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Brexit, the failure of the British political class, and the case for greater diversity in UK political recruitment

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Abstract

Britain's exit from the European Union on the 31st of January 2020 was the culmination of what was arguably the second major failure of statecraft by the British political class this century, following the UK's participation in the 2003 Iraq invasion. Drawing on elite theory as well as research into group behaviour, identity diversity and cognitive diversity, decision making and organisational performance, the article examines key stages of the Brexit process. The article argues that failures at each stage are attributable to a degree of 'groupthink' and 'group polarisation' linked to the relatively homogenous nature of the British political class and the structural attributes of British government. It goes on to advocate greater diversity in political recruitment and fundamental reform of modes and structures of British government.

Keywords

Brexit; Groupthink; Group Polarisation; Identity Diversity; Cognitive Diversity; Political Recruitment; Elite Theory

Introduction

The British 'political class' is disliked and distrusted (Allen and Cairney 2015). UK politicians are perceived as 'self-serving' (Osborne 2007) careerists parachuted into constituencies they neither know or understand (Allen 2013; Childs and Cowley 2011) or whose social profile they do not reflect (Cairney et al 2016). The political class (and those wishing to join it) remains strongly white, male, middle class, has higher than average levels of education, and is often the offspring of politicians themselves (Allen and Cutts 2018).

This homogeneity is mediated by the multi-level nature of modern politics (Stolz 2009) and the type of electoral system – including district magnitude – in operation (Verge 2018). But women, people of colour, working class people, and individuals from other marginalised groups are still under-represented in British politics, particularly at Westminster.

This matters for many reasons. Gender scholars argue that it reproduces the 'complex, interlocking practices and processes' (Acker, 2006) that exclude women and renews the 'homosocial capital' (Bjarnegård 2013) of male privilege and the distribution of institutional power associated with it (Waylen 2014). Similar arguments are made about the under-representation of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and the working class (Aydemir and Vliegenthart 2016). However, there is no consensus as to whether a more 'representative' political class would be transformative (Disch 2011). Political science accounts focus on 'descriptive' and 'substantive' representation (Saalfeld and Bischof 2013; Saalfeld 2011), often underpinned by a tacit assumption that minority representation is enough (Odmalm and Lees 2006).

This article contributes a different argument for breaking down established hierarchies and practices of power, drawing on research into group behaviour, identity diversity and cognitive diversity, decision making and organisational performance. Using the 2016 Brexit Referendum and its aftermath as a case study in policy failure (Bovens and t'Hart 2016), the article makes an original contribution by drawing links between elite theory (Weber 1978; Pakulski 2012; Best 2010) and the literature on

groupthink (Allison and Zelikow 1999; Turner and Pratkanis 1998), group polarisation (Brown, 1986; Myers 1982), cognition (Landemore 2013; Hong and Page 2004), and diversity and decision making (Coles et al 2015; Hassan 2015), to argue that this failure is partially attributable to the socially homogenous nature of the British political class and the modes of governance that scaffold it. The article goes on to advocate a fundamental shake-up of political recruitment in order to bring new voices into British politics and to reform the structure and practices of British government in order to make sure they are heard. The article argues that, in doing this, the British political class can renew itself and address the crisis of British politics.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. Next, it establishes the Brexit process as a case study in policy failure. Then it specifies the article's analytical framework and operationalises insights from the groupthink, group polarisation, cognition, diversity, decision making and corporate performance literatures. It then examines the historical context of the Brexit referendum, assesses the failures of the Cameron government's choice of referendum process, and explains how the Remain campaign was unable to move beyond a narrative of economic rationalism. It then briefly examines the three-and-a-half-year period between the referendum and the UK's formal exit from the European Union (EU)'s political structures on the 31st of January 2020 and discusses the capture of the Brexit debate by a minority advocating a much 'harder' Brexit than was discussed during the referendum. Finally, it links these narratives back to the analytical framework and argues for far greater diversity in political recruitment (with examples of where this has been attempted elsewhere in the world) as well as a fundamental reform of modes and structures of British government.

Brexit as a case study of policy failure

The UK has been regarded as one of the world's more stable democracies but the World Bank Index of Political Stability currently ranks it at a modest 80 out of 195 countries – ahead of Italy and France but

behind fellow Anglosphere countries like New Zealand in second place and Australia at 38. The UK's current score of 0.26 - on a scale from -2.5 (weak) to 2.5 (strong) - is located towards the low end of its historical range, between a low of 0.12 in 2009 and a high of 1.04 in 2000 (Global Economy 2018). Moreover, we know that a significant proportion of the UK population have long been ambivalent towards democracy. Eurostat polling data dating back to 1973 on 'satisfaction with democracy' in the UK consistently demonstrate significant minorities (an average of 37 percent over the period) who are 'not very' or 'not at all' satisfied with democracy (Eurobarometer 2018).

