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# **‘BREXIT’ AND THE SCOTS IN ENGLAND: A DIASPORA FACING UNCERTAINTY?**

**MURRAY STEWART LEITH and DUNCAN SIM**

## **Abstract**

Brexit has brought many uncertainties, especially for UK-based EU migrants. Our concern is with a much less studied group, albeit one of the largest socio-political sub-groups within England – the Scots. These migrants live in a different country but the same state, although recent constitutional decision making has not been kind to them. In 2014, they had no vote in the independence referendum and in the EU referendum they witnessed Scotland voting significantly differently to England, resulting in ongoing tensions between the UK and Scottish Governments. If Brexit leads to another independence referendum, what are the implications for Scots in England, in terms of their citizenship, identity, and residence? We explore their status in a (r)UK outside the EU, we speculate on whether some might return or if they would experience hostility within post-Brexit England. Might the current position of the English Scots tell us something about the future England-Scotland relationship?

## **Keywords**

Scotland, England, Brexit, nationalism, national identity, diaspora, constitutional politics

## **Introduction**

‘Brexit’ – the decision by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union – has resulted in many uncertainties. In the 2016 referendum, majorities in both Northern Ireland and Scotland voted to Remain but were ‘outvoted’ by the large Leave vote in England. This led to demands from Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon for another referendum on Scottish independence and from Sinn Féin politicians for a referendum on a united Ireland (Murray 2017). A vote for leaving the UK in the case of Scotland would allow the newly independent country to apply to rejoin the EU if it chose, while if Northern Ireland became part of the Irish Republic, it would automatically gain EU membership. England and Wales would then remain as a rump UK (rUK) outside the EU. It is very unclear when – or if – a second Scottish independence referendum might take place – or indeed what its outcome might be (Leith 2020). Nevertheless, the possibility of a break-up of the UK has been widely recognised (BBC 2016, Deerin 2018).

In this paper, we look at those Scots who have left Scotland to work, study and live in England. Such individuals form a diaspora but one which is outside their homeland but within the same nation state (the UK). If Brexit does lead to a Scottish exit from

the United Kingdom (a 'Scexit?'), then Scots living in rUK would find themselves in a separate state.

We begin by exploring, within the confines of this paper, the Brexit vote north and south of the border. We then discuss the nature of the Scottish diaspora in England, moving on to explore how members of this diaspora appear to view the prospect of Scottish independence, using data from research interviews. Finally, we speculate on how both Brexit and Scottish independence (if it happens) might impact on this diaspora.

## **The Politics of the Brexit Vote**

At one level, the EU referendum result is a clear vote for UK withdrawal, and the UK is, of course, the existing member state. The result was declared on a UK-wide basis, and all parts of the UK plus Gibraltar) left on 31 January 2020. Politically, however, things appear less straightforward, particularly in Scotland.

Prior to the referendum, the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon campaigned for a Remain vote, arguing that this represented the best outcome for Scotland and for the UK as a whole. She warned against Scotland 'being dragged out of the EU against its will', a result she argued was 'democratically indefensible'<sup>1</sup>. The people of Scotland have been asked to state their constitutional preferences twice, in the independence referendum of 2014 and the EU Referendum of 2016. They have indicated their wish to remain in both the UK and the EU. But, because of voting elsewhere, these preferences are seen to be incompatible, and politicians are faced with the seemingly impossible task of reconciling two contradictory results.

One solution, of course, is for Scotland to hold a second independence referendum and seek to become a fully independent country and to negotiate separately to rejoin the EU or the European Economic Area. Arguments in favour of holding a referendum could be justified by statements in the SNP's manifesto for the 2016 Holyrood elections, that said the Scottish Parliament should have the right to hold another referendum if 'there is a significant and material change in the circumstances that prevailed in 2014, such as Scotland being taken out of the EU against our will' (SNP 2016: 24). It has also been suggested that, as a result of the Brexit vote, a number of individuals, who opposed independence in 2014 have changed their minds (Cairney 2016), although the position is unclear and polling figures are variable. What is clear at this point is that any discussion around Scotland's constitutional position within the UK, and its relationship to the EU, is ongoing (Leith and Sim, 2020)

The Westminster government has clearly refused to sanction a second independence referendum at this time. The December 2019 General Election

