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‘Immigration, Stupid!’ Or Was It? Re-Imagining Brexit as a ‘Wicked Problem’

Working Paper No. 97

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May 2020

US
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Abstract

In this paper I attempt a novel interpretation of Brexit as a 'wicked problem'. Wicked problems are those which are unique and complex, which are full of internal contradictions and counterveiling forces, and which defy solution, instead only creating other problems. After reviewing the events leading up to the 2016 Brexit referendum, paying particular attention to the role of immigration, the main part of the paper takes what I regard as the eight main criteria for the specification of a wicked problem and applies them to Brexit. Special attention is given to the exploration of two propositions: that every wicked problem is a symptom of other problems; and that every attempted solution to a wicked problem produces irreversible consequences. Both are seen to apply to Brexit, along with a similar close matching of the other six propositions. In the conclusion, I explore possible 'wicked synergies' between Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords

Brexit, wicked problems, immigration, European Union, coronavirus

Introduction

Bill Clinton's iconic phrase 'the economy, stupid', deployed during his successful election campaign against Bush senior in 1992, was designed to emphasise the point that, at crucial moments of collective national decision-making, it is the performance of the economy which has overriding salience. The same argument, although not the same phrase, was used by Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osbourne as the spearhead of their campaign to persuade the British public to vote 'Remain' in the June 2016 referendum on whether the UK should stay in or leave the European Union. In the end, the economic argument was outflanked by the fear-inducing, emotive and ultimately more effective playing of the immigration card by the 'Leave' camp. As in the November 2016 election in the United States, which saw Donald Trump narrowly victorious, scaremongering around immigration proved to be a key message which resonated with large swathes of the electorate, especially those voters who had been negatively affected by the fall-out from globalisation, deindustrialisation and the economics of austerity.

In retrospect, we might say that, in opposition to the rationalistic economic argument, 'it's immigration, stupid' could be the catchphrase which caught the mood of the British public, and that the 2016 referendum was not about the EU or the economy, but instead was a vote on immigration, promoted as the root cause of everything that was 'wrong' with British society at the time. This was certainly a popular interpretation of the 'Remainers' in their referendum post-mortem, who saw the whole issue of staying in or leaving the EU as hijacked by the furore over immigration stoked by Nigel Farage and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and supported by the vocal Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party. Indeed, the referendum was called in the first place as a strategy to neutralise the electoral threat of UKIP and to placate the Conservative Eurosceptics. But alongside large sections of the British upper and middle

classes, natural supporters of the Conservative government, the 'Leave' campaign recruited millions of people on low incomes and shrinking welfare who felt somehow 'left behind' and who saw (or, rather, were persuaded to see) in 'Europe', and especially 'immigration', the (mistaken) causes of their existential malaise.

Undoubtedly, then, to attribute 'Brexit' to the role of a single factor, immigration, is an over-simplification. Different groups of people voted 'Leave' for quite different reasons, and it is the 'wicked' combination of reasons, which in a single moment (the referendum) united these markedly divergent forces, which I explore in this paper. Thus, in order to shed light on why and how Brexit happened, including the gap between the referendum date of 23 June 2016 and the eventual date of leaving, 31 January 2020, I frame Brexit as a 'wicked problem'. In essence, wicked problems are those which admit no easy solution (or indeed no solution at all), are complexly linked to other problems, are full of internal conflicts and contradictions and only create further problems down the line. Although this paper is mainly a conceptual polemic, built on the literature on wicked problems and on my interpretation of the 'facts' of Brexit, I also draw on empirical research, mainly relating to the impact on EU migrants in the UK across the Brexit period. A final part of the context, which suddenly developed during the latter stages of writing this paper, is the devastating impact of the coronavirus, which is both profoundly upsetting at a human level and has had the effect of displacing Brexit to the economic, political and media background for the time being.

The paper develops as follows. The next section reviews some of the key literature on wicked problems, including a listing of the criteria that characterise such problems. The 2016 referendum is seen as a 'wicked event' which both derived from a wicked problem and subsequently unleashed a whole series of 'wicked effects' whose outcome is as yet unclear, particularly in light of the unfolding drama of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following this mainly conceptual overview, the subsequent section describes the events leading up to and surrounding the referendum and its results. Of course, the nature and interpretation of events are increasingly contestable in an era of 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth politics' but my account and interpretation will aim for objectivity and follow the mainstream narrative as reported by critical academics and the more balanced media. The next part of the article – the most substantial section – looks at the extent to which Brexit can be considered a wicked problem, based on matching the key criteria for a wicked problem with the characteristics of the referendum and the Brexit process. The matching is found to be close. Finally, the conclusion sums up key findings, offers some personal reflections on how Brexit can be interpreted over the longer term and spotlights emerging 'wicked synergies' between Brexit and the impact of the coronavirus in the UK.

What are wicked problems?

A wicked problem is one that is extremely difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete information, contradictory forces, changing circumstances, multiple layers of complexity, and interdependencies with other problems. The use of the word 'wicked' does not necessarily imply 'evil' or 'malice' but, rather, the problem's malignant nature and resistance to solution. The origins of the term are traced to a series of seminars given by Horst Rittel at

the University of California in the late 1960s (noted by Churchman 1967), followed by a seminal paper (Rittel and Webber 1973) cited by all subsequent writers on wicked problems.

Rittel and Webber (1973) wrote about dilemmas and challenges in the field of urban planning, where there are usually conflicting interests, incomplete data, different ideological approaches and ambiguous conceptualisations of equity and public good. Hence optimal solutions are elusive or impossible to achieve. Such wicked planning problems are contrasted with 'tame' problems, more common in the scientific realm, where solutions can be found through the collection and analysis of the required data, to which are applied scientific logic based on linear reasoning (Conklin 2007).

Rittel and Webber (1973) argued that wicked problems were defined by most or all of ten characteristics. Subsequent authors, writing about wicked problems either more generally or in specific fields such as social policy, politics or the environment, finessed the tenfold list of Rittel and Webber into a somewhat modified yet broadly analogous range of criteria (Camillus 2008; Conklin 2007; Head and Alford 2015; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee 2009). I combine insights from these authors whilst still taking inspiration from Rittel and Webber's original list. My list consists of eight propositions.

1. *There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem; every wicked problem is unique and novel*

No two wicked problems are alike; solutions to them are elusive and cannot be argued by analogy to other problem solutions. This is because it is not possible to create a well-defined statement of what the problem is, as can be done with 'ordinary' or 'tame' problems. Since a wicked problem is without precedent, experience of problem-solving in other contexts is of limited relevance. Rittel and Webber (1973: 161) declare (their emphases): 'The information needed to *understand* the problem depends on one's idea of *solving* it … [Thus], to find the problem is the same thing as finding the solution… The formulation of a wicked problem *is* the problem!'

2. *A wicked problem has many stakeholders with often radically different worldviews and therefore different frames for understanding the problem*

What the problem is depends on who is asked: the problem involves multiple stakeholders with different values, priorities and ideas about what constitutes both the problem and an acceptable solution. The variations between stakeholders might reflect different or conflicting economic interests, different philosophical, moral or ideological approaches, or different institutional positions – individuals, firms, investors, trade unions, NGOs, political parties etc.

3. *Every wicked problem can be considered a symptom of another problem or problems*

Whilst an 'ordinary' problem is self-contained, a wicked problem is complexly linked with other, higher-level problems, many of which have other root causes. Rittel and Webber (1973: 165) quote the example of 'crime in the streets', which can be argued to be a manifestation of other, deeper problems such as moral decay, poverty or social alienation, or be linked to

insufficient policing – this is not an exhaustive list. A wicked problem is bi-directionally embedded in other sets of problems, both 'upstream' and 'downstream'. To stick with the example of crime, it can, as mentioned above, be linked to broader causal problems such as poverty or inequality and also downstream to the crisis in prisons if a particular 'solution' (arrest and imprisonment) is pursued. Thus, given the difficulty of finding a solution to a wicked problem, any attempted solution is likely to generate a new problem or set of problems.

4. *Wicked problems have no stopping rule*

Since there is no definitive 'problem', so there is no definitive or optimal 'solution' (proposition 1 above). Unlike a scientific or mathematical problem, where the problem-solver knows when 'the job is done', with wicked problems the process of solving the problem is commensurate with understanding its nature; both are elusive and logically endless. Efforts to solve the problem ultimately cease when a 'messy' or 'clumsy' solution is found (Ney and Verweij 2015), often when time, resources or patience have run out. In this sense, any given solution, driven by the constraints of time and expediency, may irrationally discount the future: proposition 5 below.