Nevertheless, British statecraft (Bulpit, 1986) is still admired by many in the EU. Talking about Brexit on social media, the Maltese politician Robert Micallef was very generous, stating: 'having served as a diplomat in Brussels I have first-hand experience of the constructive contribution by the UK in internal EU discussions advocating evidence-based policy and sound financial management. They will be missed' (Micallef 2019). Missed, perhaps, but not emulated. As the French political scientist Christian Lequesne observed: 'it's striking. Before and right after the referendum, the talk was Frexit, Nexit, Czexit. It all stopped very quickly' (Henley 2018).

One reason no-one wants to follow the UK's example is that, although it has now left the EU, it made such heavy weather of its departure. So, this article is not concerned with the *decision* to leave the EU: its focus is on the dysfunctional Brexit *process*. The article is alive to the constructed nature of the concept of policy 'failure' (see Bovens and t'Hart 2016; Opperman and Spencer 2016) but argues that, as the majority of the British political class as well as most of the UK's economic elite were opposed to Britain leaving the EU, then Brexit is the second major failure of statecraft this century, following the UK's disastrous and muddled decision-making (Robinson 2017; Chilcot 2016) around its participation in the Iraq War and its bungled aftermath (Eder 2019; Byman 2008; Dodge 2007; Bensahel 2006). This failure of process was apparent before the referendum, grew more compelling during it, and became inescapable to all but the most optimistic of Leavers in the three-and-a-half years it took to leave the EU. As a result, some British political scientists argued that the UK Conservative Party's promise to 'just get Brexit done' in the December 2019 General Election made an electoral virtue out of policy failure

in that it ‘appealed to Leavers but also ... to some Remainers who are sick to the back teeth with Brexit and want to get it over with’ (Bale in Perrigo 2019; see also Ford and Usherwood in Adam 2019). The next section of this article sets out the analytical framework for the argument that this failure is partially attributable to the homogeneous nature of the political British class and its propensity towards groupthink and group polarisation, as well as the practices of British government that amplify these tendencies.

Analytical framework

As the title of the article suggests, the focus on ‘the British political class’ engages with elite theory and its political sociology tradition, after *inter alia* Weber (1978), Aron (1950), Mills (1956), Dahrendorf (1979), Ruostetsaari (2006) and Best (2010). As Best observes, in complex societies ‘the needs of ... developing an efficient system for extracting resources that maintain and expand power structures, of legitimising systems of domination, and of enforcing central power locally induce a division of labour within and between elite groups’ (Best 2018: 331). Thus, political elites perform the representative, executive and – contingent on historical patterns of political development - the high-level strategic-administrative functions. Other sectoral elites, such as economic elites, contribute to this division of labour (Bourdieu 1996; Giddens and Stanworth 1974) and the degree to which sectoral elites share a common identity varies across political cultures and is often dependent on social and educational background – particularly higher education (Mangset 2016; Bauer and Bertin-Mouroit 1996). The article posits higher educational background as a key explanatory variable in generating the shared values associated with elites and with the consensus-seeking associated with groupthink.

However, whereas the idea of a political elite is relatively uncontentious, the notion of a political *class* is more specific (Allen 2018). This article follows von Beyme’s notion of a political class as a coherent, socially homogenous, well-educated and professionalised power group, often recruited through political parties and their scaffolding organisations (von Beyme, 1996). After von Beyme, it

focuses on both (1) who the political class is and (2) what the political class does (ibid: 83). The article's key contribution is to deploy its analytical framework to use (1) to explain the failings of (2) in the context of Brexit and to suggest how such failings might be avoided in future.

Groupthink

Groupthink occurs when significant levels of social cohesion amongst political actors incentivise consensus-seeking and make careful deliberation an unattractive option. Groupthink creates decision-making dynamics where consensus is achieved without systematically weighing all potential courses of action and often by ignoring dissonant information (Hassan 2013) thus 'exaggerating favourable consequences, downplaying unfavourable consequences, denying uneasy feelings' (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 284).

Groupthink is intuitively plausible (Turner and Pratkanis 1998) and the concept is widely used outside academia. The literature itself divides into experimental studies, which replicate the conditions under which groupthink takes place, and historical case studies that use groupthink as a theoretical lens to explain instances of 'highly consequential decision making settings' (Hassan 2013; 225), such as the Watergate cover-up (Cline 1994), NASA's decision to go ahead with the 1986 Challenger mission (Esser and Lindorfer 1989); and the Carter administration's attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran (Ridgeway, 1983). This article is in the latter tradition of retrospective analytical narrative.

