

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live event from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the Open University. In this session, we take a look at analysing the vote-- identity and geography. And I'm joined by Kesi Mahendran Honduran and Allan Cochrane. Kesi is from Psychology, and Allan is from Geography.

Now, this is going to be a very interesting discussion, because we're going to be taking a look at some very broad ideas from quite different perspectives. So I'd like to start by asking about where Britain is going, post Brexit. What are your takes on that?

KESI MAHENDRAN: It's an interesting question, isn't it? I mean, it's almost like the sort of million-dollar question, isn't it?

KAREN FOLEY: I'm going to write down your answer.

[LAUGH]

KESI MAHENDRAN: I mean, Britain doesn't know where it's going, really. And I think there are a few different narratives on the table, at the moment. And it is really quite fascinating.

There are some people who are very pessimistic about it. They say it is-- it's-- it's, you know, offroading, at the moment. And it's not clear what the plan is, that we're leaving the Eur-- we're certainly leaving the European Union, but we don't know quite what we're joining, going forward.

And other people see us as being-- I mean, I speak generally from what the public say. That's most of my work, is on what the public say. And other people see this as being a fabulous opportunity, really, to be free of what was a well-intended but now outmoded project, the European Union project.

KAREN FOLEY: You speak about these narratives. And, for some people, geography doesn't matter. For others, they matter a huge amount.

ALLAN COCHRANE: So, I think that is interesting. I go along with what Kesi says. But I just want to-- for me, one of the things that's really interesting about thinking around the European Union is what it tells us about Britain, what it tells us about the UK. And it seems to me that some of the divisions and distinctions that came out in the referendum and have been continuing, in some respects, is it

they tell us about how different projects have been trying to redefine the UK, redefine Britain, as much as having anything to do with Europe. In other words, Europe itself, joining the European Union, was in a way trying to sort out one set of problems for the UK.

But what we've now done is thinking, well, actually that hasn't worked, or it isn't working, and how have we held together? What are the different bits? And the UK is changed. It's no longer a great imperial power. And it's somehow having to deal with the way in which that finds a reflection in the structures of the United Kingdom.

So, you get the rise of really quite interesting and important nationalisms-- in particular in Scotland, but not just in Scotland. But you also get significant divisions that have taken place, even in England. England is a very divided country, in terms of-- you just have to look at the divisions between London and parts of the deindustrialized north. Although there are lots of similarities between London and some of the big cities.

So, I think what you're seeing coming out, and the expression, is a series of things which reveal tensions, which reveal that we haven't quite sorted out where we want to go-- to come back to that question. And what happens next is going to be really interesting, because those tensions have not gone away. And they're there because they're deeply rooted in some very big political and economic changes that have been taking place since 1945.

KAREN FOLEY: We've put some widgets up, and we'd like you at home to vote on those for us. So the first one is "Is Brexit moving towards the breakup of Britain?" So let us know whether you think that's a no or a yes or somewhere in between.

The other thing we'd like you to tell us is whether you think that people want to keep European citizenship. So, do people want to keep citizenship? So, that might be your answer. So you can say "yes," "no," or "unsure."

And we've also got another one, which has got a couple more options there, which is "How do you think that everyone else might answer that question about citizenship?" So, would they want UK citizenship, European, or undecided or pragmatic, or a boundaryless or global citizenship? So let us know your answers to those, and we'll bring those into the conversation.

Because, Allan, to pick up, then, from where you left off about this whole idea about things happening, there's this whole aspect of colonialism and various narratives coming through, in terms of how we're perceiving Britain internally, yet all of this emphasis, as well, on

boundaries.

ALLAN

Yeah. I think, I'm not sure. I mean, I would see it as more rooted in an imperial project rather than specifically colonialism, although obviously that's part of it. That's come across in some of the ways in which migration's been talked about very recently-- in terms, for example, of the Windrush generation. But I think what's interesting is how, from a quite strong, identifiable, imperial project in which there was some deep-rooted economic basis for cities like Glasgow and Belfast and a number of others, Liverpool, those confidences, those serious positions within a wider British international economy are no longer there.

