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The Dilemma of Brexit: Hard Choices in the Narrow Context of British Foreign Policy Traditions

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Abstract

Brexit threatens to disrupt the fabric of British foreign policy thinking. For decades policymakers identified membership of the European Community as one of two pillars of British influence (the other being the 'Special Relationship' with the United States). Together, they allowed Britain to exercise power on a global as well as regional scale. These assumptions were repeated so often that the UK was regularly criticised for lacking policy imagination and avoiding hard choices when the interests of Europe and the United States conflicted. Brexit presents an unavoidable dilemma for policymakers as they chart a new course for British foreign policy. Interpretivism, as set out by Bevir and Rhodes (2003), offers a route to understanding how actors interpret and respond to such dilemmas, via reference to traditions. This article uses their approach to examine the expression of beliefs about Brexit and British foreign policy. In particular, it focuses on two datasets, one a 'control sample' of commentary since 2016, the other, the parliamentary debates on the first EU Withdrawal Bill in December 2018 and January 2019. We find a contrasting willingness to evoke traditions in a substantive fashion to understand and justify political choices. In particular, parliamentarians utilise one particular tradition, pragmatism, to marginalise the expression of abstract belief. In the process, they reduce discussion to a technocratic exercise that is unable to manage the conflicts Brexit has brought about. Meanwhile, those MPs that are most creative in their expression of traditions tend to be from smaller regional parties or on the political periphery. The resulting deadlock is evidence of the importance of traditions to interpreting and managing dilemmas of social change.

Brexit posed a series of fundamental dilemmas for British foreign policy. Once the British public had voted in 2016 to leave the European Union, policymakers faced pressures to re-evaluate from first principles the nature of British identity, its international relationships, its patterns of global interactions, and its priorities (Beech, 2020; Blagden, 2017). Such a call

would represent a major intellectual, emotional and practical challenge to policy elites. Membership of the European Community had been an organising principle of Britain's international interactions, with the UK coordinating voting in the UN General Assembly with EU members, acting as one with other member states over WTO disputes, sharing diplomatic missions and diplomats via the European External Action Service (EEAS) and arriving at joint responses to regional and global crises (Whitman, 2016; 2016b; Martill and Sus, 2018). As part of the largest economic bloc in the world, the UK's voice was perceived to carry greater weight in global counsels. EU membership was also believed to increase UK influence in the United States, since it offered the US a conduit to understanding and shaping European policies (Oliver and Williams, 2016). Removing such a crucial pillar of foreign policy therefore constituted a severe shock to established modes of thinking.

This article aims to explore how parliamentary elites wrestled with the dilemmas that Brexit wrought. To do so, it employs an interpretivist analysis, following Bevir and Rhodes (Bevir 1999; Bevir and Rhodes, 2003; Bevir, 2005). This approach, I argue, is most attuned to understanding how individuals interpret and respond to dilemmas in political and social life. In particular, Bevir and Rhodes' emphasis on the fluidity of beliefs and the importance of individual agency in creating meaning, via the use of traditions of thought, allows an appreciation of how change is managed and new ways of thinking are brought into existence. This holds, I assert, even in a 'hard case' such as British foreign policy, where abstract thinking is marginalised and policymakers resist the very idea, let alone practice, of making choices between divergent policy beliefs. Indeed, it is the emphasis on one tradition in particular, pragmatism, (generally interpreted as a focus on the practical details of policies), that inhibits the emergence of a more coherent web of beliefs about future British foreign policy (Coles, 2000: 48-9; Honeyman, 2017; Beech, 2011).

The argument proceeds as follows: it begins with an outline of interpretivism and the particular approach of Bevir and Rhodes. It then applies this mode of inquiry to a control group of commentary about Brexit since the 2016 vote. This sample provides a useful point of comparison with the later analysis of parliamentary debates. In demonstrating the potential scope for creativity in interpreting British foreign policy meanings, the narrow parameters of parliamentary discussion are brought into sharper relief. We then turn to the first EU withdrawal agreement debates from December 2018 to January 2019 as an

exemplary case study of how UK parliamentarians express beliefs about foreign policy. The eight days of debate on this bill represented an extraordinary amount of parliamentary time dedicated to discussing a single policy issue, especially one that had foreign as well as domestic implications. It resulted in the largest loss for a government in a parliamentary vote in British history and, as such, it is a pivotal moment for British politics. Analysis of this debate offers a useful insight into how parliamentarians understood and responded to the dilemma of Brexit.