Group Polarization

Group polarisation describes conditions in which group dynamics lead discussions between actors towards more extreme positions along the continuum of outcomes under discussion. Experimental research shows that, when the choices under discussion involve an element of risk, discussions can shift group members towards 'risky choices' (Gabbay et al 2018: 248), previously only favoured by minorities within the group.

Group polarisation theory makes similar assumptions to the groupthink literature about the impact of social norms and information exchange. It works from the premise that relatively cohesive social or political identities impact on the scope of political debate. Most germane to this article is the literature that examines how the consensus position of cohesive groups polarises through the deliberative process. This literature is experimental (Keating et al 2016) or based on mathematical modelling (Gabbay et al 2018).

Cognition, diversity, decision making and organisational performance

At the core of the groupthink and group polarization literature is the role of group homogeneity in decision making. The groupthink literature, in particular, is rich with suggestions as to how groupthink can be avoided. This includes the active encouragement of diverging views and the discussion of collective doubts (Hassan 2013).

This brings us to the article's central assumption: that greater diversity of protected characteristics not only enhances descriptive and substantive representation - it also leads to greater cognitive diversity, described as 'the internal, psychological property that determines how each individual sees the world, interprets its problems, and makes predictions in it' (Landemore 2013: 1212). Greater cognitive diversity does not just imply a more inclusive harnessing of 'all the talents' for more effective decision making. Two of the most powerful insights from the literature are the 'diversity trumps ability' and 'diversity prediction' theorems, associated with the work of Lu Hong and Scott Page (Hong and Page 2004, 2001; Page 2014). The former posits that, under certain conditions, a randomly selected group of better-than-average problem solvers will outperform a group of the best individual problem solvers. The latter states that the prediction of a crowd must always be equal or better than the average prediction of its members and that the more diverse the crowd is, the greater the chance of the crowd performing much better than the average (Page 2014).

This literature on cognitive diversity cross-cuts with an empirically-driven corporate governance literature that indicates that, on the balance of probability, there is a meaningful link

between greater levels of identity diversity on, for example, company boards and higher market valuations (Bernile et al 2018, Arat et al 2015). There is an assumption in the literature that women, BAME individuals, and other non-traditional board members bring new skills (Kim and Starks 2016) and outlooks to company boards. Although there are contradictory studies (Rose 2007), we find statistical correlations between various indicators of board diversity and firm value in a range of different countries, including Australia (Nguyen and Faff 2006), Denmark (Leighton 2000), and Indonesia (Darmadi 2011). This article assumes that, *ceteris paribus*, the benefits of enhanced identity diversity and cognitive diversity apply to all complex organisations, including political institutions.

Operationalising the theoretical framework

This article posits the following antecedent conditions to groupthink amongst Remain actors:

- a. Strong group cohesion
- b. Homogeneity of group members' social background and ideology
- c. Lack of norms requiring methodical procedures
- d. Clear leader preference for a decision

The more antecedent conditions are present, the more likely are one or more of the following symptoms of groupthink:

- e. Over-estimation of the in-group
- f. Pressures for uniformity

These two symptoms e and f are also consistent with group polarisation theory. The article argues that the post-referendum Brexit debate demonstrates dynamics in which:

- a. Groups make decisions that are closer to one pole of possible outcomes than the aggregate of individual preferences
- b. The pole of possible outcomes is at the extreme of the direction of individual preferences
- c. Decisions become more extreme as the time for deliberation increases

Finally, the article argues that:

- a. There is a positive relationship between relative levels of group process variables (agreement-seeking behaviour, group trust, cognitive diversity) and decision outcomes
- b. Greater identity diversity and cognitive diversity leads to better decision making and predictions about future outcomes
- c. Better decision making and predictions about future outcomes challenges orthodoxies/established ways of working and leads to improved organisational performance

Having operationalised our concepts, the article now draws upon them to structure a critical analysis of the Brexit debacle before, during, and after the Brexit referendum.

Europe, the Global Financial Crisis, and David Cameron's 'Government of Chums'

Stephen George described the UK as Europe's 'awkward partner' (George, 1990) and this notion of discomfort in UK-European relations persists. All EU member states are challenged by spill-over effects and resource dependencies created by European integration (Wessels 1997), but modes of British statecraft created particular problems (Wilks 1996). Despite this, the UK shaped many of the EU's key achievements, including the Single Market and Eastern Enlargement.

However, the tone of debate about Europe in British domestic politics never reflected its objective success. British politicians framed the UK-Europe relationship as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Even passionate pro-Europeans such as Edward Heath or Tony Blair were reluctant to move beyond economic rationalism and use the language of European identity (Young 1998). As the Remain campaign were to discover during the 2016 Referendum campaign, the fallout of the Global Financial Crisis and the subsequent policy of austerity (Blyth 2013) hollowed out a previously pragmatic acceptance of European integration on economic rationalist grounds.

