020, is far-fetched, with the possible exception of Montenegro, a country of 600,000 inhabitants. Turkey’s ongoing struggles with the basics (democracy, human rights, media freedom, etc.) mean that it has an extremely long path ahead before it reaches the point of accession readiness: 2020 is completely out of the question at the current rate of progress. The suggestion that all of them, including two that have not even stated officially negotiating accession, could join the EU by 2020 is simply **pie in the Brexit sky**.

28 accession vetoes

The Brexiteers are ruthlessly stoking-up and exploiting people’s fears by projecting an unrealistic scenario 15 years from now. This calculated fearmongering is as manipulative as it is irresponsible for several reasons:

1. None of the countries is making sufficient progress to be ready for accession by 2020;
2. The European Commission has learned from previous rounds of accession and is monitoring progress much more careful than in previous rounds of EU accession;
3. Two of the countries have not even started official negotiations;
4. Each of the 28 EU member countries has a veto on EU enlargement (despite what Brexiteers, such as [Ms Penny Mordaunt](#) may wrongly claim);
5. There has been a sea-change in public mood towards further enlargement, especially after Bulgaria and Romania, though Croatia’s accession is barely mentioned;
6. Some EU counties have pledged to hold a referendum on enlargement connected with Turkey, thus adding a huge degree of further uncertainty about its future accession.

The Brexiteers’ arguments are plain wrong and they are fully aware of this. The same goes for their diagnosis of the role of EU immigration in relation to the breakdown of British public services. The same

applies to the claim that the EU costs Britain GBP 350 million per week. And yet [the Brexiteers keep pushing the misleading buttons](#). They have run out of valid economic arguments and the only Joker left in the pack is the current and future EU immigration card.

7 year transition provision

The Brexiteers are wrong in their estimated scenarios of possible future immigration from the five EU accession countries. Because in addition to the arduous process of accession connected with the *acquis communautaire*, there is the small matter of getting 28 unanimous “yes” votes to accession, followed by the referendums that any of the 28 nations may choose to hold. These multiple barriers undermine the scaremongering.

Even if the EU accession countries, especially Turkey, get through all those hurdles, there is also the [EU's 7 year transition provision](#), which means that each new country that joins the EU, must wait up to 7 years before its population acquires the right to live and work in the rest of the EU countries.

Even in the extremely unlikely scenario that all five countries join the EU by 2020, it would be 2028 before any of them would have the right move, live and work in the UK, unless Britain chooses unilaterally to suspend the 7 year rule, as it did in 2004 but not in 2007. For 5,2 million additional EU immigrants to move wholesale from these five countries to the Britain is yet another stretch of the Brexiteers' febrile imagination as the 23 of June 2016 approaches.

When it comes to EU enlargement, there are lies, damn lies and Brexit.

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