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## Re-imagining Space, Scale and Sovereignty: The United Kingdom and "Brexit"

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## Chapter 7

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# Re-imagining Scale, Space, and Sovereignty

## The United Kingdom and “Brexit”

*John Clarke*

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We have voted to leave the European Union and become a fully-independent, sovereign country. We will do what independent, sovereign countries do. We will decide for ourselves how we control immigration. And we will be free to pass our own laws.

(Theresa May, October 2016)<sup>1</sup>

The United Kingdom’s referendum vote to leave the European Union on June 23, 2016 was a profoundly shocking political moment, one whose effects are still reverberating across national, regional, and global scales. In this context, however, what is most significant about the moment of Brexit (British Exit) is the way that the campaign and the result brought into being new imaginings of space, scale, and sovereignty. The slogan “Take back control” condensed unexpectedly popular conceptions of *space* (restoring the Great to Great Britain); *scale* (rejecting the supranational – European – level while projecting a flat and friendly globe); and *sovereignty* (understood as national decision making). In this chapter, I will first explore some of the dynamics of the Brexit moment, treating the Leave campaign as an insurgent nationalist-populist movement. Then I will draw out the important ways in which this nationalist-populism made established conceptions of space, scale, and sovereignty contestable in the process of demanding exit from the European Union. Finally, I will explore some of the political problems arising when the populist promise of “taking back control” meets “governmental time,” creating a struggle to materialize these new imaginaries that brings new conflicts and contradictions in its wake.

### **The Brexit Moment: A Populist Interruption?**

It is increasingly difficult to remember, given what has been unleashed, that the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU was invented as a political device through which then Prime Minister David Cameron believed he could end the long- running internal conflicts within the Conservative Party over “Europe” (note that in the UK, “Europe” is typically metonymic with the European Union). This proved to be a major political miscalculation as a

populist Vote Leave campaign (with some Conservative ministers among its central figures) took on “the establishment” (Vote Remain) and achieved a substantial and unexpected victory (51.9% against 48.1% of a 72% turnout). As one of the leading Leave figures put it, when celebrating the UK’s “Independence Day”:

We have broken free from a failing political union. We have managed, the little people, the ordinary people who have ignored all the threats that have come from big business and big politics and it has been a huge, amazing exercise in democracy.

(Nigel Farage, *Daily Mail*, June 24, 2016)<sup>2</sup>

Brexit articulated a variety of economic, social, and political disaffections around the empowering promise to “Take back control.” The Leave campaign dramatically juxtaposed the “abandoned” ordinary people of Britain with the affluent, liberal, metropolitan, cosmopolitan middle classes/elite/establishment. As a variety of commentators have argued, a cluster of dynamics around globalization, Europeanization, and neoliberalization have played a major role in producing the economic unevenness (especially the experience of de-industrialization and stalled incomes), the social dislocations, and the managerialist political culture of the last three decades (e.g. Piketty 2016; Streeck 2016; Watkins 2016).

Elsewhere (Clarke and Newman 2017), I have argued at greater length that this moment of Brexit condenses a longer conjuncture in which these multiple tendencies – and their accumulating failures and fractures, crises, and contradictions – have underpinned a growing public detachment from the disciplinary demands of austerity politics. This accompanied an increasingly skeptical distancing from the political promises of a long-delayed future when sacrifices would be rewarded. This is the unstable ground of what Jeremy Gilbert has called “disaffected consent,” in particular the sense “that Labour and the left in general could not be trusted to defend their capacity to consume, and that no other compensation for the negative consequences of neoliberalisation could viably be offered by any government” (Gilbert 2015: 39). In my view, Brexit *condensed* a variety of discontents, enabled by the political form – the referendum – in which norms of party political attachment and discipline were significantly weakened.