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, <http://www.politico.eu/article/nicola-sturgeon-scotland-will-not-be-dragged-out-of-the-eu/>

results, however, with a large Conservative majority at Westminster and the SNP increasingly dominant in Scotland, mean that ongoing constitutional tensions are inevitable. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon had previously stated her desire to hold a second independence referendum in 2020, but Prime Minister Boris Johnson has made his opposition clear. Thus, whatever the final outcome of the Brexit negotiations, or negotiations between Holyrood and Westminster, it is clear that Scottish independence remains part of the ongoing political agenda, even though some (Johnson included) viewed the 2014 referendum as a 'once in a generation' event (Dekavalla 2016).

During the EU referendum campaign, there was a significant focus on migration and an apparent desire by many to see levels of immigration to the UK reduced. Understandably, the debate focused almost entirely on movement from other EU countries into the UK and there was little discussion regarding migration *within* the British Isles (including Ireland, which shares a Common Travel Area with the UK). Nevertheless, there is evidence, since the referendum, of hostility and hate crimes directed not only at European citizens in the UK (Burnett 2017), but also at people of colour and at non-English people living in England (these points are also discussed by other papers in this volume, see Clark, or Pietka-Nykaza). This would reflect the view of political scientists like Curtice (2016) and Henderson *et al* (2016) that the Brexit vote was very much an expression of English nationalism.

There is a history of tension, and even hostility, between the different nations living within the British Isles. Within England, there is evidence of this directed against the Irish (Hickman *et al* 2005, Ryan 2007), against the Welsh (Parker 2007) and the Scots (Ichijo 2004). There is also, of course, anti-Englishness evident within Scotland (McIntosh *et al* 2004). Since the Brexit vote, it has been suggested that such hostility has increased, with Cosslett (2018), for example, suggesting that Brexit has reinforced an English sense of cultural superiority towards the Welsh, and Carswell (2019), identifying an increase in Irish people leaving the UK to return to Ireland, often as a result of anti-Irish racism.

This evidence led us to think about the position of the Scottish diaspora living within England and their feelings, particularly towards a second Scottish independence referendum, which might leave them 'stranded' in an England not well disposed towards them. As part of our research with this diaspora, we investigated such issues in 2012, prior to the Independence and Brexit referenda taking place. This allows us the opportunity to consider the results of our detailed interviews. They provide useful information on the thinking of the diaspora not only in regards to Scotland, Scottish constitutional matters and the wider relationships of the UK and the EU, but also before the situation was so strongly impacted and fixated by Brexit itself.

## **Methodology**

The interviews which we conducted were semi-structured and took place in two different locations. The first of these was Merseyside, reflecting the area's long tradition of Scottish settlement; in the mid-nineteenth century, 4% of the city of Liverpool's population was born in Scotland (Sim 2011). There have been a number

of Scottish organisations locally, albeit many are now rather moribund. In 2011, the Scots-born population in the city was only 3,196 (0.7% of the total) (Leith and Sim 2020).

The second area of study was Shropshire. This contrasted with Merseyside in being less urban, without a tradition of Scottish settlement, and with a limited number of Scottish organisations. This enabled us to explore differences in a sense of Scottish identity and attitudes to the homeland, between two contrasting locations. Shropshire's Scots-born population in the 2011 census was 3,828, representing 1.2% of the county's population. The numbers of Scots-born have remained fairly constant, although there is no significant, obvious tradition of Scottish migration to the area.

Initial contact was made with members and office bearers of several Scottish societies to identify potential interviewees and samples then 'snowballed' to other contacts and friends. Thus, our eventual group of interviewees comprised a range of individuals with varied Scottish origins and connections; only eight, for example, were actively involved with Scottish organisations. A total of 13 people were interviewed in Merseyside, and 9 in Shropshire. There were 11 males and 11 females interviewed and the average age was 61. In all, 16 interviewees had been born and brought up in Scotland, while the other six had been born in England of Scottish parentage. Our sample was not large, but the length of the interviews yielded a wealth of data and, by relating it to other research, we believe it to be representative of elements of the Scottish diaspora in England.