What we find is a largely technocratic discussion, supported and legitimised with reference to the dominant tradition of pragmatism. Although there are speakers who seek to evoke other frames of understanding, they are generally from opposition figures, particularly smaller, nationalist parties from the regions. Whilst conjuring pragmatism might have facilitated greater compromise and a moderated tone of debate, its effect seems also to have been that larger questions of identity, ideology, and future policy were marginalised. In that light, it is little wonder that the Commons was unable to come to agreement. It also highlights the difficulty UK foreign policymakers will have in making significant and hard choices about future British foreign policy unless they are prepared to openly contest the principles which underpin them.

Interpretivism

As noted above, Brexit represents a significant challenge to prevailing expressions of belief about British foreign policy that have endured for decades (McCourt, 2011; Chalmers, 2019; Broad and Daddow, 2010). Bevir and Rhodes have outlined an approach to analysing the dynamics of political understanding that might have been designed for just such an event (Bevir 2011). For them political change has to be interpreted and enacted by individuals. These individuals are situated agents, who respond to dilemmas with reference to traditions of thought. Focusing on individuals is not meant to deny the existence of social influences; however, since individuals think and act differently in response to the same social context, it follows that agency is possible and “Individuals can reason creatively in ways that are not fixed, nor even strictly limited by, the social contexts or discourses in which they exist” (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 32). They employ the concept of traditions to distinguish their understanding of social context from other, more structuralist concepts like episteme, discourse, or ideology, which they perceive as often framed as “constitutive of

intersubjectivity rather than emergent properties of it” (Bevir, 2005: 23). Rather traditions are only meaningful through their intersubjective production, through writing, speech and visual communication, and are inherently unstable and mutable. Dilemmas, such as Brexit, prompt individuals to modify traditions to make sense of new realities. Conversely, traditions provide a route to make sense of change, not in a deterministic fashion, but as a reference point and resource for accessing previous expressions of beliefs (Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 33). In short, the aim of the interpretivist is not to uncover an underlying structure of belief, expressed in the form of a tradition, but to understand how agents formulate and express their beliefs in response to dilemmas.

To examine how beliefs were articulated in response to the dilemma of Brexit, this article analyses two sets of texts, one of political commentary from journalists and academics, and the other of speeches in the House of Commons during the first crucial debate on the EU Withdrawal Bill. The first was selected to act as a sample of the types of beliefs expressed in wider society, for comparison, and so does not purport to be representative or exhaustive of the range of expression. The texts were chosen on the basis of their prominence, determined by the publication outlet, publisher, or author. Other scholars may have opted for alternative selections but given its purpose – to provide a control group – this is not seen as problematic. The parliamentary debate on the first Withdrawal Bill was identified at the time by speakers as both momentous and substantive. Summing up on 15 January 2019, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, noted that the deliberations “lasted some eight days, over 54 hours, with speeches of powerful sincerity from more than 200 right hon. and hon. Members” (May, 2019). Numerous speakers commented on the significance of the occasion, with the Leader of the Opposition describing the vote as “one of the most important we will ever take as Members of this House” (Corbyn, 4/12/18). It was therefore expected to constitute a rich resource for understanding British foreign policy beliefs, at least among parliamentarians.

In terms of the specific method of analysis of these texts, the authors were guided by interpretivism, with its origins in hermeneutics and desire to capture the spirit of understanding in social practices (Hay, 2011; Gadamer, 1996: 164-69; Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). The article’s mode of reasoning is inductive and phenomenological (Chalmers, 1999: 39; Gadamer, 1996: 242-264). As Ted Hopf notes: “Phenomenology implies letting the

subjects speak, in this case through texts. Induction involves the recording of these identities as atheoretically as possible” (Hopf, 2002: 23). Rather than begin with a set of assumptions or theoretical categories, the authors followed Hopf’s injunction to “remain ontologically open for as long as possible before imposing an analytical theoretical order, or closure, on the numerous ambiguities and differences in the texts” (Hopf, 2002: 24). The sample texts were read multiple times, firstly for overt references to traditions of thought (e.g. socialism, conservatism, liberalism), secondly for organizing concepts that are ‘traditional’ to this sphere (e.g. identities, roles, principles and governance practices); only then were these grouped into categories with like conceits and mapped by the authors to understand the creative range of expressions of belief in this sphere.