Whilst a referendum on UK membership was probably inevitable at some point (Opperman 2013), the manner by which the Cameron team committed to holding the 2016 Referendum constitutes

the first obvious instance of groupthink and bad decision making. It will be recalled that the antecedent conditions for groupthink include strong group cohesion, relative insulation and homogeneity of social background and ideology. This description describes the British political class to a tee (Evans and Tilley 2017).

David Cameron came from a high status, relatively insulated and homogenous milieu. The so-called 'Cameroons' were economically and socially liberal, more at home in the metropolis than in the Shires, and shared many ideological assumptions with their coalition partners between 2010 and 2015, the Liberal Democrats. The social makeup of Cameron's 'government of chums' (D'Ancona 2015) was upper-middle class, white, male, and privately educated.

Table One about here

This homogeneity became more pronounced after the 2015 General Election. Table One sets out the composition of David Cameron's 2015 cabinet by sex, ethnicity, secondary schooling, university or college and degree subject studied. With some exceptions, the cabinet conforms to the stereotype of a homogenous group found in the groupthink literature. Of the 22 members of the cabinet, 15 were male and seven female, all but one (Sajid David, who is British Asian of Pakistani heritage) were what the UK Office of National Statistics would classify as White British, half were privately educated (compared with 9 percent of the general population) at top private schools such as Eton, St Paul's, and Charterhouse, and all but three (Tina Stowell and Patrick McLoughlin who left full-time education after school, and Iain Duncan Smith who went to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst) went on to university. Of the 19 cabinet members who went to university, eight went to Oxford, three to Cambridge, and the remaining eight went to southern English Russell Group universities (two to Bristol, one to Exeter, one to UCL) or Scotland's 'ancient' universities (two to Edinburgh, one to St Andrews). None went to 'new' or '1960s expansion' universities or any kind of university located in the English Midlands, the North of England, Wales or Northern Ireland. None of the 19 university-educated cabinet members studied for degrees in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths subjects and, of the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences subjects studied, four studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics

at Oxford, four studied History, and the others studied Law, Economics and/or Business Studies/Accounting, Politics, or Geography.

Cameron's 2015 cabinet was drawn from a very narrow spectrum of British society in terms of class, ethnicity, and sex, with an arts or social sciences background. From a less than ideal starting point in terms of diversity of backgrounds, skillsets, and (after Hong and Page 2001) cognitive diversity, the cabinet had to deliver on the Conservative commitment to hold a referendum on an issue that was to expose seething resentment against the UK political class. The referendum commitment was consistent with Cameron's previous attempts to appease his party's anti-Europeans (including his 2005 Tory leadership campaign pledge to pull Conservative MEPs out of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) group) but it was a huge risk, given the well-documented Euroscepticism amongst the British electorate. Yet some observers – including European Council President Donald Tusk – noted that Cameron was 'relaxed' about the referendum promise because he was convinced that the pro-European Liberal Democrats would still be his junior partners after the 2015 General Election and would veto a referendum. This was a high stakes gamble and the meltdown of the Liberal Democrat vote in the 2015 General Election exposed the degree of risk involved.

Tusk claimed to be 'really amazed and even shocked' (Boffey 2019) by Cameron's risk taking. He shouldn't have been. Cameron had a history of political gambles and many of those, such as the EPP pledge or the decision in the early years of his Prime Ministerial career to allow a Scottish Referendum on independence from the UK, appeared to have paid off.

So what drove Cameron's risk taking? There has been speculation about the shaping of Cameron's personality and that of fellow Old Etonians such as Boris Johnson (Buckley 2016), but, from a political science perspective, what is interesting is how these traits interact with the structure and practice of modern British politics; in particular, the increased discretion of the British Prime Minister and Core Executive (Byrne and Theakston 2018). Like Tony Blair's 'sofa government' (Bennister 2009), Cameron's informal 'friends of Dave' approach tested the resilience of the Westminster system (Diamond 2017). And as with the Blair government in the run-up to the Iraq War (Robinson 2017),

Cameron and his inner circle's preparations for the 2016 Referendum revealed another antecedent to groupthink: the lack of norms requiring methodical procedures around the Prime Minister's team that encouraged the over-estimation of the in-group, in terms of a faith in muddling through to a satisfactory outcome, as well as the illusion of unanimity amongst Cameron's inner circle (Ashcroft 2016).

The Referendum and the Remain Campaign

In the 2016 Referendum, voters were asked to decide on the most important and complex political-economic question of their lifetime. British voters were relatively Eurosceptic but, prior to the referendum, the cause of leaving the EU had little salience beyond the Conservative Party and anti-European think tanks. The referendum campaign transformed an internecine dispute into a national schism (Hobolt 2016).

