

BREXIT

The Blackbird

Leys Memo

THE COUNTRY WE WANT AND BRITAIN'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

A report of an open, community conversation, post-EU referendum, on what's needed now

Introduction

In 1972, Sicco Mansholt, then President of the European Commission, raised a series of provocative questions that still resonate: “Will the EEC become a powerful agent for improving living standards and opportunity in solidarity with less fortunate countries? Or will it remain a select inward-looking club of some of the world’s richest nations? Will it continue to produce ‘bigger, faster and more’ for ‘some’ to the detriment of the global environment and the welfare of the ‘rest’?”

What he failed on that occasion to see, however, was that the questions he raised about how Europe might become divided against the rest of the world would also apply to how some of its citizens saw Europe divided against itself. He didn’t foresee how the European project itself would become a lightning conductor rod for those who felt that the economic system more broadly was failing by producing ‘bigger, faster, and more’ for an elite minority to the detriment of the ‘rest’.

It was a top down political project that did not, sufficiently or convincingly, in the UK referendum make its case that membership of the EU brought significant benefits in terms of defending the rights of working people, keeping multinational corporations in check and acting to protect the environment. Instead, advocates of continued membership stressed that we’d get more of the same economic system, which many people thought wasn’t working for them. Right or wrong it was a powerful perception, especially in lower income and economically insecure communities.

This paper is a short report of a pilot initiative to explore what might address feelings of communities who felt this way. It was an exercise in creating a space for people to talk, and then listening. Any prescriptive comments come entirely from members of the local community who took part.

Going local: Blackbird Leys and our futures

After the EU Membership referendum the New Weather Institute and the Said Business School, Oxford, discussed exploring the ideas people had about the kind of society they would like in the wake of the Brexit vote. A national conversation began that still continues among politically active groups and individuals. Some are calling for a new ‘progressive alliance’, such as in ‘*The Alternative*’, a new book published with support from representatives of multiple opposition parties including Labour, Green, Liberal Democrat and the Scottish National Party.

We thought it was also important to hear directly from those in key Brexit voting areas. It seemed likely that many of the public, media and Parliamentary concerns would focus predominantly on the mechanisms around leaving the EU – votes in Westminster and different shades of hard, soft and clean Brexit – rather than on the impact of the referendum result at the crucial local and regional levels.

The point was less to find out if and why people had voted to leave the EU; instead we wanted to open up discussion with communities about what they thought should happen in the ensuing situation of flux and how to ensure that their voice could be heard. In all the media and political discussion about how some areas were ‘abandoned’ by the economy, by politicians, by metropolitan society, we could not find any evidence that people’s views and hopes about their own communities – rather than their much-reported anger – were being taken into consideration when talking about our post-Brexit future.

The city of Oxford voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU – 83 per cent. But the communities of Blackbird Leys and Greater Leys, four miles to the south east of the City Centre, which together have a population of around 12,000, voted by 53 per cent to leave the EU.

These two estates seemed the obvious place to host a pilot conversation.

Planning the event

The event was organised to be sociable, in Blackbird Leys itself, and open to anyone who wanted to come. Any particular time of the day that a meeting is held risks excluding some part of the community, but an early evening event, from 5-7 pm on 29 November 2016 was chosen to try to include as broad a cross-section of people as possible. It was held at the popular Community Centre. Locally made food was provided, and anything we used – notebooks, pens – was bought locally from nearby shopping parades.

The meeting also provided an opportunity for students on relevant courses at the local college and the City's university, who were there taking notes for the discussion, to meet local people from the Blackbird Leys area. The students themselves commented on how they had never taken part in such discussions, were noticeably enthused and found the experience awakening.

Reaching the residents

Members of the local community told us that getting people to attend public meetings in the area was always difficult. The event itself was organised in less than a month and on a very small budget. So, in order to advertise the meeting, flyers were handed out in the shopping centres, outside and inside the Leisure Centre and the Community Centre. They were distributed through local churches, the library, the local College, children's centres (to reach out to parents), and outside the Pegasus Academy primary school. They were also taken to local kebab shops, hairdressers, newsagents and supermarkets.

