

Event Report**BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE****The Scottish Parliament Election and the Brexit Referendum: Are the UK and the EU Heading Towards Disintegration? ¹**

When in 1975 the United Kingdom held a referendum on whether the UK should remain in the EEC, membership was supported by all major political parties, though it split the Labour Party whose membership had voted 2:1 in favour of a withdrawal. The ‘yes’ vote was convincing: 67.2% against 32.8% with a turnout of 64.5%. 40 years later, the situation is different. With changing small majorities for both camps – depending on time and opinion poll – and a Tory party split down the middle, the outcome is, with just 7 weeks to go to 23 June, hard to predict. Much is at stake, for the UK and for the European Union. But first, on 5 May, there will be the Scottish Parliament election. In September 2014 the referendum on Scotland’s independence led to a surprisingly clear rejection (55.3% against, 44.7% for with a turnout of 84.6%) of Scottish independence, however, as the majority of the Scottish, including the leading Scottish National Party (SNP), back EU membership, what will happen, when the majority in the UK wants to leave the EU, whereas the Scottish wish to remain? How will this outlook influence the upcoming Scottish parliamentary election and, whatever the results will be, how will they feed back into the Brexit campaign? But Scotland is not the only part of the UK which ‘Leave’ proponents should be worried about. What would a Brexit do to Anglo-Irish relations? Nobody can possibly have forgotten how many years and human lives it took to establish peace in Northern Ireland? A ‘Leave’ vote majority could blow the UK to smithereens and at the same time cause a cascade effect in the EU: with Eurosceptic forces already in power or at the threshold of taking over, Europe seems to be backsliding into its dark past. Jean Monnet famously said that ‘Europe will be forged in crises’, but what if there are too many crises and too few European leaders with the will and strength to overcome them?

Four weeks before the EU referendum in the UK and three weeks after the Scottish parliamentary election, the Böll Lunch Debate on 25 May shed some light on the particular settings of Scottish and British politics. While almost two years ago Scottish independence was rejected by a majority of Scots, a Brexit would reopen the independence debate as Scotland is clearly in favour of EU membership. Furthermore, the panellists observed a transformation and fragmentation of the political scene in the UK on many levels such as inner party divides, civic engagement and party politics. Hence, the referendum must be reflected upon in light of these inner British developments as much as in the context of the relations between the EU and the UK. The debate depicted the multitude of influencing factors, gave an outlook on what might happen during the next weeks until the referendum and explored the possible scenarios for the day after.

Scottish/UK relations

All current Scottish political developments are to be seen in consequence of the 2014 independence referendum, which even though it resulted in a rejection of independence left the constitutional questions unsolved. The fact that the Constitutional debate continues and that the

¹ The event took place on 25 May 2016. Guest speakers were: Paul Adamson, founder and editor of E!Sharp online; Nicola McEwen, Professor of Territorial Politics, Associate Director – Centre on Constitutional Change, University of Edinburgh; Molly Scott Cato, Member of the European Parliament (Greens-EFA) and Stefani Weiss, Director Programme Europe’s Future, Bertelsmann Stiftung. The debate was moderated by Klaus Linsenmeier, Director of Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union.

Scottish National Party (SNP) remains the strongest political force, show this very clearly. In the recent Scottish election the SNP consolidated its power whereas the parties powerful in the rest of the island did not manage to equal their successes in Scotland. While the Labour Party has almost collapsed in the recent election, the Conservative Party managed to survive as an opposition party and UKIP has not played a significant role. The rise of the SNP can largely be explained as a consequence of the introduction of a separate Scottish Parliament in 1999, which allowed for a Scottish political agenda separate from the English. Hence, a substantial fragmentation of the British political landscape has emerged, which makes it obsolete to talk about a 'British political system'. This fragmentation is also reflected in the differences in attitude towards the referendum. The referendum is surprisingly absent and not at all contested in the Scottish debate, because there seems to be broad public trust in the political leaders to keep the country inside the EU. Polls confirm this notion. In Scotland the 'Remain' vote will win with such a comfortable margin, that there seems to be no need to debate EU Membership. Hence, a UK vote in favour of leaving the EU which would take Scotland out of the Union might trigger a new debate on Scottish independence. Recent remarks by Scottish political leaders point out that a Brexit would make a new Scottish referendum almost inevitable. Nevertheless, this outlook remains rather vague as polls suggest that the British 'Leave' vote would not necessarily increase the support for Scottish independence significantly, because the possibility of 'hard borders' between both countries adds a new dimension to Scottish independence. In summary, it can be stated that a Brexit would bring about a different relationship between Scotland and Britain, possibly lead to a new independence referendum but in any case cause a lot of uncertainty.