Making sense of Brexit: academic commentary

Reviewing a selection of writings about the EU referendum, authored both in the lead up to the vote and subsequently, one is struck by the sheer range of allusions to traditions of thought.ⁱ To make sense of this multiplicity of traditions, we can group them into six broad categories, namely identities, roles, approaches to governance, economic models, ideologies and social movements. The approaches to governance are further sub-divided into styles of governance, international governance traditions and domestic governance traditions (see Figure 1). As we will see later, some of the key traditions evoked by parliamentarians in the debates link with those in the wider political discourse, and at least one of the traditions in each category was cited by MPs.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

What is striking about the traditions delineated here is the extent to which most of them are deployed to support the underlying logics of Brexit. Thus, when it comes to the traditional identities articulated, those related to the Anglosphere or the English-speaking peoples are usually used to create a sense of distance between the UK and the continent (Wellings and Baxindale, 2015; Kenny and Pearce, 2018). The maritime tradition of the UK and its identity as a “maritime power” and “island nation” also support this, both in conjuring up historical memories of maritime conflict between the UK and continental powers such as Spain, Holland, France and Germany, and in recalling the idea of Britain’s “trans-oceanic...national destiny” going back to Pitt the Elder in the eighteenth century (Black 2016; Whittaker, 2018;

Daddow, 2015, 2019; Wellings, 2016). Domestically, English national identity and growing nationalist consciousness, and the problems of accommodating these in the political structures of the UK and EU, are conveyed as powerful drivers of Brexit (Kenny, 2015; Brocklehurst, 2015; Henderson et al, 2017; Tombs, 2016). Meanwhile, the idea of “Global Britain” was specifically developed as an identity for the UK in a post-Brexit era (Daddow, 2019; FAC, 2018). Thus, only one of these traditional identities, that of the UK as a European country, is available for pro-remain speakers to articulate and it operates very much at the margins of political discourse (Startin, 2015; Daddow, 2015).

When it comes to the ideological traditions invoked, there is perhaps more potential for contestation as many of them have an inherent duality in their interpretation.

Imperialism/Colonialism can elicit pride and nostalgia for Britain’s former influence, leading to a more internationalist and interventionist foreign policy (Biggar, 2017; Malik, 2018).

There is even a call for “Empire 2.0” to revive Britain’s former colonial relationships (Ballantyne, 2018). Alternatively, it can provoke shame and contrition over Britain’s behaviour (Olusoga 2017), thereby favouring a more circumspect and regionally focused outlook. The UK can be viewed as a committed advocate of neoliberalism, with the EU as a bulwark against the worst effects of associated policies like the infringement of worker’s rights and constraints over the movement of global capital; or the EU is definable as the actor that imposed austerity on southern European countries and prevents radical government and state aid in Britain (Blagden, 2017; Blakeley, 2019). Similarly, Brexit can be presented as part of a global turn to more authoritarian, nationalist policies or as a release from the authoritarianism of EU regulation and governance (Barnett, 2017). There is less equivocation about Unionism and Euroscepticism, which are generally associated with pro-Brexit sentiment, even though here too the potential exists for alternative interpretations (Lowry, 2016). After all, the Brexit process is putting strain on the union, and many countries, and remain advocates, are Eurosceptic to some degree (Stokes, 2016). Overall though, when it comes to the use of all of these ideological traditions by commentators, the interpretation that tends to be favoured is that which reinforces a sense of difference between the UK and the EU – even if this is meant in criticism.

Regarding social movements, environmentalism and feminism were referenced by Lord Ashcroft in his polling on the day of Brexit, and those with a greater commitment to these

traditions were found to be more likely to vote remain (Menon and Salter, 2016). Yet, otherwise they were not raised and so it is curious Ashcroft chose to include them in his survey of social attitudes linked to the referendum decision. Of the other three referenced in commentary, populism and nativism are said to favour Brexit but are often deployed negatively to disparage the intellectual and emotional basis of these traditions (Calhoun, 2016; Switzer and Hannan, 2017), whilst anti-elitism is seen as a paradoxical force for Brexit – with figures like Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson often railing against elites despite their personally privileged backgrounds (Barnes, 2016; Johnson, 2016; Jahn, 2018). That said, populism, nativism and anti-elitism do constitute political traditions that can be used to rationalise and cohere the articulation of beliefs (Salter, 2018). By contrast, there is a relative lack of expression of equivalent traditions articulating pro-European sentiment (Goes, 2016).