Mueller (1996) posits four types of referendum: the constitutionally mandated referendum, the government-initiated referendum, the citizen-initiated veto, and the citizens' initiative. The Brexit referendum was a government-initiated referendum without a constitutional mandate, in that it was only advisory (although the government promised to honour the outcome). After Hug (1999) the government had significant agenda-setting power because it had initiated the referendum process. It could shape the mechanism of the referendum, choose the question, determine its timing, and so on. But in four key procedural issues, the government made sub-optimal choices that undermined its position.

First, a government determined to shape the framing of the referendum would have chosen a different question. Unlike the Scottish Government, which sought to maximise its chances of winning the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum with a question requiring a Yes/No answer (with Yes their preferred response), the UK government's choice of question ('Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?') offered the options of 'Remain a

member of the European Union’ or ‘Leave the European Union’. This was a mistake: research by the Leave campaign indicates that avoiding a Yes/No question was worth up to 4 percentage points for Leave (Shipman 2016).

Second, although it would not have guaranteed the status quo (Herrera and Mattozzi 2010), a minimum turnout requirement might have changed the campaign dynamics and would have enhanced the legitimacy of the eventual 52/48 outcome, which some Remainers still question. Minimum turnout requirements have not been used in previous UK referendums but they are not alien to British political life and can be found in, for example, legislation requiring Trade Union industrial disputes and strike ballots to have minimum turnouts .

Third, a government determined to defend the status quo could have inserted a requirement for a super-majority of, say, two thirds of the popular vote. Supermajority requirements are used around the world where referendum outcomes involve disruptive or constitutional change (Schwartzberg 2013). But, as touched upon earlier, the 2016 Referendum only had advisory status so no super-majority was required or stipulated.

Finally, the government could have constructed a more deliberative process to determine the UK’s future relationship with the EU. For instance, it could have learnt from New Zealand, where the eventual binding referendum in 1993 for a new electoral system was preceded by a Royal Commission and an initial non-binding referendum (Levine and Roberts 1993). This would have been consistent with the thoughts of some deliberative democratic theorists who claim that political institutions can only be regarded as legitimate if they can ‘effectively aggregate and assess disbursed information’ (Schwartzberg 2015: 195). Other scholars, by contrast, would question the *a priori* notion of an informed and objective public sphere in general or the efficacy of majoritarian direct democracy in particular (Coleman 2013; also Riker 1982). Nevertheless, even if there was no guarantee that a more informed public might have produced a different referendum result, a more informed democratic debate might have generated a degree of popular legitimacy for the final referendum outcome that is still lacking in the UK.

So, to sum up, the government chose a flawed referendum process with an ill-judged referendum question, no requirement for a super-majority, and little (meaningful or symbolic) deliberation. Once the referendum campaign was underway, both the official and unofficial Leave campaigns, Vote Leave and Leave.EU, were brutally effective; linking fears about immigration to the issue of Europe and employing sophisticated methods of data mining and voter identification. The Leave organisations' negative campaigning was also buttressed by a more positive message – that leaving the EU would allow the UK to reverse its relative decline. By contrast, the Remain campaign, Britain Stronger in Europe, failed to articulate a positive vision and relied on the familiar but no longer effective economic rationalism. As Will Straw, the executive director of Britain Stronger in Europe, remarked later, the campaign lacked an 'emotionally resonant message' and was hamstrung by its pollsters advising it that 'voters simply wanted facts on the economic impact' of leaving the EU (Straw 2019). As a result, and despite the resources behind it, Remain's campaign did not cut through with voters and was brilliantly deflected by the Leave campaign as 'Project Fear' (Shipman, 2016).

Table Two about here

It is clear why the Remain campaign failed, but why did it fail so comprehensively? It is accepted that much of the Brexit vote was driven by a desire to punish the political establishment (Goodwin and Heath 2016) and the Britain Stronger in Europe team certainly fitted the bill. Table Two sets out the composition of the Board of Britain Stronger in Europe, again by occupation, sex, ethnicity, secondary school, and university/college and degree subject. The board read like a list of the great and the good of the previous 30 years and their children – with names like Lord Mandelson, Sir Peter Wall, and Will Straw. Of the 17 members of the board, three (Damian Green, Caroline Lucas, and Lord Mandelson) were frontline politicians, two (Trevor Phillips, Danny Alexander) were former activists or parliamentarians, and two more ran London-based public relations companies. Other members of the board listed their occupations as *inter alia* banker, businessman, theatre director and university vice chancellor. 15 members would be classified as White British and two as Black British. 10 attended state schools, whilst seven were privately-educated and all but four went to university. Of these, five had

gone to Oxford, two to Cambridge, and one each to Aberdeen, Birmingham, Exeter, Reading, and Imperial College. Only the trade unionist Brendan Barber, who studied Social Sciences at City University in the 1970s, broke the pattern of Oxbridge or Russell Group institutions. Once again, we see a pronounced bias towards arts and social science subjects, with only two members of the board (Trevor Phillips, who studied Chemistry at Imperial College, and Sir Peter Wall, who studied Engineering at Cambridge) from a science background.