We contacted local councillors, the local MP for Oxford East, the union Unite (which distributed information to its members) the Oxford Polish Association, the Cowley Mosque, and the Oxford Mail, which reported the event both in advance of the meeting and subsequently. So did the local radio station, Destiny 105.FM. Word was spread also through the Green Party, and the nascent Oxford Progressive Alliance. Oxford Academy let parents of their students know it was happening.

The event

The Jack Argent room in the Community Centre was hired, with its a kitchen and good equipment. We provided cake, sandwiches and sausage rolls from the Boiler Room café at the Pegasus Academy. A friendly atmosphere was created with tea lights on the window sills and tables.

We waited for the residents. And they came. We had a total of 34 participants, including five students from Oxford University. Andrew Simms of the New Weather Institute facilitated the event. The meeting did not begin with a set agenda and list of issues for discussion, but instead by finding out what people wanted to talk about, listening to what people said and following where their thoughts took them.

We divided into four groups to discuss the future that people wanted for Blackbird Leys. The discussions ranged widely, and were not curtailed.

While there was no set agenda, there was some context outlined for discussion, which sought to anchor conversation in the practical realities of living in the area. For example, people were invited to reflect on:

- What people thought works well now about Blackbird Leys, Oxford and the economy
- What people valued about life in the community
- Whether it was possible to identify what was most important to them.

People were then invited to consider what impact Brexit might have on the things they had identified, and to explore:

- Whether it will be possible to build on what is most successful to shape a better local future?
- What changes might improve life in Blackbird Leys
- How might we go about making them happen.

In terms of the agency local people did or did not have, the meeting was asked to consider how much power there was over local life in Blackbird Leys? How much power individuals felt that had? And, what might be done to increase it?

Here's what happened: round tables

An early plan imagined that popular topics of discussion might include the cost and availability of housing, jobs, opportunities for children, access to and the cost of food shopping, as well as the quality of the local environment – all issues typically raised in debates about the state of the country and the focus of discontent for communities who feel poorly served by the economy and politics.

But our initial invitation for people to volunteer the subjects that they would like to discuss produced a much longer list and discussions ranged far more widely. Following one-on-one conversations with a person sat next to them in the room, each person present was invited to offer topics for discussion. Some issues, like jobs, were among those that might be expected, but the list also included:

- Freedom of movement
- Quality of life
- Mental health
- Education
- Environment
- Inclusion and exclusion
- Economic survival
- Islamophobia
- Immigration
- Social structures and segregation
- The role of Oxford University
- Powerlessness
- Inequality.

The meeting then broke up to discuss in more detail the issues that had been thematically grouped. The points and propositions that emerged from these discussions are similarly grouped here.

The conversations:

1. Jobs and the Economy- including the impact of Brexit
2. Immigration and relationships between social groups
3. Education
4. Local power and democracy

Observations from Blackbird Leys residents on jobs and the economy, and the ramifications of Brexit

Underinvestment

A common observation was the belief that the UK had failed actively to invest sufficiently in its own future, abstaining responsibility and leaving the economy to the whims of the market. Hence we heard:

“The UK has never invested enough in its own economy nor the people driving that economy.”

“At the moment, UK inventors (and entrepreneurs) are not capable of realising their ideas in the UK, need to go outward and develop and bring their innovations to the market in different countries.”

“The UK needs more ‘inward investment’. How can one change these things? There should be a focus on investment in young people.”

“We need more local jobs for young people who want to stay in Blackbird Leys”

The trouble with finance

There was clear awareness of the distorting influence of the City of London on the national economy:

“The UK economy is structured around the city and the financial sector, particularly London, which reduces access of employment in other areas, such as the suburbs or outskirts of Oxford.”