When these identities, ideologies and social movements translate into policy behaviour, we see a similar inclination for associated traditions to favour Brexit. Discussion of Britain's role in the region sees it as an outsider or awkward partner – reinforcing a sense of distance between it and the rest of the continent (Daddow, 2015). Meanwhile, the role of champion of free trade links with the aforementioned identities of Britain as an imperial, maritime power (Halligan, 2017; May, 2016; Johnson, 2020). Although this role can be exercised within a regional context, it is often defined in opposition to a more protectionist EU (Winders, 2016; Whitman, 2016: 528). In a similar vein, there is an ambiguity about Britain's role as a great power. Membership of the EU can be seen as a soft power multiplier and Tony Blair, in particular, was often keen to emphasize that the UK was a valued partner of the US because of its leading role in that institution (Hill, 2019; Blair, 2003). However, it also carries with it the spectre of the UK being a regional rather than global actor, and as such risks diminishing the great power role to which policymakers and the general public still cling. The desire to leave the EU is seen as a defeat for the “declinist” view of UK power in the post-war era, which viewed EC membership as vital to slowing the decline in British global influence. In that sense, Brexit is posited as a more optimistic view of the UK's future as an autonomous actor (Tombs, 2016).

Of the five economic traditions evoked, capitalism is perhaps the most fluid in terms of how it is used to either promote or denigrate the Brexit process. On the one hand, Brexit

presents “speculative opportunities” that could serve capitalist interests; on the other hand, the EU is often represented by the hard left as a capitalist club, limiting state aid, from which the UK should leave. There is also the representation of the EU as the largest free market in the world and many sectors of the economy, particularly manufacturing, benefit from its existence (Osborne, 2019). Whilst references to capitalism as a tradition may be contradictory, those to the other three are much more aligned with anti-European sentiment. Advocates of leave note how the EU discriminates against other regions via its policies such as the common agricultural policy, and these are framed as protectionism (Murray-Evans, 2016; Switzer and Hannan, 2017; Minford et al, 2016). This tradition is also contrasted with the longstanding Cobdenite liberal tradition of free trade which led to cheaper food prices until the UK joined the EC (Ludlow, 2015). Linked to this is the “laissez-faire liberalism” and latter day neoliberalism that are often seen as underpinning the Conservative case for Brexit. Here the EU is represented as a highly regulatory actor exercising an undue influence on markets and stifling innovation.

Lastly, when it comes to the long list of traditions associated with different governance arrangements, there are remarkably few which are conveyed as favouring pro-European sentiment and a majority which are utilised to support the opposite. Of the former, regionalism and the tradition that Britain should maintain a commitment to the continent are the clearest expressions. Federalism, continentalism and Integrationism are largely used pejoratively as alien influences on British political life. At the same time, traditions such as common law, parliamentary government, and negative liberty are evoked to emphasize the UK’s distinctiveness vis a vis the continent (Bennett, 2004; Nedergaard and Henriksen, 2018). Moreover, a pragmatic governance tradition, highlighted by some commentators, is generally framed as facilitating Brexit, via “pragmatic adaptation” rather than as a counter-weight to the emotive arguments of Brexiteers (Talani, 2018; Daddow, 2019; Honeyman, 2017).

Thus, what this sample reveals is that Brexit is a remarkably fecund opportunity for the articulation of beliefs about British foreign policy, encompassing a wide array of traditions. These are most often evoked or framed in ways that support certain beliefs underpinning the rationale for the UK leaving the European Union, namely: that the UK is separate from the continent, geographically, politically and economically; that the UK is a global actor and

this outlook is threatened by the regional parochialism of the EU; that the EU is undemocratic, and its governance practices are alien or even hostile to those of Britain; that the EU is inflexible and works against the interests of ordinary people. Although such depictions are often raised by commentators in order to critique them, in doing so, they serve to highlight the prevalence of these beliefs in public discussion.

If we now turn to the parliamentary debates on the first EU Withdrawal Bill, we can see a more superficial engagement with traditions and a greater emphasis on pragmatism than was notable in the sample above. This has implications for the work that traditions are able to do to create and sustain meanings that could lead to political action.