The Leave campaign successfully wove these experiences of dislocation and disaffection into a potent story of how “Europe,” aided by the UK elite, had demoralized a once proud nation, had undermined a viable way of life, and had made Britain a space dominated by aliens (Brussels bureaucrats, migrants, and refugees) – people out of place, and who had no place being in Britain. The campaign operated in a potent populist register (“telling it like it is” versus “politically correct speak”) through which an insurgent nationalism was evoked – dramatizing a nation always beset by its (racialized) others. This

campaign successfully mobilized a coalition of heterogeneous social forces through this nationalist-populist repertoire. Indeed, the campaign for Brexit worked on and produced a variety of social, economic, and political fractures. Rather than any straightforward consolidation of structural power, the Leave campaign divided sections of capital (not least the finance capital associated with the City of London, where many companies are now contemplating the costs of relocating after Brexit) and posed threats to established markets for many exporting companies. Equally, the middle classes were divided, in large part between economically and culturally traditional fractions (the “suburbs and shires”) against those new segments based in public service locations with more “cosmopolitan” dispositions (Dorling 2016). Although older segments of the working class (in the increasingly de-industrialized “heartlands”) predominantly voted Leave, younger people, typically in more contingent forms of work and training, tended to vote for Remain. Other social divisions were equally striking – those over 45 were more likely to vote Leave, as were those without a higher education qualification and those who did not hold a passport. Perhaps most significantly for the spatial, scalar, and sovereignty issues to be explored here, while England (53.4%), and Wales (52.5%) supported Leave, both Scotland (62%) and Northern Ireland (55.8%) supported Remain. As a result, the Brexit moment demands a careful analysis of how blocs and alliances were (more or less temporarily) formed, and how different interests, political-cultural dispositions, and “structures of feeling” (Williams 1978) led different fractions toward Leave and Remain. It also poses questions about the potential stability or longevity of this particular bloc, given the complexity of its social constitution.

Most analytic and political attention has (rightly) focused on the Leave campaign, both because it was successful and because it represented a dramatic interruption of “politics as usual.” The space beyond normal party alignments and discipline created conditions of possibility for a distinctive populist campaign, claiming to speak for a forgotten or abandoned people, and doing so in a potent nationalist-xenophobic and racist mode of address that identified sovereignty with the control of migration. It would be erroneous to read off popular sentiments directly from this ventriloquial voicing. Rather the campaign attempted to constitute a People out of very diverse discontents, dissatisfactions, and desires that included racist and misogynist imaginings of an endangered “way of life,” a sense of political, economic, and cultural abandonment, and, not least, a growing distance from “politics as usual.” As Insa Koch (see also Davies 2016; Evans 2017) commented from ethnographic work in London:

For many of my interlocutors and friends, what made Brexit different from an ordinary election was that they perceived it as an event that would make a difference in their lives in a way that standard electoral processes do not. This is because many saw Brexit as an opportunity

to move beyond the current system by saying no to government tout court. Citizens' engagement with the referendum constitutes an attempt to moralize politics by inserting everyday moralities into electoral processes.

(Koch 2017: n.p.)

Similar sentiments of dismay and despair might be found among Remain voters, not least in strongly Europhile Scotland (see e.g. Knight 2017). But for both Brexit supporters and Remainers, the referendum certainly broke with "politics as usual" in multiple ways and its effects are still working their way through the body politic as established parties struggle to realign themselves with the fractures, antagonisms, and possibilities that emerged in and through the moment of Brexit. Each of the leading UK parties experienced considerable turmoil, including leadership changes, internal conflicts, and splits around how to respond to the Brexit vote. But in this chapter, I will focus on some rather different realignments that emerged through Brexit.

### **Making Space, Scale, and Sovereignty Contestable**

The campaign to Leave the EU succeeded in revealing the contingent, contradictory, and contested character of the normalized spatial and scalar orderings of the existing national, supranational, and international regime, not least by articulating a vision of restored national sovereignty. In the process, the campaign articulated new imaginaries of scale and space that reworked important tropes of proximity and distance, borders and boundaries, and lines of affiliation and antagonism. One of the leading Leave Campaigners, Boris Johnson, expressed this potential when addressing voters:

You have it in your hands to transform Britain's current democratic arrangements for the better. Now is the time to believe in ourselves and in what Britain can do. Of course we can continue to provide leadership and support for Europe – but inter-governmentally, outside the supranational EU system. I hope you will vote Leave and take back control of this great country's destiny. This chance will not come again in our lifetimes and I pray we do not miss it.<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of the campaign was a promise that voting Leave would restore the (imagined) spatial and scalar unity of people, place, and polity that was at the heart of the classical nation-state imaginary (Clarke 2005). In particular, restoring national control over borders would mean preserving the people and securing the place; while repatriating law-making would restore a sovereign polity and ensure "British laws for British people."