Identity problems

Some thought the problem was a clinging to the past and the needs to modernise how Britain sees itself in the world:

“The UK has an isolationist mindset: people tend to think in the short-term, which is something that has to be addressed in the communities as well as nationally”

“Post Brexit we need to reform British identity and culture outside of the model of the EU. We cannot lose our identity through globalisation (and the spread of US commercial influence).”

The local jobs market

There were very particular insights into the challenges surrounding local jobs, and of the issues that need addressing:

There’s a huge gap between Town and Gown. Blackbird Leys is shut off from the University and its networks (apart from one project called ‘Into University’).

“There needs to be greater integration with local businesses. For example, the only link between Oxford Academy and the BMW factory in Blackbird Leys is that Business Studies students are invited for a visit once per year. A program could be more stream-lined, organized, incentivized.”

“Using this integration with local businesses, schools should provide more vocational courses and work experience opportunities”

The Ramifications of Brexit

Far from a sense of the Brexit vote being a popular success and ‘one-in-the-eye’ for a distant, uncaring elite, there was overall, a sense that the Brexit vote was driven by poor decision-making and lack of appropriate information, leading to some quite broad regret.

“The UK never really made any effort in the EU to learn what it was about and that pro-EU politicians had a responsibility to take on EU-sceptics, but this not happening.”

“There was a lack of education about what the EU actually does for us”

There was pessimism about how bad economic consequences could be prevented. And just two ways of doing so predominated: preventing the UK from pulling out of the EU (especially the single market); or for that to happen but still with access to the single market.

“Brexit could lead to more disenfranchisement. Brexit was driven by a ‘big England mindset’ but not a ‘big England capability.’”

Two students at the Oxford Academy believed that there are now fewer jobs available in Blackbird Leys than before, saying, “Jobs have moved to the bigger cities – particularly London.”

Observations from Blackbird Leys residents on immigration and relationships between social groups

Similar to concerns that the outcome of the referendum was significantly the result of poor, absent and misinformation, there was a strong feeling among those present that the debate and attitudes around immigration were shaped by “Falsehoods and myths spread by the media into local communities”. People said:

“Immigration isn’t discussed rationally: it is laced with racism and prejudice”

This was seen to be an important local issue that had risen in relevance since the middle of the last decade:

“There’s segregated communities, and mutual fear between classes and races”

“There’s been Increase in racial attacks, especially post-Brexit; and categorising of people according to their ethnicity”

Practical problems were raised:

“The difficulties in applying for residency must be addressed; particularly for those who can’t have double nationality, such as Germans and Slovaks)”

And the need more broadly for “Education on tolerance, anti-xenophobia, with an emphasis on a common European/human identity,” the defence of “equal opportunities” and the need to ‘call out’ negative portrayals of other ethnicities within the media.

Lessening Possible Community Tensions in Blackbird Leys

There was a sharp awareness of the need for immediate local action to address prejudice inflamed in the aftermath of the referendum.

“We need to be fostering allies amongst the local MP, police forces; and have a common effort to eradicate prejudices and develop education”

“We need conversations within the community with participants from different groups”

“Let’s have explicit anti-racist, internationalist statements displayed publicly (e.g. on buses, billboards etc.)”

The group spoke of the need for citizenship classes within schools, greater representation of different ethnic groups and a change of rhetoric in the media. It was an area where people at the meeting felt especially strongly and made numerous recommendations for action which included:

- Mixing children in schools to avoid early segregation
- Organising community-led events - such as fairs and carnivals - which integrate and attract people from different nationalities and communities
- Focusing on young people, primary schools in particular and explicitly counteracting any stereotyping
- Creating more spaces in which to bring the community together
- Holding discussions; and not being afraid to speak about uncomfortable topics
- Greater involvement and responsibility from Oxford University in mentoring and work within the community.

Observations from Blackbird Leys residents on ‘All Important Education’

There was widespread discontent with the current educational system, stressing its obsession with goals and “squeezing people through A-levels.” Notably, in the context of the broader discussion about Britain’s relationship with Europe, the example of the German educational system was raised as an example to emulate. It includes a stronger emphasis on courses on politics and civics, which people felt that the UK could learn from to increase active citizenship and reduce the national sense of political alienation.

