1 INTRODUCTION: HOW BRITAIN BECAME BREXITLAND

> One temptation should be avoided – to seek, month after month, to prove that membership of the Community has created all Britain's ills . . . Above all we should avoid creating a new, semi-permanent rift in British society, between pro- and anti-Europeans.
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> *The Guardian*, 1 January 1973 (the day Britain joined the EEC)

Brexit is not Year Zero

As dawn broke on Friday, 24 June 2016, a nation struggled to make sense of the dramatic events which had unfolded overnight. From welcoming the 'Birth of New Britain' in the *Telegraph*, to the *Daily Mail*'s praise for the 'quiet people of Britain [who] rose up against an arrogant out of touch political class', to the panicky 'What the hell happens now?' question posed on the front of the *Daily Mirror*,[1] the media were as divided in their reactions to Brexit as they were in their pre-referendum allegiances. *The Times* called it an earthquake and warned that it threatened the break-up of the Union, and as the markets took a tumble in response, foreign newspapers painted Britain as an international laughing stock.[2]

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[1] Available at: www.theguardian.com/media/gallery/2016/jun/25/brexit-front-pages-in-pictures, last accessed 28 October 2019.

[2] The *New York Times* used a picture of a John Cleese lookalike stepping off the edge of a cliff in his famous Ministry of Silly Walks suit, and *Libération* found a particularly ridiculous picture of Boris Johnson to accompany their sarcastic

Plenty of more sober and reflective analysis has appeared in the years since those breathless first reactions, as the nation's journalists, politicians and academics have wrestled with the causes and consequences of the most dramatic and disruptive exercise in direct democracy Britain has ever seen. While these accounts offer a rich tapestry of different perspectives, most take a narrow view of the referendum, starting their analysis in the run-up to the campaign, and finishing it soon after the votes were cast. The longer-term social changes and political conflicts that brought us to this point are left in the background. This book moves them to centre stage. What happened on 23 June was not solely a product of the referendum campaign, and the deep divisions laid bare by the vote will not be healed by Britain's exit from the European Union (EU).[3] Brexit is the expression of conflicts which have been building in the electorate for decades, not their cause. 'Brexitland' is the name we give to our divided nation, but while Brexit gives a name and a voice to these divides, they are not new. They have their roots in trends which have been running for generations – educational expansion, mass immigration and ethnic change.

The EU Referendum itself was not so much a moment of creation, but rather a moment of awakening: a moment when the social and political processes long underway finally became obvious, and the different groups of voters finally recognised themselves as two distinct and opposed camps. We cannot understand this moment without understanding what forces it awakened, so much of this book focuses on the decades before the referendum. We show how demographic change and rising conflicts over identity put mounting pressures on the mainstream parties, but we also seek to explain why they proved able, for a while, to respond to these pressures. We want to

'Good Luck' heading, available at: www.theguardian.com/media/gallery/2016/jun/25/brexit-front-pages-in-pictures, last accessed 2 April 2020.

[3] Nor would returning to the EU heal these divides.

understand why the dam eventually burst, but we also want to know why it did not burst earlier.

In looking both to the long term and the short term, we go beyond explaining how Britain arrived at the decision to leave the EU and show how the changes which drove Brexit will continue to generate volatility and political change for many years to come. We map out how the referendum made voters acutely aware of new identity divisions and helped to forge new partisan identities rooted in these divisions. These identities are already having major effects on how British voters think of themselves, how they judge political parties and the 'other side'. These divides may continue to exert a disruptive influence for many years to come.

Our argument is presented in three parts. The first focuses on the long-term drivers of identity conflict: demographic change and its political consequences, in particular, educational expansion and ethnic change. We show how a tendency to divide the world into groups – ethnocentrism – shapes the views of different groups of voters and is structured in particular by voters' education levels and socialisation experiences. We then show how conflicts rooted in ethnocentrism had a profoundly disruptive impact in an earlier period of post-Second World War politics, as ethnocentric voters mobilised in opposition to the first wave of non-white migration.