5. *Every attempted solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation' which may have knock-on irreversible consequences*

In seeking solutions to a wicked problem, there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error experimentation, as in a mathematical puzzle or a mechanical-engineering problem. Every attempted solution to a wicked problem has irreversible consequences, leaving 'traces' that cannot be undone. As Conklin (2007: 9) puts it: 'This is the "Catch 22" of wicked problems: you cannot learn about the problem without trying solutions, but every solution … has lasting unintended consequences which are likely to spawn new wicked problems'.

6. *Solutions to wicked problems are not 'right' or 'wrong', nor 'true' or 'false'*

Unlike 'ordinary' or 'tame' problems, where analyses, findings and solutions can be independently checked and repeated, for wicked problems there are no 'true' or 'false' answers, only solutions which are 'better' or 'worse' or, perhaps, more or less 'satisfactory'; all judged subjectively. Such evaluations will vary, however, according to the different people, interest groups and institutions involved, depending on their aspirations, values and ideological positions. Judgements about the 'common' or 'public good' of an attempt to resolve a wicked problem are even more difficult to evaluate.

7. *Those seeking to solve the problem are also those who caused it*

This statement is self-explanatory, although it can be seen to operate at a variety of levels of (in)action. On the one hand, there are individual planners or politicians who, through their actions, 'create' problems which it is then their professional duty to solve. On a more macro level, the aggregated behaviour of people may create problems which it is their collective

responsibility to solve, either as multiple individuals acting in concert, or as social groups, or via the democratic process. The last of these takes two forms: either elect 'suitable actors' to tackle the problem or some kind of plebiscite or referendum.

8. Solutions to wicked problems, to the extent that they are attainable, require a great number of people to change their mindset and behaviour

Given the already-acknowledged uniqueness and complexity of wicked problems (propositions 1 and 3) and the fact that different stakeholders have opposing perspectives on alternative strategies (proposition 2), moving towards a solution requires many individuals and groups to change their mindset and behaviour. According to Conklin (2007), building a shared understanding is the key to arriving at some kind of broadly accepted solution but the very nature of a wicked problem makes this extremely difficult. As Rittel and Webber (1973: 169) observe: 'what satisfies one [person] may be abhorrent to another [and] what comprises problem-solving for one is problem-generation for another'. Our societies and political systems are increasingly characterised by structural complexity: 'social complexity is not just a function of the number of stakeholders – it is also a function of structural relationships among the stakeholders' (Conklin 2007: 19). Social complexity portends conflict and fragmentation over decision-making, which is when the stakeholders in a wicked project are all convinced that their version of understanding the problem is correct and others are wrong. The solution to intractable problems requires dialogue to create shared understanding and appreciation of the other stakeholders' positions. Once this is achieved, stakeholders can exercise their 'collective intelligence' about how to tackle the problem: easier said than done!

Not all the eight propositions listed above need to be satisfied in order for a wicked problem to be categorised as such but most wicked problems will fulfill most, if not all, the criteria. Typical wicked problems identified in the literature include the following: climate change, the sustainability of global fisheries, health and social care for an ageing population, nuclear weapon proliferation, poverty and hunger in developing countries, and planning issues over the location of a controversial yet needed development.[1] A special category of wicked problems – called super-wicked problems – is identified by Levin, Cashore, Bernstein and Auld (2012). These are problems which are global in scale with potentially catastrophic impacts. Global climate change is the obvious example. Super-wicked problems are additionally characterised by four defining features: time is running out; policy responses tend to overlook the full future impacts of the problem; those who have caused the problem are also charged with seeking a solution; the central authority to address the problem is weak or non-existent.

An interesting question arises over the 'wicked' status of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the one hand, some of its characteristics – its global scale, devastating human impact, lack of a strong central authority to address the issue at a global scale, the urgency of the time factor and

[1] This listing is drawn partly from the following sources – Conklin (2007), Head and Alford (2015), Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2009), Ney and Verweij (2015) and Rittel and Webber (1973) – and partly from my own thoughts on the matter.

links to other problems such as poverty and residential overcrowding – suggest that it should be categorised as a super-wicked problem. On the other hand, the fact that there does potentially exist a range of scientific and social measures to overcome the challenge – social distancing, quarantining, mass testing, intensive care and the chance of an effective vaccine – indicates a 'non-wicked' status.

Chronology of Brexit

The immediate origins of the Brexit referendum lay in the Conservative Party's manifesto for the 2015 election, which they won by a clear margin to give them an absolute majority (prior to that they had been in a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats). The manifesto contained a pledge to hold a referendum on EU membership before the end of 2017. This was a tactical ploy to pacify the 'Eurosceptic' wing of the Conservative Party and stop the rising anti-EU populism of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) under the vocal leadership of Nigel Farage which, although not represented in the UK national Parliament, succeeded in electing a slew of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in the 2012 European elections.

In truth, the origins of the Brexit vote lie further back in history. I suggest that they reside in three domains: in several decades of inner turmoil in the Conservative Party over the issue of Europe; in long-present colonial sentiments about British identity and the UK's role in the world which still resided in the minds of many, mainly older, members of the population; and in the widening socio-economic and spatial divide in Britain between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', a fracture which was sharpened during the years of austerity following the banking crisis of 2008. I come back to a more nuanced interpretation of the multi-layered meaning of Brexit a little later.

The referendum was announced by the then Prime Minister David Cameron in February 2016 in the belief that the vote to stay in the EU would be won and that the Europhobic critics would be defeated. Between February and June the discursive and tactical battle-lines were drawn up and soon became clearly polarised. There were powerful figures on both sides but, ultimately, it was the more 'direct' – some would say 'cynical', even 'untruthful' – messages and slogans from the 'Leave' campaign that carried the day.

The referendum question was this: 'Should the UK remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?'; hence, a straightforward binary choice was asked for – 'Leave' or 'Remain'. Importantly, no clear guidelines were given as to what 'Leave' actually meant, except vague assurances by its proponents that it would be quick and straightforward, and liberating and empowering for the country. This lack of clarity would haunt the incumbent government, Parliament, negotiators, opposition parties and the general population for the next three-plus years. Many issues are no clearer now, as the transition period is under way. Above all, people could not understand or were not informed of the full significance, future implications and complex ramifications of Brexit.

The rhetorical positions of the two sides of the campaign obviously offered contrasting messages but what was ultimately more significant was the way these messages were put across. The 'Remain' argument, articulated, in retrospect, with insufficient passion or conviction by Cameron and Osborne, focused on the economic and security disadvantages of leaving the EU – an essentially negative stance of 'project fear'. At this stage, most

Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs) were ‘remainers’. The opposition Labour Party’s official stance was also pro-Remain, although its leader Jeremy Corbyn appeared increasingly ambiguous, partly because of his traditional Marxist socialist leanings (when Conservative-led Britain joined the European Community in 1973, most of the Labour Party opposed the move) and partly because many Labour MPs represented working-class constituencies where UKIP was rapidly gaining ground. The LibDems and the Green Party (with small numbers of MPs) were fervently pro-Remain.

On the other side of the campaign the message was clearer and more visceral: people were urged to vote ‘Leave’ in order to ‘Take Back Control’ of Britain’s borders, laws and sovereignty. The famous ‘Breaking Point’ poster (Figure 1) remains the most iconic representation of this message, fronted by then UKIP leader Nigel Farage. The image on the poster portrayed an endless queue of ‘immigrants’ supposedly threatening ‘our borders’; in fact, the picture is of Syrian and other refugees waiting at the border between Greece and (North) Macedonia during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015. The EU was also targeted as the source of countless bureaucratic and pedantic laws (the shape of bananas was often mentioned); whilst immigrants were scapegoated as an uncontrolled problem (because of freedom of movement within the EU) responsible for unemployment, falling wages, pressure on housing and health services, and cultural and demographic change within towns and cities across the land.

Figure 1: ‘It’s Immigration, Stupid!’ Nigel Farage and the poster on the supposed threat of immigration to the UK. *Source:* Telegraph (2016).

