

Northern England ahead of Brexit

Royal mess in the United Kingdom

The majority in the Labour heartlands of the north voted for Brexit, however the British left-wing party remains divided on how to deal with it.

By Christian Werthschulte



Leave or remain? For many in Britain, it is about their own identity. Photo: dpa

If there is a primal scene for Brexit, it took place in northern England. On 28 April 2010, then Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown was at an election campaign appearance in the town of Rochdale when he encountered pensioner Gillian Duffy. “I’ve voted Labour all my life”, she said, “now I’m ashamed to.” Her pension was being taxed too heavily, her grandchildren would have to pay high tuition fees. And at some point she stated, “you can’t say anything about immigrants any more. All these eastern Europeans – where are they flocking from?”

Gordon Brown defended himself in an amicable manner and drove away. What he didn’t know was that the Sky news microphone was still recording when he called the old woman “bigoted” in his ministerial car. The whole country was listening, and Brown lost the election by some margin a couple of weeks later.

“The incident shows how difficult it was for politicians in Westminster to understand the lives of the people whose side they claimed to be on”, says sociologist William Davies of London’s Goldsmiths College as he watches the video again for *Die*

Tageszeitung. “There is a gulf between the economic narratives of politics and the narratives surrounding identity.” Brexit is another result of this. A lot of the Labour heartlands in northern England voted Leave, including Rochdale, 20 kilometres north of Manchester.

The world’s first cooperative was founded here in 1844. Since the 2016 EU referendum, towns such as Rochdale have been used to argue that the British left needs to get back to its roots: to the traditional values of the working class, to the “real hardships of ordinary people”, which would also include “legitimate concerns” about excessive immigration.

Non-progressive nostalgia

“This return to traditional values is not a progressive form of nostalgia”, says Owen Hatherley, architecture critic and member of the Labour Party, who was also shown the video. In his book “The Ministry of Nostalgia”, he investigated the extent to which political discourse in Britain is imbued with nostalgia for a golden age. The right invokes the spirit of the Second World War, when the country closed ranks against the external enemy of fascism, and the left the post-war period when the NHS was set up enabling all Brits to have health insurance irrespective of their income and when almost all Labour voters were reputedly white.

“The working class, even in Rochdale, was already multicultural at that time and remains so today”, says Hatherley and recalls the strike at the film processing factory Grunwick in London between 1976 and 1978. There, a workforce that was predominantly female and of southeast Asian origin fought against the dismissal of a colleague, and in doing so gained support from many other trade unions, such as the powerful mineworkers under their President Arthur Scargill. “Even at the end of the seventies it was clear that industrial disputes were interrelated.”

Even now, many BAMEs (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicities) in northern England see the Labour Party as their political home. “At my school, Labour enjoyed almost 100 per cent approval”, says Balraj Samrai. He is a DJ and producer of the Manchester-based club night Swing Ting and at the time of the EU referendum was working at a college in the multicultural south of Manchester. He took straw polls in lessons. “Around half would have voted Leave”, explains Samrai. “The pupils thought that it would mean more money for the NHS.”

Megan Coyne cannot agree with them and says, “the NHS has been broken by the Conservative government’s cost-cutting.” On 23 March, the day of the big pro-EU demo in London, the pensioner is in the centre of Manchester where she has helped to organise a rally against leaving the EU. Coyne comes from a socialist family and her father was a blacksmith. She hails from Bolton, a medium-sized town on the outskirts of Manchester where 17 per cent of the local population comes from ethnic

minorities and, at the equivalent of around EUR 26,000 per year, the average wage is considerably below the national average. Bolton also voted Leave. "The Leave voters didn't understand how much financial support the EU has given to culture, sport and the regeneration of infrastructure in the area", says Megan Coyne. "We Remain voters know this, which is why we are now so distraught." Coyne still supports the socio-political ideas of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, but does not understand why the Party leadership is behaving as it is on matters relating to the EU.

"There are various reasons for this", says Jeremy Gilbert, who teaches Cultural Studies at the University of East London and is a member of the left-wing Labour group Compass. "Corbyn has adopted almost all of the political ideas espoused by Tony Benn." In the eighties, the Labour left, with Benn at its centre, had great hopes for the socialist Mitterrand government in France, however the latter was unable to implement its social democratic reforms in the face of the EU. The Labour left in turn used this to conclude that there was nothing to be gained from being in Europe.

During the EU referendum, another aspect also came into play, namely the EU's hard stance in relation to the Greek left-wing party Syriza. "I voted Remain", says Jeremy Gilbert, "but due to Greece I could not bring myself to promote the EU." According to Owen Hatherley, you cannot draw any conclusions about Britain from the Greece conflict because the United Kingdom was never part of the euro zone. "For us, the EU Social Charter and the Maastricht Treaty helped to put a dampener on the neoliberal reforms of Margaret Thatcher", he explains.

But how do you explain this to Labour supporters like Gillian Duffy, the pensioner from Rochdale? Shortly before the EU referendum, she told the BBC that she was frightened for her English identity and did not want to be European. "These people believe a narrative about the world fed to them by the tabloid press", says Jeremy Gilbert. "We need to explain the economic contexts to them clearly – but in a radical democratic manner."

His organisation Compass has recently spoken out in favour of the "Citizen's Assembly", a form of civic participation which was also successfully used in the 2018 referendum on the legalisation of abortion in Ireland. In this process, a representative group of the population is selected to debate the subject of a referendum and ultimately to prepare the vote including the options to be put to the people. "It is about giving power back to the people as citizens", says Gilbert.

This also includes changes in economic policy. “We can now see how more power can be given back to the towns and cities”, says William Davies and mentions Preston. The city in the northwest voted clearly to leave, and the left-wing city council drew its own conclusions from this. It is awarding public contracts to local companies and is supporting the foundation of cooperative businesses. “The northwest of England was not only the birthplace of the industrial revolution, but also of socialist experiments such as self-organised businesses and consumer cooperatives”, says William Davies. “Many people think that if anything is going to raise hopes it is the rediscovery of the passion for the left-wing experiment.”

This research was supported by the Goethe-Institut.