The second part builds on this picture by discussing the political and social changes of the past twenty years, which have again mobilised these demographic divides into political competition. These include the gradual erosion of links between the traditional political parties and the electorate, the return of conflicts over immigration to the top of the political agenda, the emergence of a new party (UKIP) mobilising one pole of the identity divide, and the consolidation of voters at the other pole of the identity divide behind Labour.

The third part focuses on the EU Referendum and its aftermath. Brexit has proved to be a moment of awakening, revealing identity conflicts and forging new political identities rooted in divides over education, age and ethnicity which cut across the

traditional dividing lines of class, income and ideology. We also compare the disruptive impact of the EU Referendum in England and Wales with the very different patterns of political change in Scotland, where the impact of Brexit was layered on top of the disruptions generated by the 2014 Independence Referendum. The mobilisation of Scottish voters in the Independence Referendum itself also highlights the power of campaigns and political parties to channel similar social and identity divisions into very different outcomes. Parties do not just passively respond to social and demographic change – they help to shape its political meaning and electoral effects. We then consider the disruptive and volatile voter shifts seen in the two general elections since Brexit and contemplate some of the paths political change may take in the years to come. Finally, in the conclusion we reflect on the implications of the Brexitland story for our broader understanding of political change, showing that while the mobilisation of identity conflicts around the question of EU membership is unique to Britain, the divisions over education, ethnocentrism and identity which it has laid bare are also visible in other countries, and have growing potential to drive electoral disruptions elsewhere too. The triggering events which mobilise identity conflicts are particular to each country, but the underlying demographic trends creating such conflicts are common across many societies. We also reflect on the broader implications of Brexitland identity conflicts for British politics beyond elections, considering how the mobilisation of identity divides may impact on areas such as policy making and social cohesion.

Part I Demographic change and the emergence of new political divides over identity

Part I tells the story of how long-term social and political changes have generated new groups in the electorate with conflicting interests. Such changes have relatively minor effects from one election to the next and are next to invisible in the hurly-burly of day-to-day politics, but as they build over decades, they accumulate the potential to fundamentally shift the

balance of electoral power. In Chapter 2, we trace three develop-ments that have driven both the rise of new 'identity liberal' electorates and the decline of the formerly dominant 'identity conservative' group. First, educational expansion has opened universities, formerly the preserve of a small elite, to the masses. In two generations, this has shifted British voters' educational experience from one where the typical voter left school in their mid-teens with few or no qualifications to one where the major-ity remain in school to at least eighteen, and nearly half go on to attend university. Secondly, mass migration and rising ethnic diversity have transformed the typical experience of a young person growing up in Britain. A pensioner born in the 1940s grew up in a far more ethnically and culturally homogeneous society, and most likely had little or no contact with people of different ethnic or religious backgrounds. Her granddaughter growing up in the 2010s had a dramatically different experience, growing up in a society where ethnic and religious diversity is a normal part of everyday life for most young people. The generational structure of both these changes and, hence, of the identities and values associated with them, drives the third demographic trend we identify: the opening up of a major gen-erational divide in the electorate.

Three distinct groups have emerged in British society as a cumulative result of these changes. University expansion has driven the emergence of *conviction liberals*. University graduates have distinctive identities and values: they value individual free-doms very highly, have little attachment to traditional majority identities or values, and, crucially for our arguments, they are cosmopolitan, pro-migration and embrace diversity. They not only see diversity as a social good in itself, but also see defending diversity and minorities as an important part of their social and political identity. These anti-racism social norms align graduate conviction liberals with our second identity liberal group: ethnic minorities, whose motivations are somewhat different. For ethnic minorities, anti-racist and pro-diversity stances are not a matter of personal values but of necessity. Hostility from the majority group fundamentally impacts on their interests and

social prospects, and the experience of such hostility is a funda-mental part of ethnic minorities' social experiences and group identities. Ethnic minority voters are not consistently supportive of liberal stances on issues such as gender equality or LGBTQ rights, but they do favour strong political action to defend diver-sity and prohibit expressions of prejudice and discrimination as this is a matter of basic self-interest for ethnic minority voters. We therefore call them *necessity liberals*.