This, too, was a kind of ‘project fear’ (of ‘Europe’ and of ‘immigrants’) but one with an active solution to ‘do something’ (leave the EU) in contrast to the Remain argument, which was essentially to ‘do nothing’ except maintain the status quo. Moreover, the three-word slogan

'Take Back Control', repeated over and over again so that it became a mantra burnt into the voters' consciousness, was hugely effective in its populist appeal. Indeed, the three-word strapline became a lexical device used widely by the Conservative Party leaders in their attempt to get Brexit 'over the line'. 'Brexit means Brexit' was endlessly intoned by Theresa May, who took over from Cameron following his resignation the day after the referendum (only for herself to resign after three years of fruitless effort to secure a 'Brexit deal' with Brussels which would be acceptable to the UK Parliament); and 'Get Brexit Done' was the slogan which branded Boris Johnson's stunningly successful electoral campaign in the last weeks of 2019.[2]

Figure 2: Poster portraying the potential of 76 million Turks to move to the UK. Note the use of colour: red denoting 'danger' or a 'threat', and the 'Conservative blue' of the UK. *Source:* openDemocracy.net (accessed 2020).

The success of the Leave campaign was due in no small measure to the aggressive support of the British right-wing newspaper media, particularly the three high-circulation tabloids, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Sun*. Spurred on by media-savvy soundbites from Nigel Farage, who demonised Eastern European migrants and held up the prospect of '76 million Turks' available to come to the UK if the country remained in the EU (see Figure 2), the tabloids repeatedly and ruthlessly headlined immigration as the 'big issue' of the referendum. Immigration was constructed as a 'crisis' which had pushed the UK to 'breaking point'. Among the tropes used to denounce immigrants were the exaggeration of numbers, often associated with military metaphors such as 'armies' or 'invaders'; their description as an 'uncontrollable flood'; their threat to national identity (without, however, specifying exactly what 'British' or 'English' national identity was beyond 'our way of life') and their representation as criminals, drug dealers, sex traffickers, terrorists etc. (Vey 2019). Table 1 sets

[2] Meanwhile, in the USA, where simplistic but meaningful slogans seem to have even more popular appeal, 'America First' and 'Make America Great (Again)' were the key messages promoted by Donald Trump in his presidential election victory in November 2016. 'Keep America Great' is emerging as Trump's re-election slogan for 2020.

out a sample of typical front-page headlines, usually printed in huge, thick capital letters, which are typical of hundreds of such titles issued in the months preceding the referendum.

Table 1 Typical headlines demonising ands scapegoating migrants

'New Jobless Migrants Benefits Scandal', *Daily Express,* 29 February 2016
'Migrant Army on Beaches of D-Day', *Sun,* 12 March 2016
'EU Lets Killers into UK', *Sun,* 29 March 2016
'You Pay for Roma Gypsy Palaces', *Daily Express,* 30 March 2016
'Migrant Mothers Cost NHS £1.3 bn', *Daily Express,* 02 April 2016
'Britain Faces Migrant Chaos', *Daily Express,* 06 May 2016
'Migrants Spark Housing Crisis', *Daily Mail,* 20 May 2016
'EU Migrant Numbers Soar Yet Again', *Daily Express,* 27 May 2016
'Record Number of Jobless EU Migrants in Britain', *Daily Mail,* 27 May 2016
'The Albanian Double Killer who's Lived Freely in open borders UK for 18 years', *Daily Mail,* 02 July 2016
'EU Killers and Rapists We've Failed to Deport', *Daily Mail,* 03 July 2016

Source: Vey (2019)

The referendum result gave a small majority for 'Leave' (51.9%) over 'Remain' (48.1%) for the country as a whole. Overall turnout was 72.2%, which meant that, as with many elections where voting is not mandatory, a minority of voters, in this case 37.4% of the electorate, produced the majority. Scotland and Northern Ireland voted by a clear majority to remain; Wales mirrored the aggregate national result with a small 'Leave' majority. At a finer geographical scale, 'Remain' won in large, cosmopolitan, multicultural and university cities, including London (except the outer eastern and south-eastern suburbs of mainly 'white' working-class and lower-middle-class voters), Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Bristol, Cardiff, Leicester, Brighton, Oxford, Cambridge, Exeter and York. 'Leave' won in rural areas, small market towns and old industrial districts, especially in the Midlands, East and North of England (Morgan 2017).[3]

The geography of the referendum outcome was closely correlated with the social, economic and demographic characteristics of the people who voted. Based on electoral-district calculations made by Picascia, Romano and Capineri (2016), the strongest correlations were between 'vote Leave' (the dependent variable) and three independent variables: lower levels of education ($r = 0.76$), older age ($r = 0.62$) and living in a constituency with high levels of poverty and deprivation ($r = 0.51$). These findings are confirmed by a more statistically detailed analysis carried out by Hobolt (2016), based on the referendum voting intentions (i.e. not the actual vote) of a sample of 24,000 respondents surveyed in April–May 2016, which showed that the better-educated, the young and the well-off were significantly less likely to vote 'Leave' than the low-skilled, the old and the poor. Hobolt also demonstrated strong relationships between 'Leave' voting and political-attitudinal variables such as strength of

[3] These figures and the geography behind them can be instructively compared to the much earlier 1975 referendum which asked: 'Do you think the UK should stay in the European Community?' A clear majority (67.2%) voted 'Yes', with 32.8% voting 'No'. See the comparative maps in Morgan (2017: 153).

British/English identity (vs 'Europeanness'), allegiance to the Conservative Party (and, even more, to UKIP) and lack of trust towards politicians.[4]

Hence, what the Brexit vote revealed was a sharply divided population, the poorest, oldest and least-educated of whom were angry – at the political class, at the falling standards of living resulting from austerity policies and, more nebulously, at the way they had seemingly been left behind by globalisation and its divisive and polarising effects, expressed also spatially in terms of North (including the Midlands) versus South (especially London). The voters were somehow persuaded that immigration – especially uncontrolled immigration from the EU – was the 'main issue' that the country faced, with the implication that, once the borders were better controlled, their problems would be solved or, at least, lessened. Another persuasive argument, which was never properly fact-checked, regarded the net budgetary cost to Britain of remaining in the EU and the economic savings that could be accrued by leaving. A controversial and duplicitous image here was the 'big red bus' that Boris Johnson used in the campaign with the slogan emblazoned on its side, 'We send the EU £350 million a week: let's fund the NHS instead' (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The 'Boris bus' claiming that the '£350 million a week' given by the UK to the EU should be used to 'fund our NHS instead'. *Source:* Express (2016).

[4] A smaller-scale statistical study based on a survey of 280 referendum voters demonstrated that 'vote Leave' was independently linked to individual predictors of prejudice towards foreigners – xenophobia. These predictors were a belief in national greatness (British 'collective narcissism'), right-wing authoritarianism and an orientation towards social dominance. All three variables were independently related to the perceived threat of immigrants and, via this, to voting 'Leave' in the referendum (Golec de Zavala, Guerra and Simão 2017).

It would be an over-simplification to interpret the referendum as a duel between the 'better-off Remainers' and the 'have-not Leavers'. Following Bailey (2019), the Brexit-supporting camp consisted of four main political groupings.

- The majority nationalist position within the Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party, associated especially with the (oddly named) 'European Research Group', supported a 'hard Brexit' with minimal ongoing links to the EU. Their stance was that the EU represented a major constraint on national policies, especially those on trade and immigration, and that only by leaving the EU could Britain reclaim national sovereignty, control its borders, and reassert its 'global' role, both as a political voice and in advancing a global trade agenda.

- A more ultra-nationalist position was taken by UKIP, whose sole purpose was to leave the EU. UKIP also vehemently opposed high levels of immigration, especially that from within Europe. After the referendum, and in reaction to the stalled progress towards departing the EU, UKIP leader Farage broke away to found the Brexit Party, which became a strategic player in the December 2019 election – which returned a reinvigorated Johnson-led Conservative Party to power with an absolute majority in Parliament.

- A 'softer' Brexit was argued for, post-referendum, by many 'moderate' Conservatives who took a pragmatic stance towards implementing 'the will of the people'. This group included many Conservatives who voted 'Remain', such as the interim leader Theresa May. Their aim was to secure a 'deal' that preserved Britain's close economic ties with the EU, by far its leading trading partner. However, May's deal, agreed with Brussels after tortuous negotiations, was repeatedly voted down by Parliament, rejected both by the Eurosceptic right-wing Tories and by most Labour MPs, as well as by the Scottish Nationalists, Liberal Democrats, and the single Green MP.[5]

- Finally, there was a much smaller faction on the far left of the Labour Party. This 'Lexit' position saw the EU as an essentially capitalist and neoliberal institution, as a vehicle for transnational corporate economic power, and as an obstacle to state intervention in the market.

