UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE

COMFORTABLE LEAVERS:

THE EXPECTATIONS AND HOPES OF THE OVERLOOKED BREXIT VOTERS

BRIEFING PAPER

FOREWORD

This briefing paper which draws on workshops conducted by NatCen in summer 2020 with a group of voters we have labelled 'Comfortable Leavers'. Often overlooked, in favour of narratives that have emphasised the role of the 'left behind,' we thought it important to understand what this sizeable part of the Leave vote thought about Brexit and hoped for the future of the country.

I would like to thank the paper's authors, Paula Surridge, Alan Wager and Dan Wincott for all their hard work. John-Paul Salter picked up any remaining typos and errors, and last but not least, Navjyot Lehl coordinated the entire process.

I very much hope that you find what follows interesting and informative.

Anand Menon, Director, UK in a Changing Europe

SUMMARY

In commentary on Brexit an image of the Leave voter who is personally 'left behind' and from a post-industrial Northern area or dilapidated seaside town has taken hold. However, while many faced sharp economic challenges, almost half of Leave voters were relatively well off. Some could be considered affluent, but on the whole the group is better understood as comfortable rather than wealthy.

This briefing paper focuses on the hope and fears, aspirations and concerns, and prorities and expectations of these 'Comfortable Leavers'. It draws on workshops conducted by NatCen Social Research for UK in a Changing Europe in summer 2020, in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic and prior to the Brexit deal being struck. Full details of these workshops and an in-depth analysis can be found in the accompanying report by NatCen.

KEY POINTS

- Expectations of personal economic benefits from Brexit were modest. Across Britain, our research found little evidence that Comfortable Leavers expect big economic changes or an immediate transformation of their lives or neighbourhoods after Brexit.

- Brexit was seen as representing an opportunity for transformational change in the country more widely. Comfortable Leavers expressed dissatisfaction with many aspects of the fabric of British society. They saw leaving the EU as an opportunity to address the things they thought had gone wrong. This was often expressed in terms of loss: of industry, community services or national pride.

- Comfortable Leavers wanted to see investment in their country and their local areas. This was often expressed in terms of local and national pride rather than in straightforwardly economic terms. While they were often strongly anti-welfare their support for government investment in public services – the police and armed forces as well as the NHS and social care – was equally clear. They were concerned about immigration but often more scathing about the groups in Britain they perceived as relying on benefits than about immigrant groups.

- Comfortable Leavers across Britain share many attitudes and values, some differences were also clear. Scotland, not Britain, was the reference point for Scottish Comfortable Leavers. While for Comfortable Leavers in England and Wales there was far more support for UK-wide solutions, albeit with a recognition of the needs of specific locations, and little enthusiasm for devolution.

The Leave voting coalition shares priorities beyond Brexit, and these could form the basis for a longer-term voter alliance across the income divide — the kind of post-Brexit realignment of politics that has featured heavily in accounts of the 2019 general election. But there are key differences within this coalition, particularly around government support for those on low incomes, in insecure jobs or out of work.

Dominant narratives of the Brexit vote have centred on 'left behind' Leavers and neglected the Comfortable Leavers discussed here. The expectations and motivations of this group are important for understanding how voters might respond to the changed political landscape of 2021 and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Brexit divided Britain into two tribes: Leavers — typically older socially conservative voters who live in villages, towns and smaller cities — and Remainers — generally younger, university-educated and city-dwelling. An image of the left-behind Leave voter has taken hold: a poorly educated inhabitant of a faded seaside town or the grim, post-industrial North. But we forget too easily that no place (or group of people) is wholly homogenous. Many people voted for Brexit even in the most pro-Remain places; more than a million people in Scotland and 1.5 million in London voted Leave. Many Leavers faced sharp economic challenges, but almost half were relatively well off. Some could be considered affluent, but the group as a whole is better understood as comfortable rather than wealthy. This research focuses on the hopes and fears, aspirations and concerns of these 'Comfortable Leavers'.

The analysis presented here draws on eight deliberative conducted by NatCen Social Research for UK in a Changing Europe in the summer of 2020. Full details of these are presented in NatCen's accompanying report.

There have been few attempts to map the contours of the Leave vote and understand differences within it, distinct from attempts to delineate the Leave and Remain votes. Kirby Swales of Natcen has identified five segments in the electorate, two of which predominantly voted Remain ('Middle class liberals' and 'Younger working-class Labour voters') each accounting for around a quarter of the electorate; and three that voted Leave. The analysis presented here is inspired by these Leave groupings and so it is worth outlining them in a little more detail. The first group are the 'Economically deprived, anti-immigration' group, 95% of whom voted Leave. This group comprises 12% of the electorate (or around one quarter of the Leave vote) and is very likely to have a low household income (less than £2,200 per month). Then there are the 'Older working classes', of whom 73% voted Leave. This group are very similar to the first in terms of their household incomes but are significantly older (an average age of 71 compared to 47).