Fact-based vs. fact-free campaigns

During the debate a number of features specific to the British referendum campaign were discussed. A recurring issue was the difference in emotional or personal appeal between the campaigns. While the 'Remain' campaign lacked passion and prominent figures making an emotional case for 'Remain', 'Leave' has shown a very passionate debate. The panellists criticised the 'Remain' campaign for focussing on small, unemotional and mainly economic arguments. Although this tactic might win the referendum in the end, it gives at the same time a lot of leverage to the 'Leave' arguments which engage people in a purely emotional way. There is a need for a more emotional 'Remain' discourse also to counter another problem. Whereas 'Remain' is pursuing a small scale 'fact-based' campaign, 'Leave' appeals to emotions with arguments not necessarily connected to facts. With the amount of information and disinformation flying around, any claim made in public whether it be based on facts or not might turn into a crucial argument. In this way, a 'fact-based' and a 'fact-free' campaign have evolved.

The personal game and societal engagement

These days Britain appears to be lacking strong centrist politicians who are able to convince and lead. The figures making the headlines are more of a populist nature, such as London's former mayor Boris Johnson, who appears to have engaged in a personal quest for power against David Cameron. He is one of the few politicians showing (sometimes misguided) passion in the debate which he uses as a platform for a leadership battle with the prime-minister, not only aimed at the party leadership, but also at the function of PM. In this way, the referendum which is so decisive for Britain's future has become a personal contest between two politicians from the same school – Eton College, known as the 'chief nurse of England's statesmen'. This personal battle has made its mark on the campaign. One could say that the campaign is run by only few politicians who fail to engage the whole spectrum of the population and show little leadership. It is also unfortunate that women are not publicly involved at the



higher level of campaigners. The campaign is almost run 'despite politicians' because civic activism has taken leadership and power away from the politicians. A big number of civic groups, movements, academic and business communities have become publicly active and have shown the engagement and the passion most politicians have been lacking. These civic campaigns have also demonstrated a level of engagement and knowledge about the EU and unprecedented in the UK. This 'European momentum' is a positive development and a chance to improve the understanding of European issues in the UK substantially.

The day after

All speakers agreed that this referendum is crucial for the further development of both Europe and the UK. In any case, 'the day after everything will be different'. If the UK votes to leave, the leadership battle in the conservative party will be even fiercer and Cameron's position substantially weakened. Whoever wins this battle, will have the difficult task to negotiate the exit deal. The EU will have no reason to be lenient on the leaving conditions and the UK might end up losing influence in a significant way. In the longer term, the UK's future might be designed according to the ideas of a very right-wing pro business group, which is also a driving force behind the 'Leave' campaign. These adherents of very neo-liberal ideologies oppose Cameron as being too left-wing and the EU for passing legislation which is too worker-friendly. Their vision of Britain's future would be one of a completely unregulated financial and business haven which so far has been prevented by Britain's EU membership. If this is where the UK is headed, the risk is high that the workers – who are likely to vote 'Leave' in great numbers – will be stripped of all their rights.

On the other hand, if Britain stays, a completely new situation would arise. The EU-UK deal concluded in February this year would come into force and regulate the relationship in a new way. This would not only literally be the end of an 'ever closer Union', it also might trigger a series of dangerous fragmenting developments. Since in many Member States Eurosceptic political forces are rising, this deal might become a blueprint for others to remodel their relationship with the Union. There is a real danger of starting a trend for Member States to try to renegotiate their membership for their own benefit, which in the end would lead to the self-destruction of the whole Union. It is therefore not surprising that those Member States which are known to be the most Eurosceptic are most in favour of the UK staying inside the Union.

Yet, should the UK stay in, UK-EU relations could also experience a fresh (re)start and a more constructive cooperation could evolve. Cameron would have to recommit fully and use what has come out of the current campaign – the level of civic engagement and knowledge about the EU now available inside the UK – for an increased inclusion of civil society in EU affairs. The UK could then play a crucial role inside the EU in dealing with the big challenges that lie ahead such as migration, economic recovery and institutional reform. In the end, the referendum is not a process where British politicians lead but where the British people decide where to go and the politicians will have to follow.