Each interview lasted up to an hour and was recorded and later transcribed. Interviewees were asked about a range of issues, including personal histories, questions of identity, their knowledge of Scottish politics and attitudes to both devolution and independence. As noted above, Brexit was not discussed in the interviews, as this was prior to the EU referendum, but in the absence of more up-to-date qualitative data on the Scots in England, we believe that our work helps to illuminate some of the present debates on the impact of Brexit on the future of the UK. This is especially the case with attitudes towards Scottish people in England. We use a number of quotations from our interviews to illustrate our discussion in the remainder of this paper.

## **The Scots in England**

It was Dr Samuel Johnson who famously remarked that 'the noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees is the high road that leads him to England' (Mack 2006, p53). In practice, however, the numbers who moved south have not been great, comprising a relatively small proportion of England's population. The 1851 Census, for example, recorded 130,087 people of Scottish birth living in England, representing just 0.7 per cent of the total population. This eventually rose to a high of 1.7 per cent in 1971 but thereafter the proportion has fallen and, at the 2011 Census, there were 708,872 Scots-born in England, amounting to 1.3 per cent of the total population (Leith and Sim 2020).

Although London was always an important destination, the proportion of Scots in London has generally been quite low, only rising to a peak of 1.9 per cent in the immediate post-war period (Leith and Sim 2020). In fact, much of the nineteenth century emigration southwards was towards northern English cities such as Newcastle and Liverpool, where expanding industries provided significant employment opportunities (Dennis 1984). There were also exceptional examples of Scottish migration such as Corby, where in 1932, the iron and steel company Stewarts and Lloyds established a new plant, to take advantage of local ironstone deposits. Labour was imported from existing works in Lanarkshire and Corby expanded into a substantial new town (Pocock 1960). Even in 2011, 12.7 per cent of Corby's population was Scots-born, and there were a number of active Scottish associations (Harper 2013).

Because of the proximity of the Scottish homeland, it has remained important for holidays and family visits. Perhaps because of this closeness, many Scots in England have felt it unnecessary to maintain their sense of identity through Scottish associations, and previous research (Leith and Sim 2012) has shown that many Scottish organisations in England have folded. One of our interviewees explained why he thought that was the case:

I wonder if that is because Scotland and America have this big pond in between. In England, Scotland is just 'up there', three hours drive away. Is it that Scotland is now too close? In other words, if you want to see a Highland Games, you can go and see them in Scotland. Motorways make it really simple. Also, most society members are second generation Scots and maybe less jingoistic than thirty, forty, fifty years ago (Male, aged 68, Merseyside).

Although Scots in England may keep close ties with the homeland, they seem to have shown relatively little interest in homeland politics, in contrast to the Irish diaspora (Arthur 1991). Significantly, they have been unable to vote in Scottish elections and referendums, as the franchises for these have been based on residency. This has meant that EU nationals resident in Scotland were able to vote in the independence referendum in 2014, whereas Scots living outside Scotland were not. Scots in England have therefore had to watch from the sidelines as their country has undergone significant constitutional change, with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and a referendum to determine if Scotland ultimately became an independent state.

At the same time, and perhaps related to the point that Scots in England have historically shown little interest in Scottish politics, Scots resident in other parts of the UK enjoy full citizenship and equal rights with all other UK nationals'. This means they do vote, and can stand as candidates, in their local communities and parliamentary constituencies. There is a clear history of Scottish born/raised individuals being elected to Parliament and local councils from non-Scottish areas. Likewise, there is a more recent history of non-Scottish born/raised individuals being elected to the Scottish Parliament. For example, Richard Leonard, who became Leader of the Scottish Labour party in 2017, was born and raised in Yorkshire.

The Scottish Government's Referendum (Franchise) Act of 2013 was noteworthy principally for the extension of voting rights to 16 and 17 year-olds. The exclusion of Scots living in other parts of the UK, coupled with the inclusion of residents originally from elsewhere was seen as relatively uncontroversial (Mycock 2014). As Mycock notes, Corby councillor, Rob McKellar, ran an unsuccessful campaign to ensure that 'anybody who is entitled to hold a Scottish passport under the Scottish National Party's regime should be allowed to vote'. Meanwhile, an Edinburgh law graduate, James Wallace, working in England, began a 'Let Wallace Vote' campaign in January 2012. His campaign attracted media coverage, but little support and the petition he set up gained only 811 signatures before being closed six months later.