COCHRANE:

So what does that mean? How do we think about that? Some of the old deindustrializing areas, in the north of England and in Wales, face particular problems. We think about how actually, in Scotland, we know that, in fact, although it's still not as prosperous as the south of England, surprisingly, we do know that there's been bigger growth in Scotland than in other parts of the UK, recently.

So what's happening? What's going on? Those sorts of questions, it seems to me, are what frame some of the discussion. We might want to talk about what Paul Gilroy's called "postimperial melancholy" to describe how people are thinking about these things. Although I know there may be other ways of thinking about that that we might want to think about.

Or how are we coping with the letdown from empire? And Europe is part of that. Europe was part of that, both as a posed solution. But now, of course, if you think about moving away from it, are we moving back to some other-- or are we trying to think of some other global solutions?

KAREN FOLEY:

Let's take a quick look at what people said about "Is Brexit moving the UK towards a breakup of Britain?" So, yeah, we're sort of on the scale, then, of the, more towards the yes end than the no. But equally, still some very polar views on that aspect.

I mean, this is all about, I guess, how we're framing this change, and how we're coping with that. And lot of that is narratives.

KESI

It is, yeah, and it's what you draw up to make your story. And I think what's happening at the moment is there is a tendency to jump quite a few decades. I mean, the 1950s, it drops out of people's story. The 1960s is dropping out of the story.

MAHENDRAN:

Because these are the points when Britain was, of course, incredibly poor-- recovering from

the war. It had a major rebuilding programme required. It wanted to join the European Union, in the '60s-- wasn't allowed. Managed to join in the '70s.

And I don't think people hold onto that story. I think that Allan's right. They jump past it, to an imperial story, and then jump forward. And not-- I shouldn't say "people," but some people-- jump forward, to a postimperial project, which they call "global Britain."

Other people, they use the war as their main reference point. They see the war as being the reason that the European Union was formed and that Britain's success and progressive quality of life, you know, how we live now, is so much a part of our membership of the European Union. And those are the people who feel disenfranchised, at the moment, I think. That they're a section of the public that feel very disenfranchised, because they haven't got the support of any major political party. You know, the Labour Party won't support them. And, of course, the Conservative Party won't support them.

KAREN FOLEY: We asked people, earlier, to tell us whether they would want to keep their citizenship and how they think everyone else would vote. And the results were quite interesting, Kesi. So the first widget we asked was "Do people at home want to keep their European citizenship?" Let's see what you had to say.

So 64% of you said yes, 80% no, 18% were unsure. But, when we asked what they think other people would think-- and, Kesi, you'll love this, as a psychologist-- [LAUGH] the results were quite different.

So here we can see that 9% would say for the undecided or pragmatic. Nobody would say European. And the vast majority would say that other people would say that they wanted to be in the UK. So what do you make of that?

KESI
MAHENDRAN: That's exactly what our research supported, that people who want to keep their European citizenship feel that they're in some ways quite separate to the general public. I mean, that's really supported that. And also notice how our students, when they're asked the question, and the viewers are asked the question, the majority didn't want to keep the European citizenship.

So, to me, that raises an interesting political question. You know, there's a gap, there, between what you want and whether you can get it when you feel that you're away from the majority. And what-- in the latest piece that I'm writing is, is how you then make sense of the rest of the people. Because it's difficult, isn't it? You feel you're in a different position to them.

And what we're finding is, some people have taken avant-garde position. You know, we're ahead. Some of us are ahead, here. We're kind of the leaders on this one. We need to persuade the rest.

And other people take a view where they see themselves as part of the public. Do you know what I mean? That they just see it as a progressive position. It's not so avant-garde, it's not quite so elitist as is an avant-garde position, it's, we're all in the same boat, here. You know, let's have more of a conversation about this.

And so they-- I mean, I'm always interested in-- I think, really, back to your original question, "where is Britain going," for me one of the key things is, how are we going to do democracy now? Because we've had this very polarising moment. And how do we cope with being in social situations-- you know, family dinners, in the cafes, in restaurants-- where you're sat with people who actually feel quite differently to you.