On the other side of the referendum fence, the 'Remain' voice was at first sight more coherent and united. It was made up initially of the Conservative Party leadership of Cameron and Osborne, most of the parliamentary Labour Party, plus the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. Once the referendum result was announced, battle lines were drawn up as to what kind of Brexit should be pursued, and parliamentary voting patterns

[5] May's deal was rejected by Parliament three times, on the first occasion by a record margin experienced by an incumbent government-sponsored bill in modern parliamentary history: 432 votes to 202. Although the size of the vote reflected a variety of tactical, ideological and personal positions taken by MPs, May's performance as Prime Minister came under increasingly harsh scrutiny – notably her stubbornness about not taking advice and seeking compromise, her lack of charisma and repetitive, robotic answers to questions in Parliament and in front of the media.

became strategic but also unstable and confused. Options included a 'clean break' with 'no deal' (i.e. an extreme form of 'hard' Brexit), a 'softer' Brexit with a close relationship maintained with the EU, a second referendum (or, alternatively, a 'people's vote' on whatever deal was agreed), or simply revoking Article 50 (the 'withdrawal' clause) and ignoring the result of the referendum. Although the relatively 'soft' Brexit deal negotiated by May was rejected by Parliament due to the pincer movement of the hard Brexiteers on the one hand and the pro-Remain MPs on the other, the latter group (consisting of most Labour MPs, the LibDems, the SNP, the one Green MP plus a coterie of fervently pro-EU Tories) was never able to cement a 'progressive alliance' either to secure a majority for another referendum or to oust the Conservatives from power. The solidity of the Remain camp was also compromised by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's position of 'constructive ambiguity' (Bailey 2019: 258). Although he said he voted 'Remain' in the referendum, he was reluctant to lead the remainist opposition to the government and to campaign unequivocally for a second referendum. This was due to several influences pulling him in different directions: his declaration that the referendum result should be respected, his long-present socialist (and arguably Eurosceptic) leanings, the pressure he was under to respect the majority Labour Party view (pro-Remain), and the fact that many traditional Labour supporters in working-class northern constituencies, negatively affected by the politics of austerity, voted 'Leave'.

During the post-referendum period, the incumbent Conservative Party played the election card twice, with very different outcomes. First, Theresa May called an election for June 2017 with the objective of increasing her majority and thereby 'strengthening my hand', as she repeatedly put it, in her negotiations over a withdrawal agreement which would have wide support in the UK Parliament. The gambit backfired: a Corbyn-led Labour resurgence, in contrast to May's insipid campaigning, significantly reduced the Conservatives' majority.[6] The result was a minority government and a 'hung parliament' in which the Conservatives were dependent on the Northern Irish Democratic Union Party (fervently 'pro' the union of Britain and Northern Ireland and socially arch-conservative) for the slimmest of parliamentary majorities.

The second election was called by Boris Johnson for December 2019. Johnson had replaced May earlier in the year when May resigned over her failure to 'get Brexit done'. Guided by his Svengali-like special advisor Dominic Cummings (widely regarded as the master-tactician of the success of the 'Leave' campaign in 2016), Johnson moved ruthlessly to expel from the Conservative Party the 31 'rebel MPs' who were campaigning for a second referendum, and hastily secured a 'deal' with Brussels (which many thought inferior to the one negotiated by May). Campaigning on the simple slogan 'Get Brexit Done', Johnson won the election by a wide margin, thereby ending Corbyn's credibility as Labour leader. With a parliamentary majority of some 80 seats, Johnson's deal was passed with ease and the UK exited the EU on 31 January 2020, with an eleven-month transition period until the end of the year to sort out the precise nature of the withdrawal arrangements. Even without the drastic impact of the corona pandemic, severe doubts were expressed about the feasibility of this timetable; now, an extension seems logically likely, albeit denied by the government.

[6] The Conservatives polled 42.4% of the popular vote, Labour 40.0%; the closest result between the two main parties since the election of February 1974.

Lest the impression be gained that this is 'Brexit done', in reality it is just the beginning – true to the essence of Brexit as a wicked problem. Many pressing problems are on the table to be resolved and lasting legacies will endure for decades, if not longer. There are four immediate issues which need to be tackled (actually, there are many more, but these have been the ones garnering the greatest attention). These are the nature of trading relations between Britain and the EU, the issue of the land border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, fishing rights within UK territorial waters, and the touchstone topic of control over immigration from the EU. Longer-term ramifications are also manifold: the economic impact of Brexit, issues of labour supply and potential structural shortage, matters related to geopolitics and security, and the impact that Brexit has had on divisions within UK society, with the formation of two antagonistic 'tribes' – the Brexit-supporters and the Remainers (dubbed 'Remoaners' by the Brexiteers). Further analysis of these ongoing problems is developed in the next section of the paper, where I 'match' the criteria for wicked problems with the historic and emerging reality of Brexit.

To what extent is Brexit a wicked problem?

In a previous section of this paper, inspired by Rittel and Webber (1973) and by other authors cited earlier, I synthesised the defining features of wicked problems into eight statements. I now take each of these in turn and examine the 'evidence' of Brexit. In doing this I recoup some of the material chronicled above in my potted history of Brexit but also add further insights from my notes on the unfolding process as I have followed it almost on a daily basis over the past four years, as well as drawing on some of the burgeoning literature in the field of 'Brexit studies'.

The first proposition is that *every wicked problem is unique and novel*; since there are no precedents, solutions cannot be argued by analogy with other, similar situations. Surely, this is true in the case of Brexit. Political commentators and politicians themselves, in speeches in Parliament and in comments to the media, repeatedly argued that the situations that they observed and found themselves in were 'without precedent' and that 'we are in entirely new territory' etc. It is true that Greenland voted to leave the EU in a referendum in 1982 (which, coincidentally, also produced a narrow majority of 52%) but the parallels are otherwise minimal.[7]

A wicked problem has many stakeholders with often radically different worldviews and therefore different frames for understanding the problem – and therefore the 'solution'. This is the second proposition and this, too, is self-evident in the case of Brexit. Contrasting worldviews were at the heart of the events leading up to the referendum and were equally

[7] Greenland had been taken into the European Economic Community when Denmark joined, along with Britain and Ireland, in 1973. Greenland was then constitutionally part of the Danish Kingdom but gained autonomy in 1979. Following a 1982 referendum, Greenland left in 1985, the key issue being disputes over fishing rights – fishing representing 90% of the Greenlandic economy. Two other factors make the two situations so different as to be beyond comparison. One is size: Greenland had a population of 90,000 at the time, compared to the UK's 66 million today. Secondly, European integration was much less advanced in the early 1980s than it is now.

responsible for the complex wranglings which delayed the formal departure for another three and a half years. The most obviously oppositional clash of worldviews is that between Europhiles and Europhobes, a more or less unbreachable set of values regarding the UK's place in the world. For the Europhiles, the UK is an integral part of Europe and is stronger, and better positioned globally, by this alliance with the EU. Europhobes are innately suspicious of the European project, which they see as too much like a 'federated state'. They see the UK in terms of a broader, more global positionality; whilst some 'Leavers' envision a return to some kind of post-imperial identity harking back to a mythical past (and an even more mythical future) when Britain was a dominant geopolitical force in the world.

Underlying these conflictual and polarised political interpretations were more complex class dynamics. In the conventional class-based view, Brexit was caused by the class conflict exacerbated by the neoliberal restructuring of the British labour market, a process traceable to the 1970s and 1980s and then reinforced by the post-2008 politics of austerity (McKenzie 2017). But, in reality, Brexit cut across class divisions, or was made to by the machinations and persuasiveness of populist political rhetoric and media bombardment (Vey 2019). Those voting 'Leave' were drawn from opposite ends of the class system: on the one hand, aristocratic toffs with landed property, huge business wealth and family-lineage privilege (perhaps best embodied in the louche figure of Jacob Rees Mogg, Chair of the European Research Group and Leader of the House of Commons in the current Conservative government); on the other, the disaffected working classes, battered by austerity and hampered by minimal educational qualifications, low incomes and high unemployment. Brexit tendencies were also high amongst sections of the middle classes, particularly older suburban office-workers who held a nostalgic view of Britain's 'greatness' or who simply voted 'Leave' as a gesture of mild political protest – perhaps thinking that a 'Remain' victory was a foregone conclusion – and amongst the more ideologically driven 'Lexit' faction of the Labour Party. Truly a *de facto* coalition of strange political and social-class bedfellows!

