**Brexit, the Leave campaign, immigration and processes of ideational change**

Edward Ashbee, Copenhagen Business School, ea.dbp@cbs.dk.

*This contribution argues that the vote to leave the EU was in large part a function of the immigration issue. It considers the processes by which immigration came to the fore and suggests that the ideational shifts that took place and the consequences that will probably follow from these can be understood in terms of reactive sequences.*

David Cameron committed himself to holding an EU referendum in January 2013. At that point the pledge was dependent upon the seemingly unlikely prospect of the Conservatives winning an overall House of Commons majority at the 2015 general election. Cameron’s move not only reflected very longstanding stresses within the party about Britain’s membership of the EU but was also shaped by much more proximate fears about UKIP’s electoral potential as well as widespread discontent on the party’s backbenches. The 2010-2015 Parliament was justly labelled the most rebellious of the post-war era. [[1]](#footnote-1) This discontent stemmed in part from the policy compromises that coalition government required and more importantly the limiting of upward mobility into government because front-bench places had to be given to Liberal Democrats. The pledge to hold the referendum may also been influenced by David Cameron’s seemingly firm personal belief that even a limited reform package would, when tied to popular risk aversion and business support for the EU, win the day for the Remain camp. Taken together, these contingent events and perceptions set off a chain reaction in the years that followed.

The predominantly Conservative grouping that organised and directed the “official” Leave campaign (*Vote Leave*) initially spoke largely in terms of market liberalism. The platform published on their homepage referred to the “£350 million” sent to Brussels “every week” and the primacy of European law but emphasized that Brexit would lead to “free trade and international cooperation”. [[2]](#footnote-2) Nonetheless, despite the early flurry of statements envisaging the UK forging a cluster of bilateral trade agreements and reaching a concord with the EU perhaps modelled on the Canadian comprehensive and economic trade agreement, the referendum campaign had a logic of its own. Indeed, over the weeks that followed the launch of the campaign, very different ideas came to the fore. All of this raises important questions about processes of ideational change.

Those who stress the importance of ideas emphasise the ways in which the perceptions of actors shape self-definitions of both location and interest and thereby bring forth change. Their approach poses a direct challenge to more rationalist accounts of politics. There are however debates within the “discursive camp” that to some degree mirror those within historical institutionalism about the character of ideational change. For a long period, accounts either explicitly or implicitly, rested on paradigms. From this perspective thinking (particular when the making of public policy is considered), rests upon “.. cognitive background assumptions that constrain decision making and institutional change ..”. [[3]](#footnote-3) Although they may come under strain, paradigms general only shift and change during periods of acute disturbance or crisis. Ideational change can thus be seen in terms of punctuated equilibrium. Such accounts have been challenged by the concept of *bricolage* that not only brings actors and the strategies they pursue back into explanations but also points to a more gradualist understanding of change whereby existing ideational legacies are transformed through processes of adaptation. Bricolage suggests that existing ideas are changed as actors pragmatically add in new ideas drawn from a multiplicity of available sources including those tied to alternative paradigms. Thus, new ideas are “.. hooked on to older ideas..”. [[4]](#footnote-4)

The stress upon the creative efforts of actors is an important corrective to paradigm theory that often seems to suggest that ideas are simply internalised and has difficulties accounting for path-departing ideational change. Yet, it perhaps places too much emphasis on agency and underestimates the ways in which particular logics roll out over time.

As noted above, the Vote Leave campaign was initially structured for the most part around economic visions, fiscal issues and questions of sovereignty. Yet, the ideas defining the campaign changed between its launch and the day of the vote. The architecture of incentives and disincentives led core actors, to use Senator Barry Goldwater’s celebrated phrase, to “go hunting where the ducks are”.

That architecture was partly shaped by the role of business interests. Although the Leave campaigners drew on backing from a limited but vocal number of business owners there is evidence of a cleavage within British capital between private companies (from where support for the Leave campaign was largely drawn) and the public limited companies as well as a divide between firms oriented to the EU, non-EU and domestic markets. Although a poll conducted by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in March 2016 indicated that eighty per cent of its members wanted to stay in the EU, (and support for continued membership was over seventy per cent among small and medium-sized firms), there are legitimate questions about the extent to which the CBI is representative of business opinion.[[5]](#footnote-5) Certainly, given some of the cleavages and the referendum’s seeming lack of salience amongst some firms, business interests never played the pivotal role that Remain campaigners had initially envisaged.

The architecture was also moulded by the search for votes. Visions of an economic future organised around a reconstruction of neoliberalism in a purer, less mediated form, have limited electoral potential even if hitched to questions of sovereignty. Given both this and business detachment, the ideational centre of gravity within the campaign shifted to immigration. By the end of May, the principal Leave campaigners, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson, had put immigration centre-stage. In an open letter to David Cameron that extended the parameters of debate they asserted:

'Voters were promised repeatedly at elections that net migration could be cut to tens of thousands … This promise is plainly not achievable as long as the UK is a member of the EU and the failure to keep it is corrosive of public trust in politics.' [[6]](#footnote-6)

The stress on immigration, the subsequent references to the numbers that might come from Turkey, Syria and Iraq, and the parallel campaigning undertaken by Leave.eu that culminated in the *Breaking* *Point* advertisement depicting a long line of migrants on the Slovenian border, gave the immigration issue an increased salience and potency. All of this in turn added to the tensions created by labour market pressures, the impact of fiscal consolidation, the long-run impact of globalisation on those without the requisite skills and the shorter-run consequences of the financial crisis. It was a message therefore that inevitably had a particular resonance in the English working-class communities that had, once upon a time, been wedded to the organised labour movement in the workplace and at the ballot box.