Britain Stronger in Europe was a little more heterogeneous than the Cameron cabinet but it remained rooted in 'progressive' centrist politics and the kind of occupations – high-flying positions in the arts, higher education, and public relations – associated with it. It is not a surprise that such strong group cohesion lead to a doubling-down on the decision – as Straw described it – to stick to the 'economic facts' (Straw 2019).

In retrospect, a Remain campaign drawing on the limited political gene pool of Britain Stronger in Europe was probably set up to fail as it lacked the kind of cognitive diversity (Hong and Page 2004; 2001) that would have generated more effective solutions to the problems it faced. The only surprise was that so many of the main players in the Remain campaign were surprised when it did fail. This lack of preparedness might explain why Remainers appeared so badly organised for the next struggle, following the referendum, to frame the debate around what kind of Brexit was politically feasible or acceptable.

Post-referendum framing of Brexit options

Pro-Remain politicians were demoralised by the 2016 referendum result and prominent Leave supporting politicians tried to set the agenda following it. Cameron and much of his inner circle, including Osborne, stepped back from the political front line. But the UK did not undergo a headlong rush towards Brexit: on the contrary, in the days after the referendum, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn

was largely ignored when he called for an immediate triggering of Article 50 and the former Remainer Theresa May defeated Eurosceptic Angela Leadsom in the race for the leadership of the Conservative Party. However, after that there was a ratcheting of the Brexit agenda away from a 'soft' Brexit, that would have reflected the close nature of the 52/48 result, towards a No Deal Brexit.

Some of this ratchet effect was more rhetorical than substantive. Theresa May's speech to the Conservative Party conference in October 2016, in which she declared 'if you believe that you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere', further polarised debate but had little practical policy impact. More important, however, were the 'red lines' she set out in the speech and re-iterated in her Lancaster House speech of January 2017. These included ending free movement, leaving the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, Single Market and Customs Union, and ending the contribution of 'huge sums' to the EU budget. The repetition of 'Brexit means Brexit' or 'No deal is better than a bad deal' meant that increasingly 'hard' Brexit scenarios could be essayed and normalised.

The triggering of Article 50 in March 2017 further energised the process of radicalisation and pushed the Overton Window of acceptable Brexit outcomes towards the extreme pole of possibilities. Despite attempts to apply the brakes, including through parliamentary interventions such as the Malthouse Compromise, the Cooper-Boles Amendment and the Cooper-Letwin Amendment, No Deal was the default outcome to the Article 50 process and increasingly an acceptable one. The mainstreaming of No Deal from an undesirable outcome - that some argued should be kept on the table as a negotiating tactic - to what was for many the most desirable outcome of the Brexit process was striking. Following Britain's exit from the EU on the 31st of January 2020, the possibility of a No Deal 'trapdoor' at the end of the 2020 transition period remains in play if there is no agreement on the UK's future economic relationship with the EU.

Discussion

Throughout this analysis, we see failures of process associated with groupthink and group polarisation, in the run-up to and in the aftermath of the June 2016 Brexit referendum. We see strong group cohesion and homogeneity in members' social background and ideology, as well as a lack of norms requiring methodical procedures, in which the increased discretion of the Prime Minister and core executive stretches the resilience of the Westminster system. In addition, after the 2016 Referendum there was a radicalisation of the Brexit debate that went beyond negotiating tactics.

Table Three about here

Table Three summarises the article's theoretical points and their application to the Brexit process. It demonstrates strong evidence of the homogeneity of the decision-making groups involved, a lack of norms requiring methodical procedures, clear leader preferences for a certain course of action, and over-estimation of the in-group. We also see decisions becoming more extreme as deliberation goes on.

So, if we accept that the premise of policy failure is partially attributable to groupthink and group polarisation, what is to be done? This article suggests two ways forward. First, the UK's culture of political recruitment must be reformed in order to diversify the political class. As discussed, greater diversity seems to improve organisational performance. Political parties should take note and introduce more pro-active measures to broaden political recruitment.

The most obvious method to broaden political recruitment is through quotas. Gender quotas are the most common and are found around the world (Thames and Williams 2013), including a 30 percent quota for the executive in Columbia, a 25 percent quota for all public administration positions in Niger, and 50 percent quotas for judicial appointments in Ecuador and Bolivia (Piscopo and Muntean 2018; Franceschet and Piscopo 2013). The driving force for much of this change was the 1995 Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, which adopted a Platform for Action pledged to 'ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision making' (United Nations 1995). However, quotas do not in themselves change the distribution of power within

organisations and scholars have advocated the adoption of more holistic gender action plans (Verge 2018, Childs 2013).