The 'Remainers' were also a mixed bunch politically and socially, combining the majority of Labour Party voters (except those who had defected to UKIP and the Brexit Party), plus the LibDems, SNP and Greens, but also including Tory 'grandees' such as Lord Heseltine and Ken Clarke, both passionate Europeans, as well as other business-oriented Conservative MPs and voters who saw the economic advantages of remaining in the EU. The point to be emphasised here is that, not only did the Brexiteers and Remainers have – obviously – radically different worldviews, ideological frames and personal motivations for their anti- or pro-EU stance, but also each of the two main camps was itself made up of stakeholders with different and often incompatible backgrounds and worldviews. This internal fractioning of the Leave and Remain 'tribes' led to great political instability, at least until the general election of December 2019, and lent an extra layer of 'wickedness' to the whole issue. These fragmented stakeholder positionalities also made it difficult to agree on a common solution on each side: a hard vs a soft Brexit or a second referendum vs revoking Article 50.

The third proposition is that *every wicked problem can be considered a symptom of another problem or problems*. This is one of two propositions that are more complex to analyse, so it will be treated in more detail. The statement is patently true, although there are different interpretations regarding the relative importance of each underlying problem and the extent to which they are connected to or layered within each other, especially if one takes a causal

historical analysis. Kilkey and Ryan (2020) see the referendum outcome as one in a series of 'unsettling events', starting with the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements and continuing with the economic crisis of 2008–09, which fundamentally changed the political and economic make-up of the EU. Both the enlargement process and the long recession combined to produce, within the space of a very few years, a 'changed Britain' in the eyes of many people, who felt 'unsettled' as a result. Once again, goaded by right-wing politicians, notably Nigel Farage, and the tabloid press, Britons were persuaded that 'the country was no longer theirs' and that somehow they no longer 'belonged' or 'felt at home' in their local communities (Vey 2019). Behind this sense of alienation and 'static displacement' lay two interconnected and more-deeply seated causal 'problems'. The first relates to immigration – especially 'uncontrolled' immigration from Europe – and the second to the vexed issue of British, or English, national identity.

There is no doubt that Brexit was shaped by a sense of ingrained racism and opposition towards immigrants and immigration which has long been present in the psyche of sections of the British population. Already evident in Victorian Britain, when hostility was directed particularly towards the Irish, Italians and Jews (see e.g. Holmes 1978, 1988; Jackson 1963; Lunn 1980; Sponza 1988; Swift 1999), it resurfaced during the immigration boom of the early postwar decades. Conservative politician Enoch Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech was arguably the single most inflammatory event of this era, but more significant were the Commonwealth and Immigration Acts of the 1960s and 1970s, designed to control immigration from the New Commonwealth countries. Here we see a direct parallel with the free movement of EU citizens and its curtailment by Brexit since, prior to these Immigration Acts, inhabitants of the (former) British colonies in the Caribbean, South Asia and elsewhere were British passport-holders and hence free to enter the EU.

Following the 2004 enlargement and the decision of the Labour government of Tony Blair to immediately allow free movement to the UK for residence and work for citizens of the so-called 'A8' (or 'EU8') countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary and Slovenia), numbers of migrants from these countries grew rapidly. By the time of the referendum, almost 2 million people from the EU8 countries were living in the UK, including 900,000 Polish-born immigrants, who had quickly become the largest foreign-birth group in the country, replacing the previous pre-eminent positions held by the Irish and the Indian-born. These numbers were further bolstered by new arrivals from the 'A2' (or 'EU2') countries of Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, although for them free access to the UK labour market was delayed. The Conservative opposition accused the Labour government of 'losing control' of EU migration, sparking the explicit problematisation of EU migration as distinct from immigration from other parts of the world. Since 2010, successive Conservative governments have pledged in their manifestos and public statements to 'reduce (annual) net migration to the tens of thousands' (i.e. below 100,000), at a time when, following the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, the figure had risen to more than 300,000.[8] Such calls became

[8] This commitment, which never came close to being attained, was dropped by Prime Minister Johnson in July 2019. In any case, net migration is not just about immigration from EU countries; it also includes the emigration and return migration flows of UK citizens, as well as immigration from and return to non-EU countries. Interestingly, as the net migration from EU countries fell after the referendum (due both to falling arrivals and

more insistent after the economic recession and its consequent austerity measures had reduced real incomes and welfare entitlements for many low-wage and vulnerable groups, who 'turned on' immigrants as allegedly 'responsible' for their plight. All the signs and opinion polls indicated that immigration ranked as the most important issue in the country at the time of the referendum campaign (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017). To that extent, it could be argued that the referendum was not about the 'problem' of Europe but about the 'problem' of immigration. But this would be a too-facile conclusion. It was not that immigration was, in and of itself, a huge problem (indeed, much evidence existed that immigrants, especially those from the EU, contributed significantly to the UK economy – see, e.g., Dustmann and Frattini 2014); rather, it was the case that many people were 'persuaded' that immigration was a problem.

The second core problem behind Brexit, arguably its most deep-seated underlying cause, relates to the question of national identity. Despite the May–Johnson tagline 'Global Britain',[9] the country has had an uneasy relationship with globalisation. Here is another wicked conundrum: Britain's pioneering role, within the EU and the world, of a more neoliberal, deregulated globalisation sat uneasily with the need for such a free-market model to draw on supplies of cheap, often migrant labour. Brexit ultimately revealed the inability of Britain's liberal democracy to embrace the diversity of all members of its society. 'While neoliberal, globalised citizenship has expanded horizons for some, it has reduced them for many others', who are beset by 'anxiety, precarity and a fragility of their sense of belonging' (Gilmartin, Burke Wood and O'Callaghan 2018: 79). These authors further opined: 'Brexit sent belonging and citizenship into a tailspin', since it represented a 'rejection of the fluid identities arising from cosmopolitan outlooks or globalised attachments' (2018: 63). Or, as Theresa May declared, in a speech to the Conservative Party conference in October 2016: 'If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere'.

This utterance by May reveals what Savage, Cunningham, Reimer and Favell (2019: 55) call the 'distinctive geography' of British relations with the rest of the world. Whilst on some criteria, such as holiday destinations and knowledge of other European countries, the British are not markedly different from their continental North European counterparts, what is distinctive about the UK population's transnational connections is a greater familiarity and connectivity with other, non-EU, countries, notably those in the 'Anglophone diaspora' of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. According to Savage *et al.* (2019: 42, 56), this indicates a specific cosmopolitanism of post-imperial whiteness which evokes old colonial ties, and is backed up by large-scale questionnaire survey data of the populations of six EU countries. Hence, 40% of UK respondents said that they felt 'neither European nor a citizen of the world', compared to only 12% in Spain and 21–26% for Denmark, Germany, Italy and Romania. And whereas 23% of UK respondents expressed 'feeling a citizen of the world and not European', the figures were only 6–7% for Denmark and Germany and 14% for Italy and Spain (Savage *et al*. 2019: 56).

Here, then, we arrive at the historical wicked problem which underpins the referendum outcome, namely that Brexit represents the end-product of an existential crisis of British, and

increasing returns), much of the slack was made up by increasing migration from non-EU countries, indicating the continuing demand for migrant workers.

[9] 'Global Britain' was first articulated in the aftermath of Brexit by Prime Minister May and then-Foreign Secretary Johnson. Subsequently the notion was given more substance in a report by Seely and Rogers (2019).

specifically English, identity that had been building for more than half a century as the UK lost its role as a global imperial power (Haseler 2017). Over several decades both the country's elites and much of the general population, particularly older people, have struggled to come to terms with Britain's loss of empire and reduced status on the global stage and have, instead, blamed Europe and immigrants for the consequent struggle to create a clear and confident national identity. The racialised discourse behind the slogan 'We want our country back' indicates nostalgia for Britain's imperial past and problematic assumptions about who 'belongs' and who does not (Bhambra 2017). The latter includes EU migrants, especially Poles, Romanians and other 'Eastern' Europeans, thereby nuancing constructions of 'whiteness', and the darker-skinned subjects of empire, seen as inferior by the 'native' white working class alienated by a cocktail of complex interlocking processes such as globalisation, deindustrialisation, regional decline, austerity, immigration, multiculturalism and out-of-touch political-elite governance.