The struggle over Brexit thus involved competing *imaginaries* of space, scale, and sovereignty. The Remain campaign defended the existing order of things – the prevailing institutionalizations of space, scale, and sovereignty – as necessary, as the only way of being in the modern world (or of surviving the dangers of the modern world). Although profoundly naturalized and sedimented in a whole variety of institutional forms, relationships, and practices, this too was also an imaginary – a projection of the EU and the UK’s membership as a harmonious, sensible, and profitable ordering of a potentially fraught and dangerous world. I want to pause for a moment over the word “imaginaries,” since all three conceptual terms – space, scale, and sovereignty – are conventionally treated as objective conditions and properties of the social and political field. Space – the geography of places; scale – the organizations of levels (from the domestic to the global); and sovereignty – the authority exercised over territory, are usually represented (in academic as well as popular discourse) as stable elements, institutionalized in orderly relations between people, places, and polities. The significance of addressing them as imaginaries aims to make visible two critical issues. First, political struggles take place in part through the articulation of imaginaries – more or less fantastic projections of how the world and its elements should be ordered (see *inter alia*, Cameron and Palan 2004; Jessop 2013). Second, approaching them as imaginaries makes the constructed, contingent, and contestable character of institutionalized formations more readily visible. Indeed, one of the great achievements of the Leave campaign in the UK was to reveal the constructed and contingent character of existing scalar arrangements and the campaign used this, in turn, to demonstrate the political thinness of appeals to their claimed necessity and inevitability. As I will explore later, the elaboration of imaginaries is only one part of what Collin and Ferrare (2015) call the “material-discursive work” of rescaling, but it is certainly critical to the political struggle to mobilize and articulate blocs in conflicts over political power and direction.

The Leave campaign emphasized how membership of the EU distorted space, particularly in the impossibility of the nation controlling its own borders (given the EU’s commitment to freedom of movement as one of the four foundational freedoms). Similarly, the EU distorted the “proper” scale of things, having become a “super state” that undermined the national level (to which people were most “naturally” attached). These distortions came together in the inappropriate surrendering of sovereignty from the nation to the EU (and its associated democratic deficits). In contrast with the organic unity of the nation-state, the European Union was represented as artificial, an invented imposition and a disordering of the natural/proper ordering of space, scale, and sovereignty. Like most current nationalist-populist political projects, Vote Leave was “restorationist” in its imagining of the nation – built

around a nativist fantasy of restoring an imagined past of imperial greatness. However, it is important to note that in this discourse of the nation, the terms of reference are unstable: the United Kingdom is treated as more or less equivalent to Britain (Great or otherwise) which is almost the same as England. This instability has become politically consequential, as I will explore later.

The post-Brexit world was projected in a series of representations of space, scale, and sovereignty and how they should be combined. The cornerstone for this was certainly the “independent, sovereign nation,” free to make its choices. But with the (anticipated) disconnection from the EU, the world was differently imagined – it is a flat (not hierarchically ordered) space where relationships revert to being inter-national:

But Brexit should not just prompt us to think about our new relationship with the European Union. It should make us think about our role in the wider world. It should make us think of Global Britain, a country with the self-confidence and the freedom to look beyond the continent of Europe and to the economic and diplomatic opportunities of the wider world. Because we know that the referendum was not a vote to turn in [on] ourselves, to cut ourselves off from the world. It was a vote for Britain to stand tall, to believe in ourselves, to forge an ambitious and optimistic new role in the world.

