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<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/should-we-stay-or-should-we-go/>

# Brexit, empire, inequality... and Eurovision

Danny Dorling



*At a recent LSE talk, **Danny Dorling** argued that we should stay in the European Union. He unpicks the absurdity of some arguments against our EU membership. Those for Brexit are not only likely to come from areas with few immigrants, but they want highly-skilled lowly-paid young Europeans out of the country, all while British expat pensioners rely on someone else's health system. And who are the decision-makers to be? Those who got to vote in the 1975 referendum will get a second vote in this one – but 16 and 17 year-olds, who will have to build an entire life on the consequences, will not.*

Recently the front cover of *Private Eye* depicted Obama telling Prince George "...and then your little country left the EU and was never heard of again". It is possible. Scotland could leave and the Kingdom and we would no longer be united. The most powerful entity in the world, before the United Kingdom, was the United Provinces, in what is now the Netherlands. It is possible to disappear and be largely forgotten, even if you had once been so very central.

The UK is not a typical country in Europe. If we were more typical I would have more patience with those who suggest that we could leave and our lives would improve. But in many ways we're a poorly performing affluent country. This poor performance has little to do with the EU, and a lot to do with us, and our legacy of having had an Empire. From the Suez crisis right through to the Panama papers, there's a series of embarrassments that have occurred and, in a way, this referendum is just another one of those embarrassments.

Some people have a fantasy (enjoyed by the majority of the Brexit group, particularly the Cabinet ministers) that if we were to leave we would become 'Great' again. We could become the richest country in the world again, and our EU membership is why we are not 'Great'. However, the UK is the most economically unequal state within Europe. Among the top 10 per cent, some 9 per cent of us share 14 per cent of total income, while the best off 1 per cent take 14 per cent. Nowhere else in Europe do they take 14 per cent, nowhere else do the top 10 percent take 28 percent of all income. Every year our 1 per cent take twice as much as the best-off 1 per cent in Switzerland take

## The UK has the widest inequality in the EU.

The best-off 10% take 28% of all income, half of that is taken by the 1% best-off.

Sources: OECD (2015), UNU-WIDER (2014), UNDP (2014), UNSD (2015), Eurostat (2014)  
<http://www.statisticsviews.com/details/feature/8493411/Understanding-Income-Inequality-and-its-Implications-Why-Better-Statistics-Are-N.html>



United Kingdom	28.0
Portugal	25.9
France	25.3
Greece	25.1
Italy	24.7
Spain	24.4
Ireland	23.8
Germany	23.5
Switzerland	23.2
Netherlands	22.4
Sweden	21.9
Austria	21.6
Finland	21.5
Belgium	20.8
Denmark	20.8
Norway	20.6
Slovenia	20.0

In real terms, the poorest tenth of households in Switzerland live on more than twice as much as our poorest tenth in the UK. You might say Switzerland isn't in the EU, so it is possible to perform well outside of the EU. But Switzerland is a very, very different country to us. It's a country where people respect each other more. We are not a country where people respect each other much. We are a country which has its own particular (and world famous) social class system, which is all about disrespect.

Alongside being riven with class-driven prejudice and tolerating this, we are a remarkably tolerant country in other ways. We don't yet have a successful far-right party, unlike most other large countries of Europe. But that's partly because we had an Empire. Even if you are pretty slow and bloody-minded, following several decades of people coming to the UK from that Empire and 'you' mixing with them – it's quite hard to stay bigoted given time and decent interaction. However, although we do mix ethnically, we don't mix well in other ways, including geographically – and it was not the EU that grew the UK North-South divide. In other EU states, especially Germany, regional divides have narrowed.

We entered what is now the European Union at a time of great solidarity, when economic and geographical divides were at the lowest they had been for decades. And after we entered we gave people a chance to vote on whether they approved of that decision, which included the commitment to ever-closer union. I do wonder why people who got to vote in 1975 are being allowed to have a second vote now?

I'm talking about people aged over 60 having had two votes in their lifetime. They won't have to deal with the consequences of their vote for very long. I would like to see a legal challenge by 16 and 17 year-olds asking why we didn't give them a vote but we let these old people vote in both 1975 and 2016. I'd like to see a legal challenge by a young adult prisoner asking why they were not allowed to vote on an issue that effects them so much for so far into the future? And on why most of our fellow EU citizens who live in the UK but who were born-overseas not get a vote? And why we have become so afraid of immigration – of them? Who made us so afraid?

Normally people celebrate population growth. It's the kind of thing that happened in California in the 1960s. They sang about it! People understand that if people are coming to where you are, that's good news. And if they are leaving the city you live in, as they did for forty years in the cases of Glasgow and Liverpool, that's bad news. But we are not normal people in a normal European country living in normal times.

The UKIP vote has traditionally been higher in places like Doncaster where they have held their annual conference. A few years ago the biggest immigrant group in Doncaster were German-born. They were the children of the Army of the Rhine who had to come back with their English born parents. It's a strange, strange country we live in. People most dislike immigrants where there are the least immigrants.