The First EU Withdrawal Agreement Debate

Parliament allotted five days for debate on the Withdrawal agreement between 4 and 11 December 2018 but this was cut short on 10 December when it appeared the result of the discussion would be a government defeat. The debate resumed on 9 January for five more days before the first meaningful vote was conducted. The sheer length of this discussion meant a remarkably large number of members of parliament were able to express their beliefs on the issue of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and the event's significance in that regard was affirmed by speakers from across the House (Diane Abbott, 11/1/19; Clark, 10/1/19). The spread of articulations of traditions is rendered in Figure 2. As is apparent from this table, when compared with Figure 1, MPs make references to significantly more identities than the commentariat sampled (more than twice as many). Although they have a broadly similar spread of traditions evoked across the other categories, there are differences in how these are framed. The commentators analysed above tended to have a more historical sensibility than MPs, alluding to individuals such as Richard Cobden and linking Brexit with previous debates over governance in the UK and relations with other European states. Whilst one MP does refer to "nearly 1,000 years of being the masters of our own destiny" (Andrew Rosindell, 11/1/19, evoking Hugh Gaitskell's 1962 speech to the Labour party conference), Winston Churchill is mentioned seven times by contributors, and there are references to the UK's imperial past, the vast majority focus on the present. Unlike the commentaries cited, MPs also evoke absolutism and authoritarianism, traditions of governance that are usually deployed as rhetorical devices to contrast with the more reasonable and moderate approach of the speaker (Hammond,

6/12/18; Kerr, 9/1/19). As we will see, they also place far more emphasis on different understandings of democracy.

Insert Figure 2 here.

Identifying references to traditions across the debates is useful for understanding the imaginative range of the participants; however, a simple comparison between the control sample and the parliamentary data arguably gives a misleading impression of the regularity and prominence with which traditions are evoked. The contributions made by parliamentarians are for the most part remarkably narrow, with traditions either not referenced or used as a rhetorical aside rather than a genuine intellectual lodestone. The key dilemmas that resonate with speakers are: whether the backstop could become permanent; whether the agreement did, or did not, commit the UK to a customs union; whether the public should be offered a second referendum on the terms of the deal; and how far MPs had a duty to reflect the views of their constituents, their own consciences, or the result of the 2016 referendum. Detailed arguments were also offered over the consequences of a “no deal” Brexit (e.g. Paterson, 4/12/18). As such, they were dominated by technical deliberations over the interpretation of the withdrawal agreement.

Even discussion of the responsibility of MPs to their constituents was for the most part framed in terms of the individual’s response in the moment. It is remarkable how little reference there is to historical precedent or tradition. In a few cases there are oblique allusions to Edmund Burke. Some MPs note they are “a representative not a delegate” but none quote Burke directly (Ed Vaizey, 4/12/18). Roger Godsiff, the Labour MP for Birmingham Hall Green asserts that the referendum had pitted the tradition of direct democracy with that of representative democracy (4/12/18). In Godsiff’s case, this moves him to vote against triggering Article 50 and in favour of a second referendum as his constituents had voted 66% to 34% in favour of remain whereas he had voted to leave. However, the authority of the referendum result is usually evoked to urge support for leaving the European Union, as in Jeremy Hunt’s assertion that: “we are democrats, and proud to be in one of the oldest democracies in the world, where we do what the people tell us” (11/1/19). Or, as Dr Andrew Murrison puts it: “They are sovereign. We serve them. Let’s get on with it” (15/1/19). To counter this narrative, numerous speakers argue that their responsibility to their constituents within the parliamentary context is not to vote for

something that would make them poorer, but this injunction is not defended in relation to any wider tradition of thought or abstract concept.

Nevertheless, the technocratic approach to governance displayed by many participants is clearly linked to a tradition, one that is by far the most dominant across the debates: pragmatism. The importance of this tradition is evinced by the fact that it is referenced by all sides of the debate, from those who opposed Brexit and the bill, to those who support both, along with those who lie in between these positions. It is regularly associated with a specifically British approach to governance, which Stephen Barclay alludes to in his assertion that “It is not the British way to put ideological purity above the practicalities of good government” (4/12/18). As this quotation suggests, it is also often contrasted with a more extreme or ideological position (Snell, 10/1/19). For example, Stephen Kerr argues: “my fundamental political belief is in pragmatism. I am no ideologue or absolutist, and the success of the Conservative and Unionist party has been its willingness...to work practically to deliver what is in the national interest...It is now for us parliamentarians to be pragmatic” (9/1/19).