The third group structuring the identity politics divide is the antagonist to these two rising identity liberal groups. The growth of graduates and ethnic minorities is mirrored by the demographic decline in white voters who leave school with few or no educational qualifications. Until just a few decades ago these white school leavers formed a dominant majority of the electorate, and hence set the tone of politics. Their decline since has been dramatic, and the experience of this decline has been disorienting and disillusioning for them. White school leavers sense that they are rapidly losing cultural and political influ-ence, becoming a marginalised 'new minority'[4] whose concerns politicians no longer listen to or represent. This perception is not irrational – as this group shrinks, so the political incentive to respond to it also declines, particularly when its concerns con-flict with the concerns of rapidly rising identity liberal groups. This experience of change as decline is not just a reaction to individual and local circumstances. It is also a reflection of the worldview of identity conservative voters, a worldview known to academics as ethnocentrism. This is a technical term for a per-sistent tendency to see the social and political world as a battle between groups, pitting the familiar 'us' against the unfamiliar 'them'. This tendency makes this group experience demographic and social change as a threat, and as they want to slow or reverse this change, we refer to this group as *identity conservatives.*

In Chapter 3 we take a more in-depth look at the differences in the attitudes and values of identity conservatives and identity

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[4] Gest (2016).

liberals, which are key to understanding the political conflicts emerging between them. We draw on a range of survey data to paint a portrait of each group, highlighting their distinctive values and concerns. The ethnocentric worldview of *identity conservatives* has two aspects: attachment to in-groups and hostility towards out-groups. They have clear ideas about who belongs to 'us', and strong suspicions of groups deemed to fall outside the tribe. *Conviction identity liberals* see this worldview, and the political stances which flow from it, as morally wrong, and regard combatting ethnocentrism and the hostility to outsiders associated with it as a core political value. This conviction is reflected in a commitment to entrenching anti-prejudice social norms. Ethnic minority *necessity identity liberals* also strongly oppose ethnocentrism and its effects, because those effects are often visited upon them. They ally strongly with conviction liberals on identity conflicts, but do not share their broader socially liberal agenda.

The conflicts between these groups focus on group identities and group attachments, and such arguments become polarised because the stakes are high. There is wide agreement that racism is unacceptable, and strong sanctions are applied to those perceived to have violated this anti-racism social norm. But there is deep and enduring dispute about which attitudes and behaviours should be sanctioned as racism. Even among identity conservatives social identities are not fixed: the sense of who is 'us' and who is 'them', and what expressions of loyalty to 'us' and suspicion of 'them' are acceptable, is constantly evolving in response to social change. Younger generations of identity conservatives are much more comfortable with diversity than their parents or grandparents. They often resent accusations of racism and xenophobia from their identity liberal peers, as they feel they have moved away from the prejudices of their parents, but this inclusive shift is not acknowledged by identity liberal voters whose attitudes have moved further and faster. With no universally agreed rules available, the politics of identity is in part a tug-of-war over social norms, with identity liberals seeking stronger and more expansive definitions of racism sanctioning

a wider range of attitudes and behaviour, while identity conservatives push back against this process, attacking it as the unjust imposition of excessively stringent rules, which stigmatise the legitimate expression of group attachments and anxieties about change.

Having laid out the social and psychological foundations of the new identity conflicts, in Chapter 4 we tell the story of how such conflicts were first mobilised into electoral politics during the first wave of migration to Britain after the Second World War. This period of British history is rarely mentioned in conjunction with our decision to leave the EU in 2016, but it is critical for understanding the more recent identity conflicts. The first wave of sustained mass migration was the first demonstration of the disruptive power of identity conflicts, producing a wave of voter mobilisation which upended political competition and continued to reverberate in debates over multiculturalism, discrimination and identity. The new political conflicts generated more recently by another surge in immigration have interacted with, and sometimes reinforced, these older divisions. The legacy of parties' choices and rhetoric in this period has informed how voters see Labour and the Conservatives on identity issues ever since. We cannot understand the identity conflicts mobilised by Cameron, May and Farage without first understanding the forces unleashed in the era of Heath, Thatcher and Powell.