Teachers from two local schools described seeing the education system become more based around exams, with a diminishing focus on achieving meaningful education for students. They said the number of top down targets was increasing.

Pressures in UK schools were said to be:

“Due to a lack of time in the classroom (all the time has to be spent on the core curricula), children are actively kept ignorant. To fix this, it requires long-term investment in education. But by whom?”

People said that ideally this should be happening through the democratic process with politicians and policy makers responding to people’s demands, but that there is a dysfunctional system at the moment at the moment.

Related problems were seen to be that:

“The pay of teachers and resources of schools is becoming increasingly linked to “performance”, which is most significantly influenced by exam results.”

“Anecdotally, teachers have seen this increase in focus on exams be associated with a rise in mental health issues of students”

“Frequent changing of regulations on schools is detrimental to progress.”

It was felt that there was a noticeable difference in the expectations of both students and teachers between state schools and private schools. A trip by Oxford Academy students to Magdalen College School was noted in relation to this. There was concern that Academy schools might be more profit-driven, but because given the current pressures in the system and that they fall outside of local government control, they may have some scope and space to change the educational content. Even though this

Educational policy was described as consistently shifting the goal posts for success, mainly tied to exams and statistical measurement. Many of the core values of education were thought to be not easy to measure, this and the tying of pay levels only to measureable elements of education were said to have led to significant devaluation of the education system among teachers, and pupils also to some extent.

Changes residents want to see in the education system

In education, as in other areas, Brexit is being used to narrow the focus of policy to compensate for the economic challenges it represents. But in Blackbird Leys the focus was much more on how to improve the quality of education, rather than it being merely a tool, and students fodder to enhance a more isolated Britain's global competitiveness. Key areas were seen to be:

“More stable policy from local, national and international governing bodies.”

“A greater value on the importance of teachers [and that this was] not a purely cultural phenomenon, policy is crucial in promoting the role of teachers in education, [there is] real scope for government policy in this area.”

“Higher teacher pay and better pensions, as well as allowing teachers to go beyond preparing students for exams”

“Staff morale is down in a lot of state schools, policy should specifically aim to make teachers happier in schools.”

“[The need to] raise expectations on what can be achieved in the state education system”

“[To] remove the idea of a “one-size-fits-all” education system. That is, some students don't relate to a lot of the material taught. Also, some students are not suited to exams, but are very able in other areas that are not properly rewarded in schools.”

“[To] address the issue of bullying and education. One local primary school student said that children who don't perform well in class are put down by other students, which in turn makes them even less likely to learn and improve”

“There is a real need to create space and time in schools for, on the one hand, both creative and reflective space; and, on the other hand, to provide pathways for students moving forward into multiple career options, whether that is trade, further education, or employment.”

Specific local educational steps forward: ‘Madagascar or Blackbird Leys?’

The relationship between the university and the more general life of Oxford and its economy was repeatedly raised. Within Oxford, it was argued, there should be a greater link between the University of Oxford and the surrounding schools.

One participant said that if the University wanted its students to experience other societies they will send them to ‘Madagascar and never to Blackbird Leys’. Given the size of the university it was said that there should be:

“Greater connection between different parts of the Oxford community and the educational system, including better connections to both the local industrial sector and the large local ‘science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector. Space in schools for greater skills support and more work experience would help student feel more comfortable in the opportunities they want—that is, to find jobs in Blackbird Leys and not feel the need to leave the area to find work.”

A final element would be a greater connection, or perhaps a greater effort to promote awareness of the existing connections between schools and the Universities in the Oxford area. There was a desire to create greater aspirations amongst the student body in schools (though some parents were anxious about this too) to aim for good universities, but many concerns were also raised about the higher fees of the universities with more established reputations. Affordability alone has changed many conversations around aspirations to go to university.