Wicked problems have no stopping rule is the fourth proposition. This means that the solution to the problem is never 'done and dusted' but the ramifications of a wicked problem are enduring and may become perverse. The repeated claims by Prime Minister Johnson of 'Brexit, job done' only refer to the parliamentary approval of the rather vague 'deal' he had secured at the eleventh hour with the EU's Brexit negotiators. Time will tell if the deal negotiated turns out to be a positive, satisfactory or, more likely, 'messy' solution (cf. Ney and Verweij 2015). Right now, in early 2020, it seems that we are only at 'the end of the beginning', with the eventual shape of the final outcome far out of sight and uncertain. Trade, migration controls, residence and welfare rights, economic and security cooperation, conflicts over fishing rights, foreign policy and the Irish border are just some of the main issues still to be resolved – supposedly by 31 December 2020.

The intended, unintended and unanticipated longer-term effects of Brexit bring us to the fifth proposition: *every attempted solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot' operation which may have unintended irreversible consequences*. This is the second of the two propositions which require a more extended discussion. For the Brexiteers, there are only *intended* irreversible consequences: exit from the EU with no turning back, and a renewed sense of some kind of national identity that is recognisably 'British' and with freedom to act and be respected on the global stage. Others, including myself, would point to a cascading sequence of problems created by Brexit which, sooner or later, need to be solved, each potentially begetting other problems further down the line. Here, I mention two key problematic issues created by Brexit: the economic impact and the effect on migration trends. These two issues are linked together by the supply and demand needs of various sectors of the UK labour market.

In an essay written in the aftermath of the referendum, Gerard Delanty (2017: 111) posed the question: 'How could a relatively prosperous country with a stable state system act against its own economic interests?' In a similar vein, Michel Barnier, the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, said as a prelude to the final discussions on the 'Johnson deal' in October 2019 that Brexit was a 'lose-lose situation' and that nobody, 'not even Mr Farage', had been able to show him 'proof of any added value of Brexit'. All economic modelling scenarios, including those carried out by the government's own researchers, forecast an economic penalty for any kind of Brexit, the scale of the damage to the economy increasing from 'soft' to 'hard' to 'no-deal'

outcomes. Amongst the immediately predictable economic impacts were the 'divorce bill' of nearly £40bn, a fall in the value of the GB pound against the euro (and the US dollar), and a forecast that the average UK household would be worse off to the tune of £900 per year. The City of London would be weakened as a global financial powerhouse, and anti-immigration measures would produce a shortage of vital labour for agriculture, tourism, the catering industry, the health and care sectors and certain branches of manufacturing. In addition, the three-plus years of dithering following the referendum had the effect of paralysing the development of the economy since entrepreneurs and investors, including foreign investors, could not plan ahead in a climate of uncertainty over the future direction of the economy.

And then, all of these dire predictions of the economic costs of Brexit were thrown in the air when it became clear, in March 2020, that a new, much more dramatic, economic reality had dawned with the arrival in Britain of the coronavirus. The consequences have included the shutting down of the majority of the UK economy and the effective nationalisation of wage support, grants and loans to businesses and charities, and various other measures to cushion the economic impact of the virus, especially on those the most economically vulnerable. For the time being, the priority of saving lives trumps economic considerations.

The economically upsetting impact of Covid-19 apart, one of the most pernicious aspects of post-Brexit economic trends over the longer term will be the geographical and social impact. The Brexiteers offer a vision based on a false set of promises that are claimed to improve the lives of the 'left behind' – in particular those millions in the (post-)industrial heartlands of the Midlands and the North, traditional Labour supporters, who voted 'Leave' (and either Conservative or Brexit Party in the 2019 election) as a gesture of protest against austerity policies and the perceived detachment of the southern metropolitan elites. There are three ironic contradictions here. The first is that the austerity measures were the work of the Cameron–Osborne Conservative government. The second is that these economically distressed regions of the country had received substantial financial help from EU structural development funds, supporting industry, infrastructure and social initiatives – support which will now be lost. And the third irony is that the economic model set out by the Conservative government to alleviate the problems of the 'left behind' – neoliberal capitalism and unregulated global free trade, free of the workers' rights and environmental and food standards of the EU – will only result in further downward pressure on wages and the polarisation of incomes (Bailey 2019: 262–264).

When it comes to the second main issue for the future – immigration – the ironies and contradictions multiply. There is plenty of evidence, cited earlier, that the referendum result was driven to a significant degree by the public's desire to dramatically curb immigration. During the twelve months leading up to the referendum, Ipsos MORI poll data revealed that 'immigration' was seen as the most pressing issue facing the country, well ahead of four other key issues – Europe, the National Health Service, crime and the economy. Immigration remained the top issue for the remainder of 2016 but then, as Brexit became repeatedly delayed, the combined EU/Brexit issue took over as the dominant concern, only finally assuaged by the Johnson agreement with Brussels and the December 2019 general election, by which time immigration had become the *least* important of the 'big five' public opinion issues. Thus we see evidence of the instrumentalisation of immigration by right-wing politicians and media;

once the 'desired' referendum result was secured, immigration dropped off the public radar and was almost forgotten.[10]

Further nuances and contradictions emerged in migration trends since the referendum, as reported in the Office of National Statistics' most recent *Migration Statistics Quarterly Report* (ONS 2020) published just before most types of migration and international travel came to an abrupt halt.[11] Overall net annual migration into the UK has declined, but not drastically, since the referendum. For the year ending September 2019, net migration was 240,000, with 642,000 arrivals and 402,000 departures. For the immediate pre-referendum years, net migration was peaking at around 320,000 per year; so, a reduction of 25% across 3–4 years. More notable was the shift in the importance of EU vs non-EU migration trends, a rise in the latter compensating for the fall in the former. For the year to September 2019, net annual migration from the EU was 64,000 compared to around 220,000 for 2014–2016. The comparable figures for non-EU migration were 250,000 (year to September 2019), rising from just over 150,000 for the two pre-referendum years. The final component in the net migration statistics is the movement of British citizens: rather constant at a net emigration of around 50,000 per year across the pre- and post-referendum years but then rising to more than 70,000 in the most recent year to September 2019.

Summing up, Brexit has thus far resulted in a significant reduction in EU migration to the UK, with fewer arrivals and a 'Brexodus' of returning migrants, especially to the EU8 countries.[12] Nevertheless, immigrants from the EU continue to outnumber departures. There has been a compensatory rise in immigration from non-EU countries, both for work and study purposes.

How might these trends evolve once the UK has completed its transition phase, still timetabled for 1 January 2021? Will there be, as Benton (2020) suggests, 'the dawning of a new age of immobility' once the current block on international (and internal) mobility is lifted? In my view, probably not, because the fundamental economic forces driving migration will reassert themselves. Having said that, there are counteracting forces also at play, partly as a result of the Brexiteers' manipulation of the migration issue and the longer-standing efforts of the Conservative Party to create a 'hostile environment' for immigrants as an appeasement to its hard-right elements and the electoral threat of UKIP (Goodfellow 2019).

Launched by Theresa May in 2012 when she was Home Secretary in the Cameron government, the hostile environment reached its controversial nadir with van-mounted placards cruising around British cities exhorting 'illegal' immigrants to 'Go home' (Figure 4). This was

[10] Yet this did not prevent a rise in anti-immigrant hate crime, especially hate speech, directed at immigrants and visible minorities in the aftermath of the referendum. Some perpetrators believed that the vote for Brexit somehow legitimated verbal and other abuse against EU migrants, particularly those from 'demonised' countries such as Romania and Poland. These anti-immigrant speech acts were observed and noted in the street, the workplace, leisure spaces and school playgrounds. Police reports confirmed the trend, as well as evidence from qualitative research carried out with EU migrants (e.g. Guma and Jones 2019; Rzepnikowska 2018).

[11] ONS data are the 'best available estimates', based on a variety of sources, but with quite wide confidence intervals.