(Theresa May speaking at a Conservative Party Conference at The ICC, Birmingham, October 2, 2016)<sup>4</sup>

This conception of “Global Britain” linked the Leave Campaign and the orientation of the Conservative government after Brexit. Unlike recent nationalist-populisms elsewhere (including the Trump campaign) what was articulated was not an economic-nationalist protectionism, but a confident reassertion of global space and scale. Britain, as Liam Fox (minister for trade) put it, is “open for business as never before.” He went on to claim that:

We are essentially at the heart of the new campaign for global trade liberalization... We have a history as a great trading nation and, as we forge a new global role for ourselves we will carry the banner for free trade.<sup>5</sup>

This is a potent scalar and spatial imaginary – one that capitalizes on a collective narrative of mercantilism (Britain as a great trading nation) in combination with an interesting temporal blurring of the past/present/future of globalization. It is an imaginary in which political sovereignty and economic power coincide in making Britain great, and will enable the country to regain its “proper place in the world”:

A truly Global Britain is possible, and it is in sight. And it should be no surprise that it is. Because we are the fifth biggest economy in the world. Since 2010 we have grown faster than any economy in the G7. And we attract a fifth of all foreign investment in the EU. We are the biggest foreign investor in the United States. We have more Nobel Laureates than any country outside America. We have the best intelligence services in the world, a military that can project its power around the globe, and friendships, partnerships and alliances in every continent. We have the greatest soft power in the world, we sit in exactly the right time zone for global trade, and our language is the language of the world.

(Theresa May speech to Conservative Party Conference at The ICC, Birmingham, October 2, 2016)<sup>6</sup>

This view of space and scale has an unexpectedly intimate quality: this is a world of *friends*, not just partnerships and alliances. In these Brexit accounts, space, scale, and sovereignty are constantly bundled together. Once the artificial intrusion of the European level has been taken out of the question, the UK – a.k.a. Global Britain/Great Britain – can take its proper place in the world. Sovereignty forms the point of intersection of these spatial and scalar re-imaginings – and it is the question of sovereignty that has, as we shall see, continued to unsettle space and scale.

### **Materializing Imaginaries: Disorders of Space, Scale, and Sovereignty**

The campaign for Brexit has subsequently encountered the difficult challenge of materializing its potent imaginaries of space, scale, and sovereignty. All scaling/rescaling political projects project themselves through imaginaries – representations of a desired ordering of things. But such projects also have to face the challenge of making those imaginaries come true in practice. This involves dismantling the existing institutionalized formations: embodied in treaties, maps, legislation, governmental ordering, sets of habituated relationships, practices, and places, and forms of affiliation and attachment. And it requires the enactment and instantiation of the new order in the same registers of institutionalization and normalization. This struggle to make Brexit come true created an encounter between two types of temporality. On the one hand, the promise of Brexit was formulated in what Taguieff has called the distinctive temporality of populism, in which historical time is replaced by a continuous and immediate present, in a promise to efface “any distance between all desires and their realisation” (2007: 16; my translation). Here we find the immediacy of Farage’s proclaimed “Independence Day” and the public insistence that Brexit must be delivered, no matter what obstacles might appear. On the other hand, there has been a return



to what might be called “governmental time” in which treaties need to be remade, economic and political relationships need to be reconstructed, and timetables, schedules, and plans need to be established – all of which insert historical time between the referendum vote and the materialization of the decision in a new ordering of things (there are other questions of temporality at stake in Brexit, too: see e.g. Davies 2016; Green 2016; and Knight 2017). The efforts to make Brexit materialize have brought about new *disorders* of space, scale, and sovereignty as a variety of social, political, governmental, and constitutional problems have emerged. Here I will only focus on the issues that begin from the question of how united the United Kingdom might be. The UK has always been a complex political and constitutional formation that combines four political-cultural spaces (England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland). In the last 20 years, that formation became more complex as a result of power-sharing arrangements in the North of Ireland which softened the border between the North and the Republic of Ireland, and the creation of forms of devolved government for Scotland and Wales. Recent Scottish politics were marked by the rise to power of the Scottish National Party (SNP) which led to an unsuccessful independence referendum in 2014.