How do we do democracy? Do we just say, look, when majority say something, everybody has to go along with it. That's how democracy works. Or do we want to do something slightly different?

KAREN FOLEY: Because, Allan, one of your points is that place gets very disruptive, because you can sort of categorise people in a place or a town, thinking, well, you're like me. And we can sort of say, well, I'm in this sort of colour area. But it's not quite as clear-cut as that. And this whole notion of place being very disrupted by a lot of this.

ALLAN COCHRANE: I think place has to be understood as something that's being made up by people who live in the places. It's not a fixed category. You can end up believing that there are fixed categories. And sometimes people do identify with place, and it becomes a way of excluding or including people.

But I think it's important that we recognise the way in which places are constantly being made and remade by the people who live in them-- particularly in the UK, where populations are shifting, where we know from successive censuses that there are different mixes of different ethnicities, different sorts of migrant groups, different nonmigrant groups, coming together and having to redefine the places in which they live. Sometimes, those divisions do find a reflection in, we're trying to maintain our position as against someone else. But, very often, it's a question of people trying to look for ways of living and negotiating their lives together.

I was involved recently in a research project which was looking at what we called "living multicultural" in three different urban areas of-- actually of England, but it was a place just outside Leicester, Milton Keynes, and in London. And just exploring what people were actually doing in practise, rather than talking about it in the abstract, was quite important, because people were learning to negotiate their different positions, understanding how to share space. And I think that's one of the things that comes back, in a way. It's what Kesi was saying-- how do we do that? Is that democracy, or what is it?

And I think one of the exciting things about this moment is how that there are different things in contention. So one of the things that's in contention, as we've just been talking about, is how we understand different possibilities of the global, of the international. I mean, some people might identify with Europe, some people might identify with a global Britain, some people might identify with a nostalgic dream of the 1950s-- whatever it is.

And it seems to me that having those things in contention is really quite interesting. It's new, in a way. I don't think-- and they've been in contention in quite the same way, in the United Kingdom, as they are now.

And, if we think about the breakup of Britain, that sort of kind of reinforces divisions of that sort, but it also undermines them, because the debate becomes wider. The debate becomes not just one about difference but one about how you're managed different, so you live different, so you live together. So those are the-- there's a whole range of different things coming together, at the moment, which I think are potentially quite exciting, even if they're sometimes quite depressing, I'd say.

KAREN FOLEY: Because, I guess, in negotiating this whole thing of our place in the world and, you know, our place within Britain, as well, you know, place is one of those factors that we often come back to, just as a demographic. And place featured quite heavily in terms of how you were looking at your research. But what you found was that it wasn't a determining factor, in terms of how are people making decisions.

So there can be this notion of place being something of a group of people. It can be a sort of emotional, you know, a joining together of people, or a geographical, or even boundaryless place. But this idea of place is not what it was maybe five years ago.

KESI Yeah, because your place could be based on sexuality. And so you then have a network of

MAHENDRAN: people who have the same sexuality as you. And that then runs across geographical place.

And what we found, actually-- you've just made me think of that, Karen, which was fascinating. Anyone who thought that sexual diversity and the freedom of sexual expression was important was pro-European. Which was-- and that was across different--

In my study, we had Germany involved, Ireland involved, Sweden involved, and then England and Scotland involved. But that was the case right across all of those countries. Which, I sensed, meant that they regarded the European Union as a progressive project.

And that was the same for anyone who had ecological views. They were pro-European. And they popped up in all of these different cities, if you like.

But one of the things, I think, that is going on specifically in the UK is that you have certain values, you have views about how you want to live and how politics should run, and you have a relationship with your government, really. And I think that what's happening in the UK is that, in Scotland particularly, there's a strong relationship between citizens and their government. They feel that they're part of the same project, going forward. It's a dynamic project.

Northern Ireland, post the Good Friday Agreement, is also very dynamic, moving forward. I think England struggles much more with that. It doesn't seem to have a kind of national project that's going forward, where there's a level of consensus. And I think that did affect it.

And you've got these divisions I live in the north of England, where the reference points were massively Scottish.