[12] For the year ending 2019, the net inflow of 64,000 EU migrants was unequally split: 49,000 from the EU15, 15,000 from the EU2 (Romania and Bulgaria) and close to zero net migration from the EU8 (returnees balancing arrivals).

part of the discursive frame and policy environment leading up to the referendum and has continued thereafter. The true nature of the British government's hostile stance on immigration was evident in the 'Windrush scandal' of 2018, when it was revealed that a large, but unknown, number of British citizens, who had arrived as children from the Caribbean in the early postwar decades, had been unlawfully repatriated, or imprisoned, or denied their rights to remain, work and access healthcare in the UK.[13]

Figure 4: Theresa May's 'hostile environment' policy towards immigrants. Lorries with this poster circulated for a short time in British cities in 2012, urging 'illegal immigrants' to 'go home or face arrest'.
Source: Socialist.net (2019).

Fast-forward to February 2020: after three and a half years of limbo for the EU migrants already in the UK, during which their future status and rights to stay were yet to be concretely determined, Home Secretary Priti Patel finally announced the new 'rules' for immigration and the right to stay in the UK. In the future, newly arriving EU citizens will be treated the same as other foreign nationalities and their immigration will be subject to a points system. According to Patel, the idea is to end the UK economy's reliance on 'cheap, low-skilled labour' from (Eastern) Europe and shift towards a 'high-wage, high-skill, high-productivity future'.

[13] The name of the scandal derives from the 'Empire Windrush' ship which brought the first contingent of workers and their families from Britain's Caribbean colonies to London in 1948. The 'Windrush generation' were those young men, women and children who arrived by boat throughout the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s to help build Britain's economy and staff its transport and health services. They became factory workers, nurses, cleaners, bus drivers etc. Their children, 'British citizens of Empire', subsequently lived and worked in Britain for the rest of their lives but the government had no record of their status or arrival, since their landing cards, their only proof of arrival, had been destroyed by the Home Office in 2010, thus making it impossible for them to demonstrate that they were in the country legally. For a fuller account, see Goodfellow (2019: 3–6).

Successful applicants for a work visa must accrue at least 70 points. There are three mandatory requirements: a job offer from an approved sponsor, a job at an appropriate skill level (for which at least an 'A'-level qualification or its equivalent is required) and being able to speak English to an approved level. Together, these obligatory criteria contribute 50 points. Extra points are awarded if the job is in a sector with a recognised labour shortage, such as engineering or IT (20 points), if the candidate has a doctorate (10 points, 20 if it is in a 'STEM' subject – science, technology, engineering and maths) and if the annual salary is at least £23,000 (10 points) or £25,000 (20).[14] The rules apply to those wanting to enter the UK after 1 January 2021.

Those EU migrants already in the UK, of whatever skill or income level, can apply for the EU Settlement Scheme and achieve either 'settled' or 'pre-settled' status. Current indications are that, although there has been an increased rate of departure, the take-up of the settlement scheme has been high.[15] Most EU citizens, it seems, are keen to stay, advance their careers and develop their personal and family lives in the UK, even if their initial (and, for many, ongoing) reaction was that Brexit was a 'rupture' (Owen 2018) or at least an 'unsettling event' (Kilkey and Ryan 2020) in their lives and they find that the 'atmosphere' in the UK became more tinged with nationalism, racism and anti-immigrant feelings post-Brexit (Guma and Jones 2019; Lulle, King, Dvorakova and Szkudlarek 2019; Ranta and Nancheva 2019).

If the economy and future migration trends are the most tangible consequences of Brexit, there is another, more potentially radical impact further down the line: the dismemberment of the United Kingdom – 'the break-up of the Brexit state', as Haseler (2017: 209) calls it. Scotland and Northern Ireland both voted 'Remain', by 62% and 56% respectively. The fact that Scotland voted for a different path to the one being doggedly pursued by the Johnson government gives strength to the campaign for a second Scottish independence referendum. If it were successful and reversed the result of the previous one in 2014 (55:45 in favour of staying in the UK), this would lead naturally, although not unproblematically, to an application from Scotland to remain in or rejoin the EU (Susen 2017: 159).

The reunification of Ireland seems more distant, certainly as long as the Democratic Unionist Party (which fervently supports the union of the UK and which is socially as well as politically conservative) remains the majority party. However, the balance of political (and religious and demographic) power is finely set and it may be tilted in the other direction in future elections and by a 'messy' solution to the issue of border controls over the movement of goods and people.

Unlikely though it may seem at present, the collapse of the UK would be a wicked problem at least on a par with Brexit, with manifold constitutional ramifications – the monarchy, politics, economic relations and identity, to name just a few.

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[14] Initially the threshold was set at £30,000, seen as unreasonably high.

[15] According to the latest figures (for 31 March 2020) released by the Home Office, there have been more than 3.1 million concluded applications under the EU Settlement Scheme, of which 58% were granted settled status and the remainder pre-settled status. This represents the vast majority of the estimated number of EU, European Economic Area and Swiss citizens living in the UK (estimates range from 3.4 million to 3.8 million). The main nationalities to apply are Poles (665,000), Romanians (564,000), Italians (351,000) and Portuguese (273,000). A backlog of 320,000 applications are pending. For details, O'Carroll (2020a).

Sixthly, *solutions to wicked problems are not 'right' or 'wrong', nor are they 'true' or 'false'*; what exist are solutions which are 'better' or 'worse' (on certain criteria and for different groups of people) or more or less 'satisfactory'. This certainly applies to Brexit, for which there appears to be no 'correct' or 'good' outcome which would make everyone, or even the majority of people, happy, except those who gain political power through its implementation (the Brexiteers currently at the helm of the Conservative government) and a small number of influential (but largely hidden) financiers and business owners who will try to make a killing. Hence the wicked problem of Brexit demonstrates the challenge, indeed the near-impossibility, of arriving at a sense of the 'common good' where most people would be happy with the outcome.

This last statement links to the penultimate of my wicked-problem propositions: *those seeking to resolve the problem are those who caused it*. This, too, rings true for Brexit. It was the Conservative government (of Cameron) which created the problem, and it is the current Johnson-led government which is charged with implementing the result – a process which is only just beginning. The 'Get Brexit Done' slogan which was so persuasive in landing Johnson his victory in the December 2019 general election was a kind of false promise; misleading to the extent that all the detailed arrangements still have to be made, and have subsequently been derailed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The other way of interpreting this proposition about cause and responsibility is to point to the 'wicked' combination of aligned and mis-aligned voters who swung the referendum. Hypothetically, they could have been asked to 'solve' the problem by holding a second referendum which, arguably, would have reversed the result. However, then the country would have to confront the political and social implications of this stage-managed reversal of the 'will of the people', with yet more polarised and entrenched views and potential civil unrest.

The eighth and final condition is that *solutions to wicked problems need a great number of people to change their mindset and behaviour*. Now that Brexit has 'happened', there is, in a way, a very real sense of not going back. This is not just because of its practical and political irreversibility but also because, even if Article 50 had been revoked or if a second referendum had been held and had swung the other way, there would not be a return to the *status quo ante* but to a new reality possibly more sharply riven than before, as noted above. In fact, only a relatively small number of people would have needed to change their minds to tip a second-referendum result over the threshold to a 'Remain' majority.[16] The only way that 'a great number of people [would] change their mindset and behaviour' would be if it could be clearly shown, in a few years, that Brexit had been an abject failure, especially from an economic point of view. That 'before and after' comparison cannot now be made, because of the devastating economic impact of the coronavirus. Whatever dire performance lies ahead for the UK economy, any Brexit-induced effects can be blamed on the virus, as it will not be easy to disentangle the separate effects of each of these two deeply unsettling events.

[16] Indeed, even without anyone changing their mindset, holding a new referendum three years after the first would probably change the result on the basis of demography. Three years' worth of newly enfranchised youngest-aged voters, with a high age-related propensity to vote 'Remain', would combine with three years of mortality of oldest-age cohorts likely to have voted 'Leave', to produce a different result.

Conclusion: Brexit and the coronavirus – a wicked synergy

On 31 January 2020 the UK left the EU, with Boris Johnson pledging to 'unleash the full potential of this brilliant country to make better the lives of everyone in every corner of our United Kingdom'. On the very same day, the first case of the coronavirus was confirmed in the country. Whether the pandemic will evolve to fulfill the range of criteria for being categorised as a wicked problem remains still to be seen. If it can be quashed by the 'scientific' methods of intensive care, quarantine, tracking and testing, two-metre social distancing and an eventual vaccine, then the problem will have been solved – until the next global pandemic. However, if the vaccine proves elusive and the virus becomes established longer-term, then it becomes more like a super-wicked problem. For the UK, in the shorter term, it is evident that there are 'wicked synergies' between these two mega-problems, including contradictions and ironies. I round off this paper by identifying a few of these.