Brexit has further destabilized the spatial and scalar arrangements of the United Kingdom in several ways. First, it marked a degree of political-cultural separation between England and Wales on the one hand, and Scotland and Northern Ireland which both supported Remain. This split has been manifested both in discontent about the perceived effects of English dominance of the UK and, more pointedly, in debates in Scotland about instituting a new referendum for Independence such that Scotland could (attempt to) remain in the EU as a separate nation. The spatial and scalar problem of maintaining a United Kingdom becomes more complex still when the case of Northern Ireland is addressed. One outcome of the peace process in the 1990s (and the resulting power-sharing governmental arrangements) was the erasure of the former “hard border” between the North and the Republic (see Gilmore 2017). All three governments involved (the UK, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Republic) are reluctant to restore a “hard border” at what would, after the UK leaves the EU, be the frontier of the United Kingdom (the Republic being a member of the EU). Yet control of “our borders” (especially against the flow of migrants from and through the EU) was a key element of the Leave campaign. In a somewhat surreal re-imagining, the current proposal is that the “hard border” between the UK and the EU would be at the edges of the Republic of Ireland (McDonald 2016). While this would not be the first externalization of an international national border (a policy much practiced by the UK and the EU itself), this proposal attributes surprising mobility to borders given the political and affective investment in them as markers of the nation/sovereignty.

However, it is the issue of sovereignty that has proved most disorderly after Brexit. The referendum produced much political turmoil, not least in contests over the leadership of the Conservative, Labour, and UKIP (UK Independence) parties. The Conservative party in government found itself the inheritor of the result and its new leader, Theresa May, announced that “Brexit means Brexit” in the face of political disaffection within her own party, as well as within Parliament more widely. The government would act, she insisted, to trigger Article 50 (the legal device to begin disentangling the UK and the EU), but this announcement produced a constitutional conflict about the form and location of sovereignty. This came to center on whether it was the government or Parliament that could trigger Article 50, with the prime minister insisting that it was the government’s choice while many MPs and legal commentators argued that it was a decision for Parliament.

In a dramatic intervention, an entrepreneur and philanthropist, Gina Miller, sought a judicial review of this issue, and won an initial ruling that the responsibility was Parliament’s, rather than the government’s. The judgment triggered a storm of outrage, with Miller being subjected to death and rape threats, castigated as a member of the liberal/cosmopolitan London elite and denounced for not being British (she was born in British Guyana). Meanwhile, the three judges who made the judgment were also denounced as “enemies of the people,” who were thwarting the popular will. In one of the more constitutionally accurate, if politically puzzling, twists, they were also criticized for being “unelected”.<sup>7</sup> Much of this attack was led by sections of the tabloid press, who have identified a rich stream of popular rage to be tapped in the idea of “sovereignty” (there are significant echoes of this theme in other European right-wing movements, such as the *Lega Nord* in Italy and the French *Front National* – see Coman 2016).

Here we can see the instability of “sovereignty,” both as an imaginary and as an institutionalized arrangement. Almost everyone finds it possible to agree on the result of the Referendum (even if they did not like it): the majority of voters voted to Leave. But after that, things have become more tangled: is sovereignty expressed solely in the referendum vote? What is the relation between plebiscitary and parliamentary sovereignty, since the vote was nominally about the return of sovereignty to Parliament from Brussels? How does the referendum relate to the constitution (including the constitutional separation of powers)? And finally, how many referenda might there be: could the “people” be asked to think again (e.g. when the terms of Brexit are known)?

The singularity of Brexit – “Brexit means Brexit” – is passionately defended and in the same populist/anti-elitist register of the campaign. This “muscular populism” denounces any attempt to undermine the “popular will” in a recurrently racist and misogynistic repertoire (see the treatment of Gina Miller). It also uses a variety of vitalist masculine tropes: inviting opponents to “stop whining,” “suck it up,” “grow some balls,” and so on. What the tabloid press calls the “Remoaners” are seen as willing to try any

ploy to defeat, delay, or deflect the decision to Leave. In this process, the governmental complexity of locating and enacting sovereignty is trumped by the clarion declaration that “we won.” The political problem, faced by the government especially, is how to negotiate governmental complexity against the populist simplification (and its conception of temporality). As I was drafting this chapter, Nigel Farage (recurrent leader of UKIP, key figure in the Leave campaign, and new friend of Donald Trump) issued a warning about “unfinished business” which I quote at length because it identifies this problematic relationship between popular sovereignty and political time and indicates its potential consequences:

Mr Farage told the gathering: “We’ve got a problem. In America the revolution is total. Not only have the people spoken and won, but the old administration, Obama and all those ghastly people, are out and the Trump people are in.

“In this country, the people have spoken, but the same players have just been shuffled around the chess board and we are still being run by the career professional political class.