Against this background, public opinion tilted. Ipsos-MORI polling undertaken about ten days before the referendum indicated that immigration had become the most important issue for likely voters. More than half (52 per cent) mentioned immigration as an issue compared with 14 per cent of those intending to vote Remain. [[7]](#footnote-7) Polls also suggested that respondents grossly over-estimated the number of EU immigrants as a proportion of the British population. The figure was put on average at 15 per cent whereas it is about 5 per cent. [[8]](#footnote-8)

The shift to immigration has in turn had further consequences beyond contributing to, perhaps ensuring, a victory for Leave campaigners. Because immigration became the most visible issue of the campaign, the May government’s perceived room for manoeuvre in negotiations with EU countries has been circumscribed. The “Norway model”, which ties access to the European single market to freedom of movement, appears to have been closed off. There are also signs of a nascent electoral realignment as Brexit becomes a principal cleavage in UK politics and in future elections the Conservatives may be compelled to seek white working-class Remain votes in much greater numbers. This may explain the remarkable shift in the nature of right-wing discourse just after the vote. Commentaries have recorded the ”left-wing” character of the statements made by the contenders for the Conservative leadership in the weeks after the referendum vote. Theresa May launched the short campaign that won her the premiership by attacking inequalities and at the same time calling for an industrial strategy, infrastructural development, greater financial regulation and transformed business governance. [[9]](#footnote-9) Some remarked that there was little in her speech that could not have been said by Ed Miliband, the former Labour Party leader.

Although conceived in large part as a way of capturing the character of public policy debates rather than changes in the popular mood neither paradigms nor bricolage prove that helpful in explaining the pronounced ideational shift that took place within the Leave campaign during the weeks preceding the June 23rd vote. Instead, it is worth reconsidering path dependence. The concept is almost always understood in terms of self-reinforcing sequences whereby the outcome of chance events is solidified through increasing returns. Nonetheless, as James Mahoney has argued, in many historical accounts path dependence also takes the form of *reactive sequences*. This “.. involves reaction and counter-reaction mechanisms that give an event chain an "inherent logic" in which one event "naturally" leads to another event”. [[10]](#footnote-10)

Mahoney was considering processes of institutional change. However, the concept of reactive sequences also captures processes of ideational change in some settings. In contrast with bricolage, it inherently downplays the place of actors and focuses instead upon sequential logics. It does however explain how in 2016 core actors found themselves in a place they probably did not envisage at the beginning of the referendum campaign, why the Brexit negotiations seem to offer relatively few credible options for the UK, and what form Conservative politics may take in the years to come.

1. Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart, “The Cambusters: The Conservative European Union Referendum Rebellion

of October 2011”, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 83, No. 2, April–June 2012, 402. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vote Leave, “Vote Leave is the campaign for a Leave vote in the EU Referendum that will take place on the 23rd June 2016”, *Vote Leave*, accessed July 20th 2016, http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/campaign [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John L. Campbell, *Institutional Change and Globalization*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martin B. Carstensen, “Paradigm man vs. the bricoleur: bricolage as an alternative vision of agency in

ideational change”, *European Political Science Review*, 3: 01, March 2011, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Phillip Inman, “CBI member survey reveals huge support for remaining in EU”, *The* *Guardian*, March 15th 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/mar/15/cbi-member-survey-reveals-huge-support-for-remaining-in-eu?CMP=Share\_iOSApp\_Other [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James Tapsfield, “Admit the EU migrants will keep on coming! Boris Johnson and Michael Gove issue direct challenge to PM as referendum battle heats up”, *Daily Mail*, May 29th 2016, accessed July 20th 2016,

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3614863/Admit-EU-migrants-coming-Boris-Johnson-Michael-Gove-issue-direct-challenge-PM-referendum-battle-heats-up.html [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ipsos-MORI, Immigration is now the top issue for voters in the EU referendum”, *Ipsos MORI Political Monitor*, June 2016, accessed July 20th 2016, <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3746/Immigration-is-now-the-top-issue-for-voters-in-the-EU-referendum.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ipsos-MORI, *The Perils of Perception and the EU: Public misperceptions about the EU and how it affects life in the UK*, June 9th 2016, accessed July 20th 2016, https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3742/The-Perils-of-Perception-and-the-EU.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. theresa2016.co.uk “We can make Britain a country that works for everyone”, July 11th 2016, accessed July 20th 2016, http://www.theresa2016.co.uk/we\_can\_make\_britain\_a\_country\_that\_works\_for\_everyone [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. James Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology”, *Theory and Society*, 29:4, August 2000, 511. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)