In many cases, pragmatism is invoked to explain a speaker’s support for the agreement even if they are unhappy with some of the details it contains (e.g. Kenneth Clarke, 15/1/19). As Alister Jack puts it: “It is a pragmatic compromise... Despite my backstop reservations, I support it” (9/1/19). Jack and others also emphasize pragmatism as an important approach to bridge the divide between those who voted remain and those who supported leave (Nick Herbert, 11/1/19; James Morris, 14/1/19). Brexit is seen as polarising and speakers argue that “pragmatism and compromise seem to have become dirty words” (Helen Grant, 14/1/19). Thus, evoking this tradition is aimed at restoring a former convention of British political life which has apparently been lost and is set in opposition to ideological positions. However, this framing is contested and many others justify voting against the bill due to its supposed lack of pragmatism, as in Justine Greening’s assertion that: “I have always been a pragmatist on Europe and our membership of the EU, so my community and I wanted a practical way forward found following the referendum, but the Prime Minister’s negotiated deal...is not a practical way forward for Britain” (5/12/18). Similarly, Sir William Cash argues: “The agreement is not compromise, as the Attorney General suggested; it is capitulation. Nor is it pragmatism. We are not purists” (15/1/19). More rarely, Andrew Lewer rejects the

sense of pragmatism as an ethical end in itself: “What I do not recognise or accept is this concept that has captured some people of pragmatism being a principle. It is not. If being pragmatic defeats the principles that we seek to uphold, then it takes on a much less healthy character” (6/12/19).

Lewer’s intervention hints at a problem in emphasizing pragmatism as a governing tradition. On the one hand, it serves an important function in the debates by allowing a technical discussion of the bill itself as well as establishing common modes of expression and tone focused on reasonableness and compromise. But, it also inhibits the wider expression of beliefs that arguably need to be contested if Brexit is to be understood and navigated. Indeed, the Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott lamented that “It is easy to get lost in the parliamentary tactics and the technocratic detail, but this is actually a debate about the future of this country and what sort of Britain we want to be” (11/1/19). Speakers do acknowledge the reality that underlying the decision to vote for or against the Withdrawal Bill lie important questions over British identity and its interactions with other actors in world politics. As Ben Bradley notes: “It cannot be boiled down to a spreadsheet with data on economic forecasts; the decision was so much bigger than that. It was about the heart as well as the head” (4/12/18). Yet, even when speakers do recognise that the vote has important ramifications for traditions and beliefs about British foreign policy, it is common for them not to elaborate further (Thornberry, 5/12/19).

As a general rule, there appears to be a strong correlation between a speaker’s strength of feeling on the Brexit issue, whether leave or remain, and their inclination to articulate their beliefs in terms of broader traditions of thought. The party that is most explicit on this front is the DUP. Its speakers evoke Unionism, Republicanism and Populism as traditions influencing political outcomes (Jeffrey M. Donaldson, 9/1/19; Gregory Campbell, 15/1/19; Paul Girvan, 4/12/18). They also describe possible identities for the UK, either as “a strong and independent global trading nation” (Nigel Dodds, 4/12/18) or as “rule takers not rule makers” (Paul Girvan, 4/12/18). Each alludes to longstanding tropes about British foreign policy. In the first case, the idea of Britain as a trading nation is a repeated refrain of speeches on British identity, going back at least as far as the nineteenth century (Gaskarth, 2013). In the second, the identity of rule taker carries with it highly negative connotations; after all, the alternative to Britannia ruling the waves in the popular song ‘Rule Britannia’ is

slavery (For a similar framing, see Sir William Cash, 15/1/19). In each articulation, DUP speakers seek to reinforce a sense of national identity and legitimise this in terms of traditions of Unionism, democracy and parliamentary sovereignty.

From the opposite side of the Brexit spectrum, the SNP regularly rejects the union with the United Kingdom and the significance of its associated traditions. Their references to identity are dominated by a sense of Europeanness, which they link with traditions such as multiculturalism, liberalism and respect for human rights. Ian Blackford describes “the rich diversity that Europe has to offer”, which had allowed him “to benefit from the experiences of different cultures” and asserts that “Respect for human dignity, human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law are the core values of the European Union. Those values have united, not divided, us as citizens of Europe for many years” (4/12/18). An “inclusive Europe” is contrasted with the image of an “an inward-looking United Kingdom” (Blackford, 4/12/18).

