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Brexit: the way of dealing with populism

In late June 2016, the United Kingdom held a referendum to consider its withdrawal from the European Union (EU). Brexit, as it is popularly referred to, has captured the political imagination. The debate on both sides, those wishing to exit as well as those who want to remain, has been increasingly heated and vitriolic. The last time a referendum was held to determine the UK's place in Europe was in 1975. The political and economic circumstances facing the world in 1975 were unsettling particularly in the light of the OPEC oil crisis, which had caused significant economic downturn in most Western countries. The result of that referendum was a resounding 67.2% voting to stay in the then Common Market or European Economic Community, compared to 32.8% that wished to exit.

The referendum this year had its genesis in particularly 'unsettling times'. However, this time around, the backdrop is not simply economic downturn triggered by the events of 1973 and the OPEC Oil crisis. Rather, it is about a migration crisis and the need to preserve national identity. More significantly, the ruling Conservative Party faced a seemingly formidable political force going into the last General Election, the UK Independence Party (UKIP). UKIP, a populist right wing party, is, at its core, Eurosceptic, yet has significant representation in the European Parliament. UKIP threatened the traditional political constituency of the Conservative Party. In response, David Cameron, the Prime Minister, promised a referendum if his party won the 2015 General Election. The referendum was an effective political tool to protect the Conservative vote, which was potentially threatened by UKIP.

Interestingly, there is much in common between UKIP and a similar movement in Australia, One Nation led by Pauline Hanson in the 1990s. One Nation was a political party that championed zero net immigration, an end to the highly successful multiculturalism policies that had come to define Australian identity, and a return to Australia's Anglo-Celtic tradition, which had supposedly been eroded by far too much attention being focused on Australia's indigenous population, as well as Asian migration, which threatened the nation's values and identity. One Nation gained a great deal of prominence, polling nearly 10% of the national vote and gaining significant seats in State elections. In her maiden speech in Parliament, Hanson argued that:

We now have a situation where a type of reverse racism is applied to mainstream Australians by those who promote political correctness and those who control the various taxpayer funded 'industries' that flourish in our society servicing Aboriginals, multiculturalists and a host of other minority groups . . .

I, and most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished. I believe that we are in danger of being swamped by Asians . . . They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate. Abolishing the policy of multiculturalism will save billions of dollars. (Pauline Hanson Maiden Speech, 10 September 1996)

If that was not enough, Hanson's ghost written book published in 1997, *The Truth*, imagined a future Australia run by a lesbian President of multicultural descent (of Indian and Chinese descent), Poona Li Hung . Only when it became clear that One Nation was eroding the traditional support of the Liberal National Coalition in Australia did the Prime Minister, John Howard, intervene. Howard adopted the technique of condemning Hanson for not having any policy solutions whilst agreeing with her on the nature of the problems she described.

In our current 'unsettling times,' where the EU lurches between financial meltdowns in some of its key economies to facing a refugee crisis that it appears unable to control, British politics is unquestionably divided. David Cameron, like John Howard, might well have tolerated UKIP to a certain extent. However, when Euroscepticism was threatening Conservative electoral chances, he had little choice but to move to try and restore order through the option of holding a referendum. It is only by understanding the way in which the power of rhetoric is deployed in politics and the media that it is possible to see how a certain hegemonic conception of identity is asserted. To counter the possible backlash of UKIP voters, the UK referendum sought to solve real political, economic and social issues through a populism that fundamentally made the UK vulnerable in a similar way to Australia.

Reference

Hanson, P. (1997). *Pauline Hanson - the truth: On Asian immigration, the Aboriginal question, the gun debate and the future of Australia*. Parkholme, SA: St George Publications.

