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Brexit: The decision of a divided country

(longer than published version, as originally submitted)

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On the same day that the UK voted to leave the EU, huge rises in UK death rates were reported. These rises followed the austerity policies enacted by the 2010 Coalition government¹. Self-reported health was a key component of David Cameron's wellbeing index, and it declined in every year of his premiership, most rapidly towards the end.² In March 2016 ONS reported that: "The proportion of people aged 16 and over in the UK who were somewhat, mostly or completely satisfied with their health was lower in the financial year ending 2014 (57.8%) than in the previous year (59.3%). The way in which people view their health is crucial to well-being."³

Brandishing the campaign slogan 'Vote leave, take control'⁴, Leave secured 51.9% of the referendum vote. However, thirteen million registered voters did not vote. An additional seven million eligible adults were not registered to vote in 2016.⁵ They were disproportionately 'the young; flat-dwellers, especially renters; members of ethnic minorities; [and] recent movers'.⁶ This does not include the millions of mainland EU citizens and 16 and 17 year olds who were denied a vote.

The outcome of the EU referendum has been unfairly blamed on the working class in the North of England, and even on obesity: 'personality traits that characterize both Leave voters and obese adults'⁷. However, because of differential turnout and the size of the denominator population, most people who voted Leave lived in the South of England.⁸ Furthermore, of all those who voted for Leave 59% were middle class (A, B or C1), and 41% were working class (C2, D or E). The proportion of Leave voters who were of the lowest two social classes was just 24%.⁹ The Leave voters among the middle class were crucial to the final result. This was because the middle class constituted two thirds of all those who voted. If personality traits mattered, it was of some of those who led, funded and ran the campaigns.¹⁰

On the day of the EU referendum data from the ONS revealed there had been 52,400 more deaths in the year to June 2015 as compared to the same period a year before¹¹. Death rates in England and Wales rose overall by 9% and by 12% for those aged 90+; by 10% for those aged 85-89; 7% for those aged 80-84; 5% for those aged 75-70; and by 3% for those aged 55-74. These rate rises were unprecedented. They were attributed to dementia and Alzheimer's, with influenza being suggested as a contributory factor.¹² Austerity played a major role. It was those with long term care needs who were dying earlier.¹³ The health and social services crises will worsen further as national finances worsen and as it becomes harder to recruit and retain staff from the European mainland.¹⁴

Most migrants to the UK have good health and settle in poorer areas. The only adult age group to see improvements in death rates in the year to mid-2015 were those aged 25-29. The mid-year estimates released on June 23rd 2016 showed that this was the age group of highest net-in-migration to the UK. The UK has benefited greatly from the immigration of healthier than average young adults, educated at someone else's expense; many working in our health, educational, social and care services. Their arrival reduced health inequalities and improved our overall health.

The underlying reason for worsening health and declining living standards was not immigration, but ever growing economic inequality and the public spending cuts. Blame the English middle classes in the 1980s for consistently voting Conservative as inequalities rose. The UK would now have to spend £1050 million more a week to fund its health service at the level more equitable that Germany does. Almost all other European countries tax more effectively, spend more on health and do not tolerate our degree of income inequality.¹⁵ To distract us from these national failings, we have been encouraged to blame immigration and the EU. That lie will now be exposed.

We can find our way through this. We have suddenly all become poorer, even the rich. However, what is about to come may give us opportunities to achieve a different kind of politics and a more just, open society.¹⁶ Economic inequality may be about to fall. The stock market investments of the rich have fallen in value, as has much of their housing equity and the value of future private pension payouts.

The majority of those aged below 50 who voted, voted to Remain. They voted for a more inclusive politics, against bigotry and for tolerance. They will feel newly betrayed, but their real betrayal has been a long time in the making. In great contrast to other European states the UK has been systematically underfunding education and training, increasing student loans and debt, tolerating increasingly unaffordable housing, introducing insecure work contracts, and privatizing the services the young will need in future. We encouraged the young to become individualistic and then blamed them when they did not turn out to vote in sufficient numbers. They blame the older generation, but

their ire should instead be directed at the post-1979 UK governments that have allowed economic inequalities to rise so high; that prevented a fair proportional voting system being introduced; and that have placed future generations in peril.

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