Part II Identity conflicts from New Labour to the Coalition

Part II turns to the story of how identity conflicts have become politically mobilised over the past two decades, showing how developments set in train during the New Labour governments of 1997–2010 culminated in the dramatic political shifts of the Coalition government of 2010–15, when conflicts over immigration organised identity divides into the heart of political competition. We start in Chapter 5 with a discussion of the 'long divorce' of the New Labour years, as voters and parties steadily

drifted apart. Both Labour and the Conservatives changed in ways which alienated voters and eroded traditional partisan political identities. The two governing parties converged ideologically, and their elites became dominated by identity liberal politicians recruited from a limited number of professions, reducing the differences between parties and narrowing the sections of society they represented. Voters responded to these changes with growing disaffection and disinterest, reflecting a growing belief that they were being denied a meaningful choice. This feeling was exacerbated by changes in campaign strategies – with a growing focus of resources on 'target seats' and 'swing voters', eroding contact between political parties and voters, particularly in the safe seats deemed unlikely to change hands at elections.

By the mid-2000s the consequences of these changes were already becoming clear: growing apathy and disenchantment, and a steady decline in partisan attachments. It is not a simple or inevitable process for latent discontent to shift into active antagonism, but these changes in the relationship between parties and the voters created the potential for a later, more dramatic re-alignment of voter preferences. Then, in the second half of the period of New Labour governments, an issue emerged with the ability to realise this potential, by mobilising latent discontents and identity conflicts. The issue was the very same issue that had disrupted politics decades earlier: immigration. We show how and why it rose up the agenda, and why it was such a powerful lightning rod for discontent among identity conservatives.

In Chapter 6, we examine the emergence of a new party, UKIP, which exploited the opening of political opportunity, mobilising identity conservatives to secure the strongest electoral performance by a new British party since the 1920s. We also unravel the puzzling timing of UKIP's surge. Though both the British National Party (BNP) and UK Independence Party (UKIP) grew through the 2000s, it was not until the Coalition years that the radical right revolt went mainstream. If immigration rose to the top of the political agenda in the mid-2000s, why did it take nearly a decade for a radical right party to fully capitalise on

public discontent? This delay was the consequence of an older reputational legacy from the first wave of immigration. Ever since Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher, the Conservatives had been seen as the party of immigration control. The Conservatives used this reputation to win over the anxious identity conservatives in 2010. But doing so required the setting up of expectations of radical cuts to immigration that the party was unable to meet in government. The Conservatives' reputation therefore collapsed at the start of the Coalition, and as their inability to control migration became clear, identity conservative voters turned to the radical right. UKIP surged in this period not because of their stance on Europe, which was an issue of marginal interest to most of their new voters, but because their anti-immigration stance positioned them to profit from the Conservatives' failure. The 'revolt on the right' which UKIP mobilised was a revolt of identity conservative voters fundamentally threatened by immigration, which UKIP could also link to EU free movement rights, thus tying their core political concern to the very different core concern of their new electorate.

However, although surging support for UKIP was the most dramatic electoral development of the Coalition period, it was not the only important change. There was also a 'reshuffle on the left', with identity liberals switching their votes to parties better aligned with their preferences. We examine this in Chapter 7. Coalition with the Conservatives unravelled the Liberal Democrats' electoral alliance of identity liberals, protest voters and tactical anti-Tory voters. More than one voter in eight in England and Wales switched from the Liberal Democrats to someone else during the Coalition. Protest-motivated Liberal Democrat supporters switched in large numbers to UKIP, but the biggest shift was the migration of identity liberals to Labour, tipping the balance of the Labour electoral coalition in a liberal direction.[5] At the same time, the traditional alliance of ethnic minority voters with Labour, strained by New Labour's foreign

[5] Many identity liberals also switched from the Liberal Democrats to the Greens, who secured a record election result in 2015.