They comprise 16% of the total electorate or around 30% of the Leave vote. The final group are the 'Affluent Eurosceptics', comprising 23% of the electorate, and almost half of the Leave vote. These are the 'Comfortable Leavers' discussed here.

Despite their different economic positions, low-income and Comfortable Leavers share many hopes and aspirations for Brexit and priorities for the post-Brexit future. In one sense, the similarity of their views should not come as a shock: we know from survey research that the Brexit divide is not economic. Comparing the two groups finds that the Leave 'tribe' shares a sense of domestic priorities that require significant further investment: the police and fighting crime; the NHS and care workers; bringing back proper, secure work for high quality domestic production — as well as apprenticeships in real jobs.

EXPECTATIONS FOR BREXIT

The workshops were as revealing for what they didn't say about Brexit as what they did. Expectations of direct change from Brexit were modest. There were no simple expectations of plain sailing to the 'sunlit uplands'. The workshops took place while negotiations with the EU were still on-going and all the groups expected some initial economic turbulence.

In contrast, however, expectations for change more generally were high. The participants expressed dissatisfaction with a range of aspects of British society, with funding for public services often the key issue. Voting for Brexit was, for many participants, a way of signalling a more general need for change.

> 'So, whilst Brexit might not automatically look at those kinds of issues, at least there's something where change triggers change…I don't know whether it'll be the biggest mistake we've ever made, but I feel like we need to do something, because it could be the best things we've ever done. (Female, West Midlands)

> '…it's all about our community and our government, and until our government decides to invest and support infrastructure in this country…Brexit is irrelevant.' (Male, Yorkshire and Humberside)

> '…it can only have a positive effect on enabling local areas to improve their infrastructure, health, police and services that require lots of investment.' (Male, South West)

> 'That's what I'm hoping that happens as a result of Brexit. Start to invest in our country again.' (Female, Yorkshire and Humberside)

This need for inward investment in areas has been seen as a core motivation for the low-income Leave voter in 'left-behind' places, but also came through strongly in these workshops. For the Comfortable Leavers this was rarely expressed in personal economic terms. Often, it was expressed as a national problem, not one directly concerned with their own immediate neighbourhood. Many of the Comfortable Leavers liked where they lived, they spoke about access to green spaces, shopping malls and local amenities but were aware of areas close by where they saw problems of crime and anti-social behaviour, a lack of opportunities for young people and loss of local manufacturing industry. They believed that Brexit would free up funding for some of this investment.

> '…some of the money that I think we will save by leaving Brexit get invested into the right areas..It's all about funding, isn't it… the police force has suffered, schools are suffering and also local communities, youth clubs. It'd be nice to see some of the money that gets saved being put back into help improve communities.' (Male, Yorkshire and Humberside)

If they did not expect their own economic fortunes to improve, workshop participants were hopeful that the UK would feel some economic benefits from Brexit. This hope was usually expressed as an opportunity to revive industries that had suffered or been lost. Among these, heavy industry, such as steel and manufacturing and food production (not least fishing) were particularly prominent.

> 'I would like to see British manufacturers come back in and build our industry back up. But we haven't got the infrastructure, so I think it's going to be more of a long-term project in developing that infrastructure, building the British manufacturing industry back up. That's what I would like to see in the future, and more as a long-term goal.' (Female, Wales)

> 'I'm hopeful that in time, manufacturing, there'll be an increase in manufacturing in this country, that yes, that we'll start seeing things are more British-made, instead of relying on other countries.' (Female, West Midlands)

It would be wrong to suggest that the Comfortable Leavers expected no difficulties to arise from Brexit (the uncertainty about the final shape of any Brexit deal was often mentioned when discussions turned to the economic impact of Brexit), but there was some recognition that their own 'comfortable' positions sheltered them from the bumpy roads ahead.

> '…seeing an increase in daily items, your daily shopping. Seeing an increase in prices across the board, really, whether it's outings with the kids. We'll probably see an increase in holidays…' (Female, West Midlands)

'Regardless of what happens, there's going to be disruption. After a period of disruption, I think you'll find businessmen in Europe, in the UK…businessmen will do business, and they'll find a way to do it.' (Male, Scotland)

'Potentially we could see a bigger divide between those who have and those who haven't. (Female, West Midlands)

'I think I agree…I think the great difficulties is going to be families that are affected that are low-income families. I think it will affect them more greatly than I think the majority of us middle class…' (Female, West Midlands)

IMMIGRATION AND WELFARE

The discussions in the workshops often turned quickly to immigration as an issue where Brexit was perceived as giving control back to the UK Government. These discussions were often quite nuanced, drawing distinctions between immigration from the EU and elsewhere and between low and high skilled workers. The Comfortable Leavers drew attention to their perceptions of problems in the immigration system around EU freedom of movement and immigration from countries outside of the EU. They also at times drew on the narratives of the Leave campaign about being a small island.