Local Power and Democracy in Blackbird Leys

Residents discussed that how much power people feel they have depends upon background and experience, but that the social structure is such that many do not feel empowered. To change that situation was thought would require both tenacity and risk taking.

In the atmosphere following the referendum many commented that people are scared to show open solidarity, and that this is problematic. There was an irony pointed out in how people come to hold political opinions in the current situation, in that people have more access to information than ever, but also feel more disconnected from politics. One commented on the change:

“In the past, people had clearer sources of information on politics and society, coming through the church, social clubs or the work place, which provided people with information for guidance.”

Another said:

“This might have started in the Thatcher era, with the attack on the unions. In sum, the decision-making process has shifted from being collective to being individualised and often uninformed.”

Residents discussed enthusiastically how this might be improved, and how to guard against and minimise misinformation for example around immigration. Questions were raised about:

- A role for participatory democracy at local level?
- How can we get people more involved in politics?

Traditional local parish meetings and local political party meetings, it was thought, might not be innovative enough. These traditional community spaces it was said tend to be dominated by older people, and that the voices of younger people are clearly lacking there. Social media had a role, but suffers from being more defined by anonymity and a tendency to reinforce shared views. Confrontation and bias confirmation can substitute for robust debate.

In terms of what can be done, residents thought it vital that there should be more spaces for open discussion and airing of concerns. Many openly valued the opportunity to discuss this range of issues wither there being a set agenda, and asked that there be more meetings in the local area of the same kind. If a single consensus emerged across the evening, it was of the absolute necessity for new and more spaces for discussion of important political issues, but in ways that were not aligned to any particular party. Places where people are already gathered - such as the work place and the pub - were suggested as possible steps forward to tackle political alienation, and re-engage the nation in a more rich and involved discussion about what kind of country we want to be. its political One commented that:

“A better system shouldn’t just be a talking shop. Perhaps the work place could be a social platform for this, but then there is the difficulty of reaching the unemployed and self-employed, or people employed by companies such as Deliveroo, where there is no physical workplace with colleagues.”

“How can we be innovative about the kinds of spaces that can be created, which are inclusive? Perhaps we need to go back to the style of old-school pub engagements?”

Where Next?

A draft of this memo was circulated to everyone who attended the meeting in Blackbird Leys and comments from participants have been incorporated.

This was just one meeting, in one community where the EU referendum vote raised more questions than it answered. The people who came did so for a variety of reasons and had a wide range of concerns and views about the challenges now facing their own community and the country as a whole. At the same time they cannot be said to represent their whole community or be representative of the debate simmering across the country. But that, really, is the point.

In the microcosm of Blackbird Leys, in just this one meeting and in one group of people who felt compelled to come, there was a debate of sophistication and detail about the ramifications of the Brexit vote that shames the bland simplifications and evasions of current government statements.

The idea that Britain is ready to trigger Article 50 and embark on negotiations about our future relationship with Europe and the world without engaging first in a far more comprehensive conversation with the British people is insulting to communities like those of Blackbird Leys.

It is glib in the extreme to ignore the questions the British population has. Excluding them from discussion means the government cannot possibly deliver a deal with any meaningful democratic backing.

Why did the vote to leave the European Union itself achieve a small majority? Partly this was due to frustration at feeling taken for granted, at not having control or a voice over big decisions. It would be a travesty now if the government were to plough ahead with tunnel vision, and without the broadest consultation, taking account of the rich, considered and varied views and questions of people like those who attended the meeting in Blackbird Leys. How can the government shape Britain's future relationship with Europe in the interests of the British people when the people haven't been asked what they would like it to be?

It would merely repeat the original, perceived fault of the nation's relationship with Europe, and once again take the British people for granted, denying them a voice and the very control over their lives promised by the campaign to leave the EU.

If there is a single insight that emerged from this pilot event, it is that we need spaces at the local, community level, to talk about the future direction of Britain much more before any steps on an irrevocable path are taken.

This memo of the post-Brexit Blackbird Leys meeting is drafted and published by the New Weather Institute with support from the Said Business School.

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