Politics around the world have been slower to adopt quotas for other groups, particularly working class and BAME communities, although there have been concerted attempts to increase the representation of indigenous groups through affirmative measures in countries such as Australia (Bobba 2019), Brazil (Schwartzman and Paiva 2014), and Canada (Rousseau 2018). However, there is no point bringing diversity to the table if these more critical and questioning voices are not heard. As Annesley and Gains observe, the core executive is 'the locus of power and where attention should be given for identifying and assessing the process of policy change' (Annesley and Gains 2010: 909). The Chilcot Inquiry has already criticised Tony Blair's 'sofa government' and the lack of checks and balances on executive discretion at the heart of British government. It is highly likely that a future enquiry into the Brexit process will make similar criticisms and come to similar conclusions.

Conclusion

This article draws on elite theory as well as experimental and historical research into group behaviour, cognition, diversity and organisational performance, and operationalises the literature in order to examine key stages of the Brexit process leading up to Britain's departure from the EU on the 31st of January 2020. The article starts from the assumption that the majority of Britain's political and economic elites were originally opposed to Brexit and that this outcome, nearly half a century after joining the EEC in 1973, can be regarded as major political failure of UK statecraft, along the lines of the British involvement in the 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath. In describing these stages of the Brexit process, the article argues that failures at each stage are attributable to a degree of 'groupthink' and 'group polarisation' linked to the relatively homogenous nature of the British political class and the structural attributes of British government.

The article goes on to argue for greater diversity in political recruitment and a reform of modes and structures of British government. This diversity is not only a good thing in terms of descriptive and substantive representation of protected characteristics in society, it is also a means of increasing the levels of cognitive diversity in decision making. Moreover, as the theoretical literature demonstrates, this is not just a question of harnessing all the talents, desirable though that may be compared with the status quo. For, as already noted, two of the most striking insights from the literature on cognitive diversity are that groups of better-than-average decision makers are at least as good and often better at both problem solving and predicting than groups of the best individual decision makers.

These insights have profound implications for both political recruitment and the kind of settings in which politics and policy making are carried out in the UK. In other words, this article argues for a fundamental reform of the political class, and the modes and mechanisms of government in which it operates. We need new voices and new arenas in which they can be heard. Only then can the UK political class renew itself, put recent failures behind it, and address the crisis of British politics on behalf of all its people.

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Table One. David Cameron's 2015 Cabinet by Sex, Ethnicity*, Secondary school, University/College**, and Degree subject

Portfolio	Minister	Sex	Ethnicity	State/Private School	University/College	Degree subject (if applicable)
<u>Prime Minister</u>	David Cameron	M	White British	Private (Eton)	Oxford (Brasenose)	Philosophy, Politics and Economics
<u>Chancellor of the Exchequer</u>	George Osborne	M	White British	Private (St Paul's)	Oxford (Magdalen)	Modern History
<u>Home Secretary</u>	Theresa May	F	White British	State (Wheatley Park)	Oxford (St Hugh's)	Geography
<u>Foreign Secretary</u>	Philip Hammond	M	White British	State (Shenfield)	Oxford (University College)	Philosophy, Politics and Economics
<u>Secretary of State for Justice/Lord Chancellor</u>	Michael Gove	M	White British	Private (Robert Gordon College)	Oxford (Lady Margaret Hall)	English
<u>Secretary of State for Defence</u>	Michael Fallon	M	White British	Private (Epsom College)	St Andrews	Classics and Ancient History
<u>Secretary of State for Work and Pensions</u>	Iain Duncan Smith	M	White British	Private (HMS Conway)	Royal Military Academy Sandhurst	N/A
<u>Secretary of State for Health</u>	Jeremy Hunt	M	White British	Private (Charterhouse)	Oxford (Magdalen)	Philosophy, Politics and Economics
<u>Leader of the House of Commons/Lord President of the Council</u>	Chris Grayling	M	White British	State (Royal Grammar School)	Cambridge (Sidney)	History
<u>Secretary of State for International Development</u>	Justine Greening	F	White British	State (Oakwood Comprehensive)	Southampton	Business Economics and Accounting
<u>Secretary of State for Education/Minister for Women and Equalities</u>	Nicky Morgan	F	White British	Private (Surbiton High School)	Oxford (St Hugh's)	Jurisprudence
<u>Leader of the House of Lords/Lord Privy Seal</u>	Tina Stowell/Baroness Stowell of Beeston	F	White British	State (Chilwell Comprehensive/Broxtowe College)	N/A	N/A
<u>Secretary of State for Transport</u>	Patrick McLoughlin	M	White British	State (Rodbaston College)	N/A	N/A
<u>Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills/President of the Board of Trade</u>	Sajid David	M	Asian British	State (Downend School)	Exeter	Economics and Politics
<u>Secretary of State for Northern Ireland</u>	Theresa Villiers	F	White British	Private (Francis Holland School)	Bristol	Laws (LLB)