“I am not sure what is going to happen over the course of the next couple of years but I suspect there’s another big seismic shock in British politics perhaps going to come at the next election.

“I suspect that the Conservative Party is not fit for the legacy of Brexit. I suspect there is going to be a genuine realignment of British politics over the course of the next three or four years.

“It is unfinished business – the people have spoken but the establishment don’t want to listen. There are great battles to be fought and I’m going to go on fighting those battles.”

He said: “When people look back in 100 or 200 years, 2016 will be seen as one of the great historic years – a year of big political revolution.

“Brexit was the first brick knocked out of the establishment wall and then look what we got on 8 November. The election of ‘The Donald’ was something of a completely different order.”

To cheers he said: “For those of you who aren’t particularly happy with what happened in 2016, I’ve got some really bad news for you – it’s going to get a bloody sight worse next year.”

(Nigel Farage, November 24, 2016)<sup>8</sup>

### **Unfinished Business: Remaking Space, Scale, and Sovereignty**

Farage’s warning captures two important dynamics. First, it speaks to the dislocatory effects of populist time on political and governmental processes through which time elapsed becomes represented as willful delay. Second, it points to the (potential) global scope of this anti-establishment conception

of popular sovereignty as a politics of rescaling. Farage named Trump, but he might also have pointed to other European movements which have learned lessons from the moment of Brexit – the *Lega Nord* and the *Front National*, for example – even if these have (so far) not achieved similar political success.

In many ways, then, the UK referendum reveals the significance of scalar and spatial imaginaries within contemporary politics of rescaling. Their salience is intimately entangled with the imaginary of sovereignty as a potent foundation for projects that seek to secure or re-establish the projected unity of people, place, and polity. But the protracted Brexit “moment” also reveals important political and analytical issues about the problems of *realizing* such imaginaries in political and governmental terms. The imaginary of national sovereignty in the UK setting has revealed problems about the form and location of sovereignty, about the formation of the nation, and about the temporalities of politics. Brexit also raises analytical and political questions about other possibilities of re-imagining space, scale, and sovereignty: how might these formations be re-imagined otherwise and for what other political projects? These questions are entangled with other problems about what the prevailing restorationist fantasies about the unity of people and place do to actually existing formations of the public (and the uses of public space). In that context, the critical uncertainty centers on the “Brexit bloc”: to what extent can this become, or be made into, a stable political formation whose divisions and differences can be overcome or neutralized? How might the disaffections, discontents, and desires contained there (and among its opponents) be reconfigured for a different politics?

## Notes

- 1 See also [www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-37535527](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-37535527)
- 2 See [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3657627/What-Nigel-Farage-s-life-s-work-comes-fruit-coming-stunning-Brexit-vote-lauds-new-dawn-Britain-outside-EU.html#ixzz4Cngl7Zj9](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3657627/What-Nigel-Farage-s-life-s-work-comes-fruit-coming-stunning-Brexit-vote-lauds-new-dawn-Britain-outside-EU.html#ixzz4Cngl7Zj9)
- 3 See [www.express.co.uk/news/politics/681706/Boris-Johnson-vote-Brexit-take-back-control](http://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/681706/Boris-Johnson-vote-Brexit-take-back-control) (June 20, 2016).
- 4 Theresa May: see <http://press.conservatives.com/post/151239411635/prime-minister-britain-after-brexit-a-vision-of>
- 5 See [www.express.co.uk/news/uk/715030/Liam-Fox-EU-risks-harm-block-British-trade-Brexit-theresa-may-iain-duncan-brussels](http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/715030/Liam-Fox-EU-risks-harm-block-British-trade-Brexit-theresa-may-iain-duncan-brussels)
- 6 Theresa May, speech to Conservative Party Conference, October 2, 2016: see <http://press.conservatives.com/post/151239411635/prime-minister-britain-after-brexit-a-vision-of-a-Global-Britain>
- 7 See [www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/nov/04/enemies-of-the-people-british-newspapers-react-judges-brexit-ruling](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/nov/04/enemies-of-the-people-british-newspapers-react-judges-brexit-ruling)
- 8 See [www.bbc.com/news/uk-38089702](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-38089702)

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