KAREN FOLEY: Let's take a quick trip to the help desk, where we have David joining us. Welcome, David. I hear that you're having a very exciting discussion around issues about what we should really be focusing on right now.

DAVID: Yes, indeed, Karen, particularly Christopher has contributed his opinions about tribal politics is outdated, and should party politics be put aside so the whole house is working together on this important issue of Brexit?

KAREN FOLEY: Very interesting question. I wonder what [LAUGH] people might say about that, if we were to have a truce for a little while so that we could really focus. Because there is this issue of this division. And, you know, again, I don't know whether, Allan, you were making the point about how some of the politics has shifted quite dramatically in a very short space of time, as well.

ALLAN

I think it has. And I think, if I could come back just briefly to the question of England, and

COCHRANE:

English national understandings, I think one of the things that's come out is how there isn't a single English national story, at the moment. I mean, England is actually-- does have some significant stories in it. I think London has got a particular story, which is a slightly different one from the rest of England-- indeed, the rest of the UK.

But it's also one that is informed by all sorts of divisions, itself. So it's partly to do with elite politics. It's partly to do with a much more broader-based politics of multicultural, of different sorts of populations, of poor and rich living almost side by side.

And, I think, in some cases links to other big cities within England. Which means that English nationalism has trouble becoming a single thing, like it might be in Scotland, or-- yeah, might be in Scotland. It certainly isn't in Northern Ireland.

But I think that's interesting. And I think, coming to the question about whether there should be a shared understanding of Brexit, I mean, that's interesting, "tribal politics." Because one of the things that's happened is, in a sense, that we've moved to a position, which was unpredicted a few years ago, where the two major parties are the parties that were attracting the biggest amount of votes. That-- most people were predicting the breakup of all that. That was all going. Everything was going to be fragmented, and so on.

Suddenly, it's not, again. And that's really weird. Now, is that because there's a series of shared agendas? I don't think so. Which is interesting.

And what you've got is, the main parties are sort of coalitions of competing and real tense. So the idea of bringing everybody together is quite interesting. Because, at the one hand, you have evidence which suggests people are coming together, because they're coming back to the big parties. On the other hand, what you find is, within the big parties there are these huge tensions around precisely some of the issues that we've been talking about. I think that's actually where we are now.

KESI

I think it's an interesting comment, because it's based on the view that we're going into a negotiating situation and we need to front up. Do you know what I mean? Whatever our squabbles are, we need to come together whenever we're in a situation where we're negotiating with Brussels.

MAHENDRAN:

And I do have some sympathy for that view. You know, it is very handy, in this negotiation

period, this transition period, that, for Brussels, that Britain is so divided on this. They know that. And it means that--

I do have some sympathy for that question. The difficulty is, it comes back to the main point, which is that, at the moment, when you ask people "what would you prefer-- direct democracy, or representative democracy"-- they say "representative democracy." So, in a way, they want the chambers to be debating and having different views. They want that kind of democracy.

And, if we start acting like a firm, do you know what I mean, like a business, where, whatever our disagreements are, we keep them quiet, for the moment, for the transition period, I think it would influence our democracy. We're not in a war situation, where, of course, that does happen. The different political parties do come together, when it's a war cabinet, and there is a general consensus that you stand behind the government that's in power. But I don't think we're in that situation.

KAREN FOLEY: But interesting that we're still fighting for something that matters hugely, both now and in the future. I wonder, Kesi, you know, we were talking, then, about the way that we can look at London, for example, and Scotland. And of mentioned some of these big categories. And you focus very heavily on identifying some of the nuances within some of those big areas and saying, well, London actually doesn't operate in quite that way. There are these different understandings.

And I wanted to ask about how quickly you felt things are changed? You know, is Britain more divided than maybe it was five years ago, in terms of how we're seeing some of those things? Are there shifts in certain areas that are different-- in some of the big cities, for example?

KESI
MAHENDRAN: I think it's a lot to do with austerity. I mean, and that's always the elephant in the room. You know, that Britain has gone through major austerity since 2008. And there's not much evidence-- there aren't many green shoots, in relation to that. And that's been very hard for it, as a country, not least because neighbouring countries that were affected by the global recession have come out of it.