The picture which emerges is therefore one in which the Scots in England realise that their country is changing but appear somewhat resigned to the change, or at least accepting of the fact that they themselves will have no say in the process. We move on therefore to explore the views of our interviewees to ascertain their attitudes to Scottish constitutional change.

### **Scottish politics: views from England**

During our interviews, we asked people if they supported the existing constitutional settlement, with a devolved Scottish Parliament operating in Edinburgh. Some interviewees felt that they did not know enough about it, but those who did were almost all supportive.

I think it's a good idea for the Scottish Parliament to deal with affairs in Scotland rather than the English central government telling the Scots what to do. I think it's working (Male, aged 48, Merseyside).

I think it is a good thing that there is a Scottish Parliament, as people should make decisions about their own country. The English should have one (Female, aged 71, Shropshire).

Indeed, one or two interviewees had kept themselves well informed about the policies which the Parliament had pursued:

When I was up visiting a friend of mine who lives in Edinburgh, I went round the Scottish Parliament and I thought it was wonderful ... I have to say, a lot of what's going on in the Scottish Parliament actually works down in England. The smoking ban started in Scotland, and eventually came here. Free bus passes certainly started in Scotland then came in here. My view – and I'm not an expert – is that the Scottish Parliament seems quite go-ahead and doing quite well (Male, aged 70, Merseyside).

Only one of our diaspora interviewees in England was wholeheartedly against devolution, regarding it as 'just another very expensive layer of administration and jobs for the boys' (Male, aged 68, Shropshire). This reflects the general finding among the Scottish population. For instance, in a recent survey, only 16% of respondents in Scotland thought the Scottish Parliament should be abolished (whatscotlandthinks.org, 2020). At the same time, it is, of course, relatively easy to

express support for an institution which already exists and which has not disturbed the status quo in England, where our interviewees lived. We were keen, however, to explore if such support would be extended to a fully independent Scotland; this was an issue which many people had considered and which produced a range of responses.

Some supported independence and expressed support for the Scottish National Party, often justifying their views with reference to Scotland's distinctive identity and the perceived remoteness of London, in relation to socio-political issues in Scotland.

I often say, when the elections come along, I wish I was in Scotland because I'd know how to vote. I just think all the parties down here are as bad as each other and I think if I was in Scotland, I would vote SNP. ... Scotland has a way of making money itself without sending it all down to England (Female, aged 58, Merseyside).

I think independence would be a good idea ... If I could I would vote for it (Female, aged 50, Merseyside)

Personally, I would have no problem with Scotland being independent. I'm not sure, in terms of the operational details, you could deliver true independence, because England and Scotland and Wales are so inextricably linked at the moment in terms of financial arrangements etc etc. It seems to me there must be some problems. But the people of the country have to make the decision and they should be allowed to make that decision (Male, aged 68, Merseyside).

This last quotation reflected the views of a number of other interviewees who, while acknowledging the possibility of Scottish independence, and to an extent supporting it, nevertheless believed that it might be problematic and possibly not achievable.

I do have mixed feelings about this. I can see some advantages for Scotland – but wonder whether total independence from the rest of the UK would really be that workable (Male, aged 70, Shropshire).

Cautious welcome. I was an active member of the SNP in the 1970s, but ... I like being Scottish and I like living in England. So there is a British connection and I'm not sure what would come about as a result of changes (Male, aged 62, Shropshire).

A number of interviewees recognised that independence was an issue on the political agenda, but expressed their sadness if it actually came to pass.

I think that's a little bit sad to split up a small island. I'd be sad if Scotland were completely independent but I haven't given it any thought. (Female, aged 60, Merseyside).

I would find it sad because I keep coming back to the fact that Britain's a small country in the world nowadays. It's lost its Empire, it's not as strong as it was.

In my opinion, we should still stick together and make it a better place ... I would hate to have to have a passport to cross the border (Male, aged 70, Merseyside).

Only one interviewee – a man in Shropshire in his late 60s – stated an outright opposition to Scottish independence, suggesting that it would be his ‘worst ever nightmare’. There were, however, a couple of interviewees who, while unenthusiastic, recognised that it was an issue for those living in Scotland and so they were resigned to the possibility of it happening.