This interpretation of tradition is contested by Conservative and Unionist speakers. Sir Graham Brady, chair of the backbench 1922 committee argues: “The right hon. Gentleman spoke at length about the tradition of democracy and respect for the rule of law. He called them European traditions without noting that they are actually strongest in this country—in Britain—and have been for a very, long time” (4/12/18). Later in the debate, Stephen Kerr utilises a Unionist tradition to counter this negative portrayal of the UK’s decision to leave the EU: “I am a Unionist; it is core to who I am...My warning to colleagues is simply this: nationalism is waiting in the wings” (9/1/19). For Kerr, it is the Scottish Nationalists who are threatening relations with Europe and the wider world in favour of “the disruption that no deal would bring”, so as to advance their nationalist goals (Ibid). Meanwhile, Gregory Campbell of the DUP refuted the narrative that the EU was “a place of safety, security and certainty”, arguing a tradition of national populism was emerging borne of “frustration, of isolation and of political establishments not listening or paying heed to what they say and want.” For Campbell, the EU was an “expansionist empire” that had to be resisted (15/1/19).

By contrast, those arguing against the withdrawal agreement, as part of a general opposition to Brexit, often see the drive to leave the European Union as a regressive Imperialist project to reconnect with traditions and beliefs from Britain’s colonial past. For

David Lammy, and a number of other speakers, it is an attempt to launch “Empire 2.0” (Lammy, 4/12/18; Douglas Chapman, 4/12/18; Tommy Sheppard, 4/12/18). Such an aspiration involves a forgetting of the “exploitation and subjugation—moral superiority that led to putting humans in shackles and the oppression of black and brown people because this country thought it knew best” (Lammy, 4/12/18). According to Owen Smith, the idea of “returning somehow to our roots in empire and, to use that dreadful, meaningless phrase, “going global”...is a claim as facile as it is false” (Smith, 9/1/19). Underpinning the desire to reconnect with an Imperial tradition is said to be “nostalgia” and a tradition of “nativism”. Smith sees the latter being deployed by individuals from across the political spectrum, from those advocating anti-immigrant sentiments to those seeking “some misty-eyed romantic notion of socialism in one state” (9/1/19). There is a duality about this framing, with attempts to reconnect with the Imperialist tradition simultaneously associated with more international and more inward-looking policy beliefs.

At first it may seem illogical to associate isolation with Imperialism but it actually links closely with how this tradition was articulated during the nineteenth century. The idea of the UK being seen as in “splendidly isolation” from European affairs, and focusing on its colonial trade and relations was a powerful belief during Lord Salisbury’s governments, however inaccurate that notion may have been in practice (Howard, 1962). The tradition of isolationism is evoked frequently by speakers, again as a negative description of the Brexit process (Ian Murray, 11/1/19; Alex Cunningham, 10/1/19). Lammy posits that the “independence” that many Brexit supporters seek is a “fantasy”, and endeavours to refute the historical interpretation of British isolation from Europe: “Britain did not become great in total isolation. Britain thrived by becoming the biggest treaty-signing power in the world, signing more than 14,000 treaties in the modern age. Britain thrived by sharing, not stockpiling our sovereignty” (Lammy, 4/12/18). Owen Smith asserts that seeking isolation from Europe would be “an abdication of our responsibility” and would instead go against Britain playing its “traditional role within Europe and the world” – that of using its “influence and power” to “provide ballast and security” for the continent (9/1/19). As such a binary choice is posited between a responsible state that engages with European affairs and an introspective one that embraces a “nativist” tradition. A similar dichotomy is apparent in Caroline Lucas’s assertion that: “This debate goes to the very essence of what we want to

be as a country—confident, compassionate and outward-facing, or fearful, inward-looking and isolated” (4/12/18). There is a subtle distinction between these statements and those of SNP speakers, since Lammy, Smith and Lucas are locating positive values at the national level, as expressed through engagement with the European Union, whereas the former saw the EU as embodying these, with citizens at the UK level benefiting by association.