And Britain, partly because of the Brexit vote, hasn't. And that's bound to divide Britain. Then, to try and make sense of that division, the biggest story in the islands is Brexit. So people put it on Brexit.

But my personal view is that it was divided, before. I mean, our data was gathered before the

global recession. So we gathered data in 2008-- at the beginning part of 2008, before it happened. And then we gathered data around 2012, 2013, when the Scottish referendum was on the table but the EU referendum wasn't.

And we saw quite a high level of division. So certainly, within our team, our view is that what we're seeing now is, as Allan says, is we're seeing the expression of it. Because this is at the top of people's minds, and that they've got political views.

So the politics has been revitalised, but the basis of those divisions, I think, have been around for at least 10 years and relate to austerity and how divisive that's been for people.

KAREN FOLEY: Where do you see those divisions as being?

ALLAN COCHRANE: Well, I think-- I think austerity's certainly sharpened some of the divisions. But my feeling is that it's-- and I think this is consistent with what we've been saying-- is that it stretches back. I mean, we're talking about divisions that have been emerging over a period of 20 or 30 years. And there have always been divisions in Britain, anyway. I mean, I think it's strange to think that there haven't been.

I mean, it's interesting, when you think back to the 1975 referendum, where everybody voted-- you know, there was a big yes vote, despite the fact that some of the political parties that now are in favour of Remain would have been in favour of Leave, at that time. That, too, showed a lot of division that was in existence. And it's about trying to come to terms with some of those divisions, I think. That's what's there.

And the debate sort of-- it keeps going round and round. I think you can-- divisions aren't fundamental, in the sense that they destroy things. You can begin to get negotiated settlements, you can begin to get ways in which you move forward, or you can begin to get ways in which one particular view takes over and begins to be the one around which consensus or hegemony emerges.

And, at the moment, I think what's interesting is how that is not happening in a very clear way. There's a-- you know, we know that the divisions are there. But they're not divisions that are recently invented. They're not invented by Brexit. The Brexit vote confirmed their existence and actually opened up some of the tensions in interesting ways.

I mean, I think that, for example, the vote in Scotland, I think, opened up interesting tensions about how Scotland fits in with the wider United Kingdom. That's not say that it doesn't, but it's

a different way of developing and thinking through politics. And you could see similar things beginning to emerge in other parts of the UK, as well, where I think there are different sorts of tensions that appear and are being managed or not managed.

But they're not new. They're expressions of some of the tensions that arise, as I've tried to indicate, from some of the shifts that have taken place in the UK'S position in the world over the past 20 or 30 years or slightly more. They're part of a process by which different areas, different industries, different sets of social relations have been being constructed over time. And I think that's what's interesting about it.

KESI And I think there is something interesting about, when you talk about division, what you mean.

MAHENDRAN: Do you know what I mean? There's the division between the haves and the have-nots. And, you know, there's an economic division.

And then there's a difference of opinion. And you know, political divisions. And, really, I think, over the last couple of years, since the EU vote, that that's been quite interesting.

Because Scotland, when we had that moment when the SMP-- can you remember the moment when the SMP won so many seats, I mean, they just won so many seats to-- it was incredible. But the next thing that happened was that the Scottish population immediately started to act against that.

I mean, I had friends and colleagues who then immediately voted differently, because it had become too much of the same party. They just thought, no, that can't be right. That can't be healthy. We need a proper democracy, in Scotland, not some sort of one-party state.

So, in that sense, difference is quite important, isn't it? To sustain it, for democracy.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolu. Allan, any final words before we end?

ALLAN
COCHRANE: I think the idea of difference being important to sustain democracy is a good place to end, because that's actually what I think we have been arguing around and about. We're arguing that there are debates that are taking place which are important debates, and they've not been settled yet. And it's important that they continue.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Well, Allan, Kesi, thank you so much. It's been a fascinating discussion. We now have a video for you, which is "A Different Vote in a Devolved Nation."

So enjoy that, and we'll be back, then, in five minutes for our next session, in which we'll look at material Brexit. See you soon.