I don't really mind either way. It's up to those who live there (Female, aged 20, Shropshire).

I don't live in Scotland so I don't get to decide what goes on up there do I? (Male aged 57, Shropshire).

It is clear therefore that opinions regarding Scottish independence varied within the Scottish diaspora in England, with some supporting it and others expressing their regret if it eventually occurred. Such opinions seemed to be reflective of the 2014 Independence result in Scotland itself.

As we indicated above, our interviews were conducted prior to the Brexit referendum but they provide us with information on attitudes to independence from within the Scottish diaspora in England. We move on now to speculate on the likely implications for this diaspora if Brexit does indeed lead to Scottish independence. We use the views of our interviewees to help inform our thinking.

### **Post-Brexit, post-Independence?**

At the time of writing, the final shape of the post-Brexit landscape is still unclear. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic clearly shifted the immediate focus of both government and populace in Scotland and the wider UK. But it seems certain that, so long as the Scottish Government is formed by the SNP, they will continue to press for a second independence referendum. The outcome of such a referendum is hard to predict but the SNP has continued to prepare the ground, firstly through the work of its Sustainable Growth Commission (2018), which sought to address many of the issues concerning the economy and currency which were thought to have created problems for the independence campaign in 2014, and secondly by passing legislation to pave the way for a future referendum.

It has been suggested that a ‘yes’ vote for independence is more likely now than in 2014, because an independent Scotland is now more economically attractive (Clark 2017), with Brexit being a ‘game changer’. Although there are many who would regret the break-up of the Union in this way, a poll in the *Daily Telegraph* indicated that Brexit was more important to voters than keeping the UK together; 60 per cent of their sample supported this view (Riley-Smith 2017). We therefore speculate that Brexit might indeed lead to Scottish independence and now explore the likely impacts on the Scottish diaspora in England.

The first impact, of course, would be that diaspora Scots would be living in a separate nation state. It seems unlikely that this in itself would affect movement of diaspora Scots back to the homeland. The UK has a substantial population of individuals born in Ireland or with ancestral connections there. Because the UK and Ireland share a Common Travel Area (Ryan 2001), there is no reason to assume that such an arrangement would not also apply between separate rUK and Scottish states. Certainly, those interviewees who told us that they did not wish to have to use a passport to visit Scotland would be reassured by such an arrangement.

A key issue for diaspora members might, however, be citizenship, with individuals choosing between retaining their British citizenship or opting instead to become citizens of a newly independent Scotland. The Scottish Government has made clear that 'Scottish-born British citizens living outside of Scotland will automatically be considered Scottish citizens' (Scottish Government 2013). This would include the *lived* diaspora (those born in Scotland). Those within the *ancestral* diaspora (those not born in Scotland but with Scottish ancestry) would also be able to apply for Scottish citizenship.

A second issue for diaspora Scots is whether they might be attracted to return to an independent Scotland. Some in our sample suggested that they would vote for independence if they still lived in Scotland but making a permanent move back might be difficult. Although there is limited research on contemporary migrant return, the evidence suggests that most returners are in fact younger and in employment. Findlay *et al* (2008), for example, identified a reduction in the numbers of Scots in London and suggested that this was due in part to return migration back to Scotland. Two-thirds of returners were aged between 15 and 44, suggesting young active people contributing to the labour market and Findlay *et al* wondered if this return movement reflected a view that quality of life might be better in Scotland. Similarly, McCollum (2011), analysing those who moved from Scotland and returned between the 2001 and 2011 Censuses suggested that these returners were likely to be employed, have a degree or professional qualification and be in higher status jobs.

Employment is therefore a key factor in decisions about return. Boyle and Motherwell (2005), interviewing Scots working in Dublin during Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' period, found that few would return without significant job opportunities in the homeland – while recognising the importance of family connections and the Scottish quality of life. It is in this context that the Fresh Talent Initiative (Scottish Executive 2004) was important and between 2005 and 2008, 7620 applications to live in Scotland were granted; it was an important statement by the Scottish Government of the need to attract individuals to Scotland, including returning diaspora. If an independent Scotland chose to rejoin the EU – or at least the EEA, this might lead to a boost in employment and prove to be attractive to potential returners. But as many of our interviewees were older, it is unclear if many would return to Scotland in their retirement.