The other avenue for articulating traditions in the debates relates to the UK and EU’s austerity policies to which many Labour speakers attribute the leave vote (Lammy, 10/1/19; Neil Coyle, 11/1/19; Nic Dakin, 14/1/19; Rosie Duffield, 14/1/19). Chi Onwurah describes a “gospel of austerity championed in Brussels, even if its most enthusiastic choir was in David Cameron’s Government”, that fed into disenchantment with the EU (4/12/18). Caroline Lucas supports this belief, seeing the UK as a “country of grotesque inequalities” that had been subject to “an ideologically driven assault on national and local public services under the name of austerity” (4/12/18). The ideology implied in these statements is that of neoliberalism. For example, Paul Sweeney identifies the “root cause of a lot of our problems in this country” as being “economic alienation caused by a crisis of neo-liberalism that has failed the poorest people in our society” (15/1/19). Deindustrialisation, privatisation of public services, rising inequality and immigration are associated with a neoliberal tradition that had harnessed the potential of globalization to enrich a minority centred round London. In this context, Brexit is seen as an important moment, raising public awareness of inequality and allowing those marginalised to express their dissatisfaction. As Chi Onwurah puts it, “We have to start with the most important thing about Brexit: what it tells us about our nation. The fact is that the Brexit voters won more than the Brexit vote: they won the right to be heard” (4/12/18). Onwurah notes how conversations with “industry groups and lobbyists” tended to be skewed towards the capital, but after Brexit Onwurah suggests that “Now they tell me how much they contribute to the regions. They have started measuring it. That is the Brexit effect” (Ibid).

In sum, there are allusions to traditions of thought in the parliamentary debates. Speakers have evoked parliamentarianism, direct and representative democracy, unionism, nationalism, socialism, imperialism, isolationism and neoliberalism. However, the majority of interventions do not link their arguments to wider political traditions and as such do not anchor their beliefs in any broader understandings of governance, with the exception of

pragmatism – itself a contested tradition that is rejected as a governing principle despite being evoked by speakers from all sides of the discussion. Thus, we are confronted with a debate which is at the same time both highly technocratic and highly individualised, even autarchic. This is problematic since without deploying social categories and interpretive traditions, it is difficult for the speakers to have a basis for comparison or collective decisionmaking. If each person is coming at the policy problem of whether to vote for the withdrawal agreement from their own individualised perspective, then how can they identify a basis for compromise or consensus seeking, or adjudicate between competing claims? The speakers cited above are creative in their use of traditions but are in the minority and the use of traditions either for or against Brexit is evenly balanced. In this light, it is perhaps unsurprising that the vote was lost and many of the big questions on Britain's future relations with the EU remain unresolved, despite a version of the bill eventually being passed later that year.

Conclusion

Brexit poses an unprecedented dilemma for British policymakers. Contrary to decades of stable assumptions about British identity and Britain's place in the world, they now face the twin challenge of engaging with abstract ideas and having to make hard choices between different conceptualizations. The evidence of the parliamentary debates suggests most are trying to do so without reference to traditions of political thought and as a result are floundering; lacking a frame of reference to forge compromises or adjudicate between different policy outcomes. Indeed, the one tradition that is consistently utilised by speakers, pragmatism, may itself militate against the kind of abstract thinking necessary to navigate policy after the rupture of Brexit. The minority that do evoke traditions are evenly balanced between pro or anti-Brexit speakers; but the speakers who are arguably most creative in conjuring them are generally from smaller parties from the regions such as the SDP and DUP, or from the fringe of the Conservative or Labour parties. As such, their rationalisations are out of step with the prevailing technocratic modes of expressing beliefs. When it comes to the wider context, as explored in the control sample of commentary, we can see that the distribution and content of traditions significantly legitimises the Brexit position. Even if some of these traditions are at times posited in a pejorative fashion or used satirically, they

carry the potential to cohere beliefs that create a sense of difference between the UK and the EU and thereby endorse pro-Brexit arguments. By contrast, parliamentarians seeking to rebut (or support) these claims would find it hard to do so at present as their emphasis on pragmatism inhibits the articulation of abstract or emotional beliefs. Overall, UK policymakers are likely to continue to struggle to cohere a set of beliefs about future British foreign policy, and make hard choices, unless they adopt more overt frames of meaning, in relation to broader traditions of thought, than their current modes of expression allow.

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