One of the most current issues at the time of writing (May 2020) is the shortage of seasonal agricultural labour, as the main summer picking season in the UK approaches. Here, Brexit and Covid-19 have delivered a double whammy. Brexit and its crude narrative on the need to control immigration had already discouraged new arrivals, especially those from the EU8 and EU2 countries, which were the main suppliers of seasonal agricultural workers in recent years. Now, the coronavirus has massively heightened this agricultural labour shortage by the virtual ban on inward travel to the UK.[17] Farmers traditionally reliant on EU seasonal harvest workers were already warning of a shortfall of seasonal labour before the coronavirus struck; now the situation is much more serious, with the likelihood of unpicked crops left to rot in fields and orchards. Against a general demand for around 90,000 seasonal labour migrants, the National Farmers Union has estimated a shortfall of 50,000–60,000 for this coming season (Doward 2020). Two solutions are being pursued: an emergency airlift of agricultural labourers from Bulgaria and Romania who are arriving by chartered planes, and an attempt to recruit British workers (students, the unemployed and furloughed employees) into these jobs. Results so far are mixed. This kind of work demands stamina, resiliance and speed – strong backs and nimble fingers. Stories have emerged of the East European 'low-skill' migrant workers, most of whom are repeat returnees, training the British recruits (see the press reports by Carrell 2020; Doward 2020; Harvey 2020; O'Carroll 2020b, 2020c).

The second issue which became visibly apparent as the pandemic quickly progressed was the heavy reliance of the National Health Service on immigrant and immigrant-origin staff, especially those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds who, in fact, make up 44% of the Service's medical staff. Moreover, a disproportionate number of them, as front-line staff (doctors, nurses, ward orderlies etc.) have become casualties of the virus. A picture gallery of the first 12 doctors who died after contracting the coronavirus showed them all to be of BAME origin (Siddique 2020). Amongst patients in intensive care in hospitals in

[17] As a *Guardian* leader of 30 April 2020 wryly commented, 'Covid-19 has accomplished in weeks what UK Conservative governments have been trying to do for decades – drastically cut immigration to the tens of thousands'.

late April, 34.5% were BAME, two and a half times their ratio in the overall UK population – 14% (Iqbal 2020). There was a touching but ironic acknowledgment of the country's reliance on immigrant staff by Boris Johnson, who himself was stricken by the virus and became seriously ill; on his release from hospital he publicly name-checked the two nurses who had been at his bedside throughout his days and nights in intensive care – 'Jenny from New Zealand and Luis from Portugal'. Yet, as the whole country expresses its gratitude to the NHS and its large numbers of immigrant staff, the Home Office, led by Priti Patel, herself the daughter of immigrants from India, continues its *de facto* 'hostile to immigrants' policy.

A third issue, less visible and more mysterious as to exactly what happened, was the UK's failure to participate in an economically advantageous EU bulk-procurement scheme for essential medical equipment – ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE) – which rapidly became in short supply. Whilst the UK government initially excused its absence from key meetings to which it had been invited by reference to 'misplaced emails', others contended that the meetings were boycotted for Brexit-inspired 'political reasons' (see Boffey and Booth 2020; Wintour and Boffey 2020). The ongoing shortage of PPE for front-line hospital and care-home staff has been one of the most widely criticised shortcomings of the government's strategy to tackle the virus.

Fourth in this list of 'wicked' examples is the pernicious two-way temporal dynamic between Brexit and Covid-19, where there is evidence of a 'double-delay' effect, encapsulated in the appearance on 'Brexit day' of the first recorded cases of virus infection in the UK. According to critical but well-informed press reports of the time (e.g. Helm, Graham-Harrison and McKie 2020), the celebratory atmosphere following the election triumph and the 'achievement' of Brexit diverted attention from the early warning signs about the spread of the coronavirus from China to Europe. The parties, the fireworks, the commemorative 50-pence coins, Johnson's election-honeymoon Caribbean holiday that went on just a bit too long, the Cabinet reshuffle that brought in a bunch of 'Brexit-heavy' ministers – all contributed to an atmosphere of casual over-confidence about the onset of the virus, once it was confirmed to be present in the UK. As a result, the UK only entered the 'lockdown' phase in late March, much later than most other European countries, which also instigated mass testing earlier than the UK. The net result of all this is that the UK has recorded the highest absolute number of Covid-related deaths of all European countries: by 18 May 34,796 and counting…[18]

The reverse argument also holds true: that Covid-19 has inescapably jeopardised the chances of arriving at any kind of comprehensive agreement with the EU on the concrete nature of Brexit by the end of 2020, when the transition phase ends. Especially urgent is agreement on the nature of the trading relationship, although other sticking points are security, fishing rights and the Irish border. The few meetings that have taken place have revealed only intransigence on both sides. The fear is that, if no progress is made by the end of June, the cut-off date for signs of progress or for a request for an extension to the transition period, then Johnson and his hard-Brexit Cabinet will resort to crashing out of the EU on 31 December 2020 with a 'no-deal' outcome. If this happens, it will signal a final victory for the hard-right *de*

[18] These were Covid-19 related deaths, and are the official government figure. However, according to ONS data on 'excess deaths' (the difference between the actual number of deaths recorded in the UK during the pandemic period – 14 March to 8 May – and the number of deaths in the same period in 2019), the impact has been far greater, 49,353.

facto coalition of Europhobic and xenophobic Tories, UKIP and the Brexit Party, who surely represent a minority of the British population, most of whom did not vote in the referendum for this kind of 'solution'.

I want to return, finally, to the question posed at the outset: What was Brexit really about? In essence, it was not really a vote on Europe, nor even a vote on immigration, even if the Brexiteers manipulated it as such. Much more, it was a vote on whether people felt happy: too many did not, thanks to nearly a decade of austerity orchestrated by the Cameron-Osborne duo who spearheaded, with too little conviction (since they, too, were part of the Conservative Party's 'hostile attitude' towards immigration), the 'Remain' campaign. Brexit, then, was about how people felt about themselves in a world and a society that was becoming more globalised, more difficult to comprehend, but also more unequal, more divided and more characterised by alienation. However, the conventional diagnosis that Brexit was a battle between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', between the 'elite cosmopolitans' on one side and the 'localists' and 'nationalists' on the other, is too simple. As pointed out earlier in the paper, those who voted 'out' represented an extraordinary variety of groups with wildly different perceptions, values and motivations, who either propagated or were duped by the slogans of the Leave campaign, many of which were gross inaccuracies if not outright lies. As Ben Rogaly points out in his recent book on the 'migrant city' of Peterborough in the Brexit era, the Leave campaign generated wide appeal amongst the middle class, thus subverting the standard 'have' and 'have-not' class interpretation (2020: 12).

In this paper, I have argued that it is instructive to view Brexit through the lens of it being a 'wicked problem', full of contradictions, complexly linked to other problems, some of which are themselves arguably wicked and still, nearly four years after the referendum, with no end in sight. In recent weeks, its outcome has been severely compromised, and perhaps delayed, by the coronavirus pandemic, so that a 'solution' remains unclear. On a broader front, as Delanty (2017: 111) has pointed out, 'whilst elections are reversible at the next election, referenda are generally not reversible … in the case of Brexit a more or less irreversible systemic course of action will ensue that will set the historical clock back several decades'. The negative effects of Brexit will be both amplified and obscured by the colossal economic setback provoked by the coronavirus, so it will be difficult to hold the Johnson government to account for the economic failures of Brexit. Is there a glimmer of hope in the long term? Labour's new leader, Keir Starmer, has not ruled out applying to rejoin the EU at some future time. Things will have to get a lot worse – and the political balance of power will have to have radically shifted – for that to be more than a remote prospect.

Acknowledgements

This paper is an updated version of a presentation to the International Workshop on 'Conflicts over Cross-Border Migration, Classifications and Belonging', Lübbenau Castle, Germany, 6-7 June 2018. Thanks to Anna Amelina for the invitation to present at the Workshop and for her encouragement to write it up in this greatly extended form. Thanks also to Georg Sootla, Tallinn University, for help in sourcing literature on wicked problems.

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