I think I partly understand racism. I grew up in the 1970s, I remember the National Front well. I know there are nasty people. I was afraid of the National Front and I am afraid of their successors. I am not afraid of immigrants. I don't understand why there is a concern about so many usually young, often highly skilled people coming into the country I have always lived in. I am not concerned that they help teach in the schools that my children go to, or that they help run the health service that I rely on. I find it impossible to become scared of people who come and do that for us. And we did not even pay to educate them.

I find it impossible to become scared of the fact that if we do decide to build 200,000 homes a year we can do it: because there are enough builders in Europe who'll come and help us do the building work. But some people see that as a threat. And I don't understand why we'd much rather be in a position where we don't build many houses and don't let skilled builders in from the mainland to do it.

Much more important than immigration is our emigration, all the people born in Britain who've gone to live somewhere else and are not yet dead – our home-grown immigrants to other places. On average they are not young and not highly skilled and not particularly innovative – the people who leave this country to live somewhere else have, in many cases, just stopped working and entered retirement. They go on to rely on someone else's health service, and very conveniently they leave here and go and live in Malta, or Spain, or Crete, or Portugal, where there are nice golf courses, sea and sun – and someone else's budget pays for much of their care.

We export thousands of our elderly every year to get free health care from another state's health service. If we do vote to 'Leave' then I suspect there will be a second referendum, but before there's a second referendum, I think that some of those people who are outside of the country will begin to think that perhaps they should return – in case they don't have enough money to pay for

private healthcare there, which most of them don't. If we leave the EU we lose our rights in the EU.

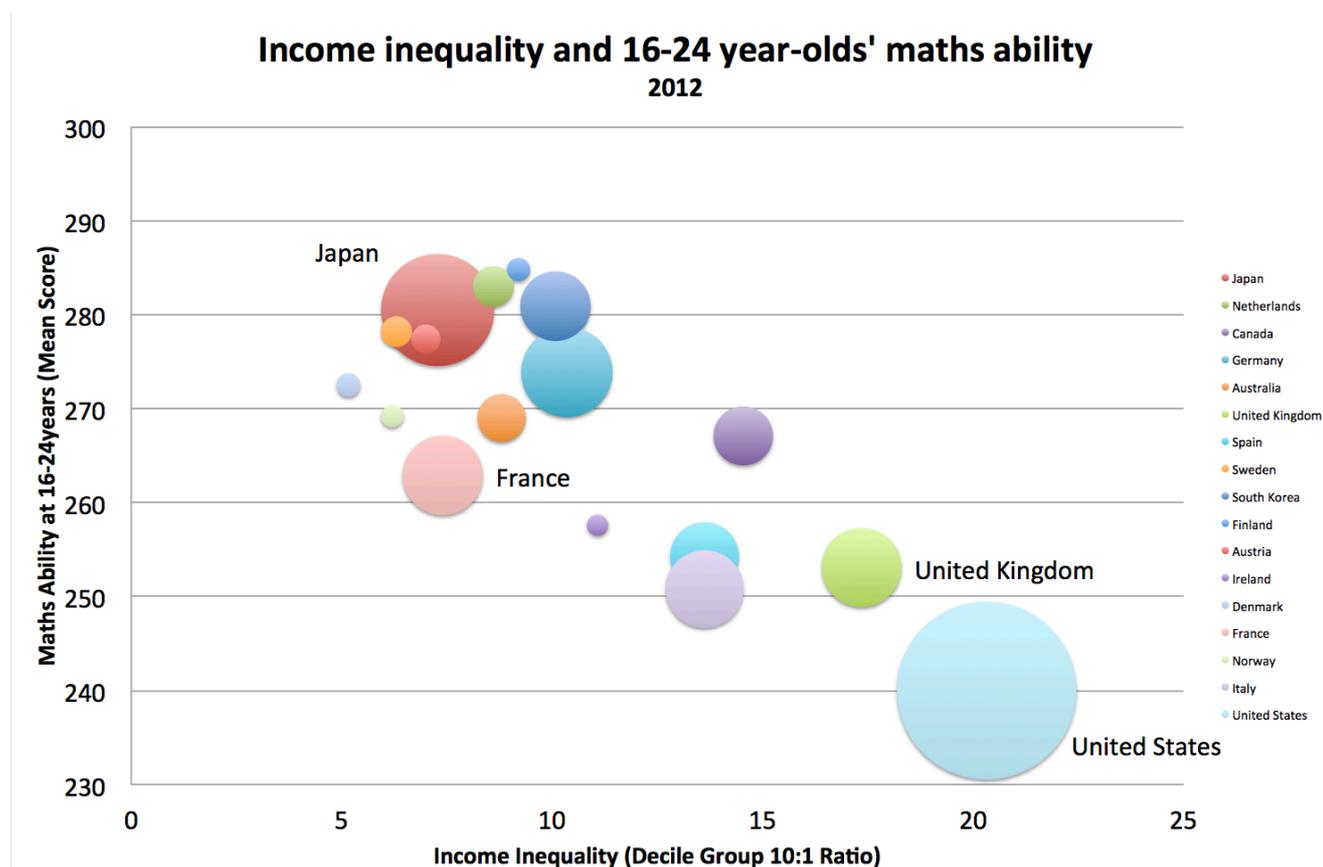
I believe we will begin to get an influx of our expats. And we can't easily cope with that number of elderly people coming in, because our health and social services are in such a poor state. It's possible to imagine British expats becoming scared that we might actually not give them the right to re-enter in perpetuity in future. Now you might think, this is ridiculous, but this is what we did in the 1960s to people with a British passport– we just did it to folk who were mostly not white.