Scots in England who are unwilling or unable to return may face the prospect of being 'foreigners' within rUK and a third potential consequence of Scottish independence might be hostility towards them. There are, after all, numerous and

well-documented examples of racism directed towards the Irish diaspora in England (Hickman *et al* 2005).

As we have noted earlier, there have already been racist incidents involving (particularly eastern) Europeans as well as other minorities, following the Brexit vote (Burnett 2017). We suggest that, in line with incidences of anti-Irish racism, there is a possibility of a similar increase in hostility towards Scots living in England. Indeed, it may already be happening as a result of the debates surrounding the independence referendum. Ichijo (2004) refers to the way in which Scots have been portrayed as 'subsidy junkies', while Tony Blair apparently referred to 'whingeing Jocks' (Campbell 2010) and interviewer Jeremy Paxman was critical of what he called a 'Scottish Raj' in England (Aughey 2007). The former editor of the *Sun* newspaper, Kelvin Mackenzie, has referred to Scotland pejoratively as 'Jockistan' (McLeod 2015). Post-Brexit, there has already been some media coverage of anti-Scottish feelings (Frith 2016), while the findings of the *Daily Telegraph* poll which we refer to above suggest that many in England are actually indifferent to Scotland and the Union.

We did not specifically ask our interviewees about any anti-Scottish experiences, but some did refer to negative stereotyping:

Oh, I get all the stereotypes at work – although as I'm senior staff it is all good humoured. They do not want to get on the wrong side of me! ... People think we still run around in the hills I think – *Braveheart* didn't help (Male, aged 57, Shropshire).

Most of my English friends think that Scottish people are more violent than the English and they drink a lot more alcohol and have poorer diets. They also seem to think they swear a lot more too (Female, aged 20s, Shropshire).

And one interviewee reported that she had often been asked 'why so many Scots were down in England'. While she felt that, for the most part, the questions were benign, she believed that there were undertones to the questioning that were 'not nice'.

## Conclusions

This paper has explored the Scottish diaspora in England – a group which has largely been ignored in the current debates about Brexit and a possible second Scottish independence referendum. This diaspora is unusual in that it comprises migrants from Scotland and their descendants who have moved from their homeland but remained within the same state. If Brexit leads ultimately to the breakup of the Union, then these individuals will effectively find themselves in a separate nation state. This is a fate which has befallen individuals elsewhere, for example Russians living in the Baltic States who found themselves living in new nation states after the breakup of the Soviet Union (Kirch *et al* 1993).

The Scots in England are politically empowered in that they have a vote for the state legislature just like every other citizen. But they are power/less in relation to their homeland, unable to vote in the 2014 independence referendum and unable directly

to influence Scottish politics. If there is a second referendum, it seems likely that the franchise will again be based on residence and so Scots in England (and other areas of the UK outside Scotland) will again be unable to vote.

Our research sought to explore this situation and the extent to which this mattered to this diaspora. Did the Scots in England feel disempowered and was this a significant matter of concern? Despite some high profile interventions such as the 'Let Wallace Vote' campaign in 2014, these had only limited impact and there appears to have been an acceptance that the diaspora would not be able to participate. Our interviewees appeared to be well informed regarding the issue of Scottish independence, and related constitutional issues around this such as devolution, but recognised and respected that this was essentially a matter for those resident and living within Scotland itself.

Yet there may have been a significant, but as yet full unrecognised change to this situation. One of the more socio-political obvious results of the Brexit vote appears to have been a significant upwelling of what might be termed 'English nationalism', a trend identified by several academic and journalist commentators (Henderson *et al* 2016, Kenny 2016), and often linked to a hostility towards migrants and those thought to be 'foreign' or 'outsiders' (Boyle 2017). If such hostility is directed towards the Scots, then this could lead to the diaspora feeling more isolated and increasingly 'othered' within England. Might this lead to further attempts to gain a vote in a second independence referendum? Might it lead to some Scots deciding to move back to Scotland, post-Brexit? At the time of writing, the only thing of which we can be certain is that, where issues of identity, belonging and citizenship are concerned, the Brexit vote has opened a Pandora's box – one that many politicians would perhaps probably preferred to have kept closed.

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