'I run a number of small businesses and one of the businesses is quite software-dependent. I've never understood the mentality of allowing a European to come in and do those jobs but not allow, for example, Indian programmers. (Male, Yorkshire and Humberside)

'…give chance for UK worked to access that role first. If they can't then that job should be opened up to everybody in the world. Everybody in the world should have an equal chance to be employed in the UK if we need employees of whatever kind in the UK.' (Male, Yorkshire and Humberside)

'We do have to limit. We cannot afford to, as a small island, we can't afford to be overpopulated.' (Female, West Midlands)

While some of the Comfortable Leavers expressed the view that migrants came to the UK because it was an 'easy touch', some of the most scathing critiques were reserved for British people on benefits who were at times contrasted unfavourably with migrant workers who would do jobs the British did not want.

'…they come to our country for our benefits. If they didn't get nowt, they wouldn't come.' (Male, East of England)

'It's too easy to come into this country, come in and get benefits and everything else. We've got to be stricter.' (Female, South West)

'The English are feral, and they were fed for years and years off, if you stubbed your toe you got Disability Living Allowance for the rest of your life…The English need to be retrained that, to feed your family, if you have to go and scrub toilets…that's what you do.' (Female, West Midlands)

'Yes, we could do, but a lot of time it's because they're lazy and we don't push, we don't push these people to do the jobs that are available.' (Female, North East)

'..we have got a great benefit system, and it's not just people who come in from abroad who come and take advantage of that. There are people in this country, born in this country, who also take advantage of that…it's easy for them.' (Female, West Midlands)

NATIONAL PRIDE, SOVEREIGNTY AND CONTROL

A striking finding from these workshops was the extent to which issues that were ostensibly about economic revival or funding for public services were intimately connected to a sense of loss of national pride and national control.

'I think that's what I wanted to come out of Brexit, is that we were going to be proud of our British manufacturing again…' (Female, West Midlands)

'I think I'd like to see Brexit when it happens, as a catalyst, really. Like a reboot, to use that money not just to pay for things but to invest in our country. Bring the pride back in.' (Male, West Midlands)

'We used to be a really, really, strong country, and I think that once we leave, it gives us the opportunity to make something of ourselves again and become more independent and powerful again.

> '**I want people to have pride in theirselves, in the country and make it great again'. (Female, Yorkshire and Humberside)**

While national pride was expressed in these ideas of sovereignty and control, there were also widespread invocations of more 'banal' symbols of national pride.

> '**I can remember…where we used to have slogans everywhere where we were proud to be British, buy British, keep Britain tidy…I want people to be reminded how we should be proud of our country and we should look after it.' (Female, South West)**

> '**…if you know that you're eating more British stuff and produce that's made in Britain, that instils that pride doesn't it…' (Male, Yorkshire and Humberside)**

> '**It seems that as a country we only seem to fly the flag in a positive manner when we've got special events. Whether it's the Proms or, as I said, football, earlier, and I think we should be flying it all through the year and be incredibly proud of it'. (Male, South East)**

Keen to have control over immigration and to see investment in local public services, there was a sense from the English workshops that these Comfortable Leavers wanted their voices to be heard but not necessarily through local governance structures.

> '**Really what it told us is that the centralised governments for whole nations need to listen more to their own people and react to what those people need in the far-flung parts of the nation as well as in the high-density population centres…It's also about the central government being more attuned to the needs of all of its people…' (Male, South West)**

> '**Our problems have to be solved with our politics and our people making the right decisions about our lives.' (Male, Yorkshire and Humberside)**

DEVOLUTION: SCOTLAND AND WALES

Many themes, including ideas of national pride, were common across the workshops, including those held in Scotland and Wales. However, the debate in Scotland differed critically in terms of its national reference point: Scotland was taken-for-granted as the

primary context in which the Scottish Comfortable Leavers conversations were held. The Comfortable Leavers were opposed to Scottish independence — their Scotland is part of the UK, its economy and political system; but they nonetheless identified as Scots. For them Scotland is a distinct nation nested within the UK.