I know there's a lot wrong in Europe, I know the EU is a rich boy's club, I know it's undemocratic – although I am not sure it's as undemocratic as our Westminster voting system and our private school dominated elite. I know many in positions of power in the EU currently favour TTIP and very big business, but I don't think it favours these things as much as our own governments have tended to.

What has really annoyed me is the argument that we can't fund the NHS as much as we'd like to because we are paying so much money into Europe. Our NHS is very efficient. It wins international awards constantly. It came first in the last five national comparisons that I have studied. But it also doesn't work very well because we fund it so lowly. We do not fund it so lowly because we have to make some payments to the EU, but because we've chosen to fund it so lowly. The Swiss spend twice as much per person on health. Norway 81 per cent more. The Netherlands 59 per cent, Germany 49 per cent, Denmark 41 per cent, even France commits 27 per cent higher spending on healthcare per person. We could spend more on health if we chose to tax more (as most other affluent EU countries choose) and we chose to spend less on other things. But we are unusual. It is not the EU that makes us spend so little on our health care.

But it's not just in health. We are abysmally low public spenders on housing policy. We have the highest rents and highest housing costs for the lowest quality housing in the whole of Western Europe. We have the least rights for our tenants. None of this was imposed by Brussels on us. We are not in a good state because of our own mistakes.

Education is another area we do poorly in and where the EU is not to blame and where membership of the EU could help in future. If you look at data on ability at maths up to age 24, you'll see that we are – along with the United States – pretty bad at basic mathematics. All the small countries clustered around Japan in the graph of affluent states shown below are European countries.



The UK and USA lag behind on maths ability. Source: [Statistics Views](#)

It doesn't look quite so bad when our children are aged 16 and when they take GCSEs, because we are quite good at teaching people how to get an A or a C at maths without them actually understanding what they are doing. In every other country in Europe for which there is data, people are taught mathematics in a way that means they are still more numerate ten years later. They are tested less at school and taught more. The only affluent country worse in terms of educational outcomes than the UK is the USA. But we are lucky, numerate Europeans from the mainland can come here and teach our children. The same applies to problem-solving and literacy, where young adults in the UK also rank so low on the European league table. But we chose not to learn from the EU, let alone to look across at places like Japan.

Our politicians fly off to America thinking that is where to go to learn. Gordon Brown used to go every year. It's not just The US record in education. America is abysmal on housing; America is particularly abysmal on health. It is the only affluent state in the world that makes our record on social progress look good, including on public spending. We are heading towards being the lowest public spending country in Europe. Other countries within the EU choose to spend far more of their money collectively – like Denmark, France, and Sweden, and Italy, and Norway – and get better health outcomes and better education and better housing outcomes. They get more innovation. People produce more scientific papers. More patents, more entrepreneurs. We kid ourselves when we claim we do this.

We don't pay very much to be in Europe, net. They pay more per head in Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Germany. It is entirely our own fault that we have chosen to spend so little on our healthcare as compared to nearby countries. My explanation for that is that we are still adjusting to losing the income that indirect-tribute from Empire once gave us. We still spend too much on arms and all the other 'Bads' that a state which had an empire needs, and which we no longer need. And we still tax too little, partly because we have not realised that we can no longer make the monopoly profits that a country with an Empire can enjoy.

But I'd like to end on some good news. At 8pm tomorrow, the grand final of the Eurovision song contest begins. Joe and Jack are [representing the United Kingdom](#). Their chorus is, 'you're not alone, we're in this together'. They're from Stoke on Trent in England and Ruthin in Wales, places which have recently become UKIP target areas. I won't tell you the last line of the song, you'll need to listen yourself, or perhaps you'll soon be forced to listen if it becomes popular. Last year the UK only won 5 votes. Our friends and neighbours in the Eurovision area have a choice and at least this one vote in that one European tradition. I am happy to predict that whatever happens next, the UK entry will get more than 5 votes, votes for Joe and Jack, and for their song about staying together...in Europe.

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*The full talk is available [as a podcast](#) from LSE Events.*

## About the Author



**Danny Dorling** is the Halford Mackinder professor of Geography at the University of Oxford. He was previously a professor of Geography at the University of Sheffield. He has also worked in Newcastle, Bristol, Leeds and New Zealand, went to university in Newcastle upon Tyne, and to school in Oxford. In 2015 he was a commissioner of the London Fairness Commission, which reported in 2016. His most recent book is ‘A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier’ a free PDF is available [here](#).

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