<u>Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs</u>	Liz Truss	F	White British	State (Roundhay School)	Oxford (Merton)	Philosophy, Economics	Politics and
<u>Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government</u>	Greg Clark	M	White British	State (St Peter's Roman Catholic School)	Cambridge (Magdalen)	Economics	
<u>Secretary of State for Wales</u>	Stephen Crabb	M	White British	State (Tasker Milward School)	Bristol	Politics	
<u>Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster</u>	Oliver Letwin	M	White British	Private (Eton)	Cambridge (Trinity)	Philosophy	
<u>Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport</u>	John Whittingdale	M	White British	Private (Winchester)	University College London	Economics	
<u>Secretary of State for Scotland</u>	David Mundell	M	White British	State (Lockerbie Academy)	Edinburgh	Law	
<u>Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change</u>	Amber Rudd	F	White British	Private (Queen's College, London)	Edinburgh	History	

*Using Office for National Statistics categories of ethnicity from 2011 national census.

** Undergraduate degree only

Table Two. The Board of ‘Britain Stronger in Europe’ by Occupation, Sex, Ethnicity*, Secondary school, University/College**, and Degree subject

Name	Occupation	Sex	Ethnicity	State/Private School	University/College	Degree subject (if applicable)
Will Straw (Executive Director)	Think Tank (IPPR)	M	White British	State (Pimlico School)	Oxford (New College)	Philosophy, Politics and Economics
Sir Danny Alexander	Banker	M	White British	State (Lochaber High School)	Oxford (St Anne’s)	Philosophy, Politics and Economics
Sir Brendan Barber	Trade Unionist	M	White British	State (St Mary’s College)	City University	Social Sciences
Dame Janet Beer	Vice Chancellor (Liverpool)	F	White British	State (City of Bath Girls’ School)	Reading	English
Baroness Brady	Sporting Executive	F	White British	Private (Aldenham School)	N/A	N/A
Megan Dunn	Trade Unionist	F	White British	State (Wilmslow High School)	Aberdeen	Politics and International Relations
Damian Green	Politician	M	White British	State (Reading School)	Oxford (Balliol)	Philosophy, Politics and Economics
Jenny Halpern	CEO of PR company (Halpern)	F	White British	Private (Roedean School)	N/A	N/A
Jude Kelly	Theatre Director/Producer	F	White British	State (Quarry Bank Comprehensive)	Birmingham	Drama and Theatre Arts
Caroline Lucas	Politician	F	White British	Private (Malvern Girls’ College)	Exeter	English Literature
Lord Mandelson	Politician	M	White British	State (Hendon County Grammar)	Oxford (St Catherine’s)	Philosophy, Politics and Economics
Trevor Philips	Writer and Broadcaster	M	Black British	State (Queens College, Georgetown)	Imperial College	Chemistry
Richard Reed	Businessman	M	White British	Private (Batley Grammar)	Cambridge (St John’s)	Geography
Sir Stuart Rose (Chair)	Businessman and Life Peer	M	White British	Private (Bootham School)	N/A	N/A
Roland Rudd	Chairman of PR company (Finsbury)	M	White British	Private (Millfield School)	Oxford (Regent’s Park)	Philosophy and Theology
June Sarpong	Television Broadcaster	F	Black British	State (Sir George Monoux College)	N/A	N/A
Sir Peter Wall	Retired British Army officer	M	White British	Private	Cambridge (Selwyn)	Engineering

*Using Office for National Statistics categories of ethnicity from 2011 national census.

** Undergraduate degree only

Table Three. Summary of theoretical assumptions and their application to the Brexit process

Assumptions	Run-up to commitment to Referendum campaign	Referendum design and Remain campaign	Post-referendum/Article 50 etc.
<u>Groupthink</u>			
<i>Antecedent conditions</i> Strong group cohesion	✓		
Homogeneity of group members' social background and ideology.	✓	✓	
Lack of norms requiring methodical procedures.	✓	✓	✓
Clear leader preference for a certain decision.	✓	✓	✓
<i>Symptoms</i> Over-estimation of the in-group	✓	✓	✓
Pressures for uniformity	✓		✓
<u>Group Polarization</u>			✓
Groups make decisions that are closer to one pole of possible outcomes than the aggregate of individual preferences.			
The pole of possible outcomes is at the extreme of the direction of individual preferences.			✓
Decisions become more extreme as the time for deliberation increases.			✓