> **'I'm a Scotsman through and through…' (Male, Scotland);**
> **Yes (Female, Scotland),**
> **Yes, same here' (Male, Scotland).**

> **'I've always been British; I've always been Scottish. I've never, ever described myself as European.' (Male, Scotland)**

> **'Don't get me wrong. I'm not a nationalist. I think Nicola Sturgeon has been great during COVID, but I wouldn't vote for her because she's going for independence. It's a contradiction in terms, I know, but that's the way it is.' (Female, Scotland)**

The Comfortable Leavers in Scotland were also comfortable with their Scottishness, and in many cases also with devolution

> **'I'm a great believer in devolution because we have someone in Holyrood, and we have local problems solved by local people.' (Male, Scotland)**

The English workshops on the whole rejected de-centralisation and devolution, while in Wales, Comfortable Leavers saw devolution as an unnecessary extra layer of institutions: at best irrelevant, at worst counterproductive and preferred UK-wide solutions to their priority issues.

> **'I think it should be central government, because I think everything gets confused.' (Female, West Midlands)**

> **'Wales hasn't improved since we had the Welsh Government. …**
> **I do see the Welsh Assembly – sorry, Welsh Government – as a complete waste of money.' (Female, Wales)**

> **'…since we've had the Welsh Government, our NHS has not improved…I can't help thinking that a lot of money is being wasted instead of into the NHS and other services likes schools and education.' (Female, Wales)**

Matters of identity were discussed much more explicitly in Wales than in England but in contrast to Scotland, 'Welshness' was not taken for granted as a shared identity. On the one hand voice was given to the striking idea of Welsh citizenship — none of our Comfortable Leavers in Scotland espoused the concept of Scottish citizenship. Equally, it

provoked a swift reaction: a man from the Gwent valleys said he identifies as British, and doesn't feel 'particularly Welsh', reflecting his understanding of character of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands.

> **'I'm British, I do see that but I'm also a Welsh person, like a Scottish person is a Scottish person, but we are all British as well.' (Female, Wales)**

> **'…giving us back our identity as Welsh citizens rather than European, and living by their laws, well, let us make our own laws'. (Female, Wales)**

> **'I've never thought of myself as particularly Welsh, but British. Perhaps it's to do with living on the borders, and Gwent was a particular mix of Welsh and English identities.' (Male, Wales)**

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

Unsurprisingly, the on-going Covid-19 pandemic was a significant concern in all the workshops, particularly the economic impact. All the workshop participants agreed that it would be very difficult to separate out the effect of the pandemic and the effects of Brexit on the economy, and some expressed concern that this may dilute the benefits they had hoped to see post-Brexit.

> **'I think the effects of Brexit will be felt, but they'll be longer term and slow burn. They won't be a sudden reversal of direction and in the next two to five years they're going to be swamped by the effects of Covid. So it would be very difficult to identify the effect of leaving the EU over the overwhelming noise of the economic and social effects of Covid.' (Male, South West)**

> **'…I also have this fear now…that the country has, we've created so much debt to deal with corona, that that may become the excuse for not investing in all these things that we were promised we would see investment in.' (Female, North East)**

> **'I'm absolutely sure that the two problems, Covid and Brexit, will overlay to a point where you won't ever be able to differentiate**

which was which, but I think it's great to get them out of the way at the same time.' (Male, South East)

'Perhaps the Covid situation is the thing that will stimulate the government…to support the economy more…perhaps it's loosened the purse strings a little bit…'
(Male, Yorkshire and Humberside)

CONCLUSION

The expectations and hopes for the post-Brexit world among Comfortable Leavers show a nostalgic optimism that leaving the EU (and the pandemic) might be a catalyst for change, but a change that could restore industries, services and a sense of pride from an earlier era.

Comfortable Leavers share many values and aspirations with low-income Leave voters: both express a sense of loss, and frustration with a lack of progress on domestic issues. The groups share priorities for reviving local economies, offering greater opportunities to provide apprenticeships and good jobs that offer security to their families. They share concerns about immigration, and each had worries about crime and policing.

There were key points of difference, as Comfortable Leavers often attributed the economic struggles to the personal failings of those on low incomes. They wanted to see 'British jobs for British workers' but felt that many British workers were unwilling to help themselves: poverty was often linked to narratives of 'scrounging' and 'laziness', of poor role models and a 'something-for-nothing' culture.

What, then, do these differences within the Leave vote mean for post-Brexit politics? There are both opportunities and challenges for politicians seeking to represent these groups. The Leave voting coalition shares priorities beyond Brexit, and could form the basis for a longer-term voter alliance across the income divide. But there are fissures in this coalition, particularly around government support for those on low incomes, in insecure jobs or out of work.

A group that comprised 52% of the votes cast at the referendum is too large to be understood simply as a homogenous group, with one set of priorities. Dominant narratives that have emerged have primarily focussed on 'left behind' leavers to the neglect of the Comfortable Leavers discussed here. Understanding the motivations, expectations and aspirations of this group is important for understanding the post-Brexit period, for how divides might adapt, and for how voters might respond to the changed political landscape of 2021 and beyond.

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