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Brexit, the NHS and the elderly middle class

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On 23 June 2016, on the same day the EU referendum was held, the UK's Office for National Statistics released its latest annual mortality figures. An unprecedented rise in mortality was reported. Some 52,400 more deaths were recorded in the year to June 2015 than in the same period a year before. In normal times we expect mortality to fall and health to improve, but death rates in England and Wales rose overall by 9 per cent during this period. Within this there was 3 per cent increase for those aged 55-74; 5 per cent for those aged 75-79; 7 per cent for those aged 80-84; 10 per cent for those aged 85-89; and 12 per cent for those aged 90+.

The decline in the health of the elderly across the UK was mainly attributed (by the authorities) to increases in dementia and Alzheimer's, with influenza being suggested as a contributory factor. However it became clear when the size of the mortality rise was revealed that austerity had played a major role in the rapid worsening of overall UK public health, including on other measures such as self reported health. It was those with long-term care needs whose rates of mortality had increased most.

In the light of the interest shown during the referendum debate on NHS health spending, perhaps we ought to consider whether Leave won, not mainly due to the fear of others, but because many people, and especially the old, had had enough of their lives becoming rapidly worse as measured through the most important of all the measures of quality of life - health. On November 14th the BBC announced the news that dementia had become the leading cause of death in the UK, but they did not explain that part of the reason for this was the bringing forward of deaths of people with dementia when care has become so inadequate due to funding cuts.

The outcome of the EU referendum has been unfairly blamed on the working class in the North of England. In fact, because of differential turnout and the size of the denominator population, most people who voted Leave lived in the South of England. Furthermore, according to Michael Ashcroft's final poll, of all those who voted for Leave 59 per cent were middle class (A, B or C1), and 41 per cent were working class (C2, D or E). The proportion of Leave voters who were of the lowest two social classes (D and E) was just 24 per cent. This is partly because the middle class is so large, and they turn out more to vote: the middle class constituted two thirds of all those who voted. As is usual, people in poor areas were most likely not to vote at all. Turnout among the young was also low, as is usual, but there are very wide variations in the estimates of turnout by age from various polls. We have a much better idea about turnout by area, as turnout figures are reported by the returning officers.

The vote for leave in the North was not especially high. It was higher in the East of England (see table below). There was remarkably confused reporting about this after the vote because of Southern prejudices about

northern towns and because Sunderland reports its votes first. There are many false assumptions that still need to be corrected. For example Wales voted almost identically to the average vote for the UK as a whole. The region where Leave was most popular was the East Midlands of England, home to 7 per cent of those who voted across all of the UK, of whom 57 per cent voted for Leave.

These figures are based on an exit poll of 12,370 voters published on 24 June by Lord Ashcroft, which turned out to be remarkably accurate after the event. When weighted by social class and region it predicted the final result to within 0.1 per cent of the actual result. The British people, it would appear, can accurately tell pollsters what they have done immediately after they have done it, but not before. The key geographical results are shown below, with areas where people were most keen to leave uppermost in the table. In only three areas, containing just 20 per cent of voters, did a majority choose to 'Remain'.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this but my suggestion here is that the elderly (mostly white) middle class were a crucial demographic for the Leave side: they were much more likely to turn out, and much more likely to live to the very older ages most keen on leaving, more so than working-class people are.

The triple lock on pensions has been no protection given that services are being cut. The older middle class have lost rural bus services, meals on wheels services and visits from social workers, and have greatly suffered from the underfunding of the health service (they have also benefited from young migrants arriving and staffing the services they relied on, including the care homes, but it appears that most of them did not realise this). Having a few more pennies a week doesn't help when meals on

wheels don't show or there is no bus service and you can't drive any longer. I don't think it is impossible that there is a connection between rapid declines in health and the vote to Leave. In the United States rapid declines in health were widely reported in the year before Trump was elected president. There are many other similarities.

Region	Sample	National %	Leave %	Leavers
East Midlands	894	7%	57%	510
Eastern Region	1113	9%	57%	634
Wales	631	5%	56%	353
Yorkshire & Humber	1129	9%	55%	621
West Midlands	988	8%	55%	543
North East	589	5%	54%	318
North West	1445	12%	53%	766
South East	1851	15%	53%	981
South West	1186	10%	53%	629
Northern Ireland	170	1%	48%	82
London	1284	10%	44%	565
Scotland	1090	9%	38%	414
UK	12370	100%	52%	6416

The initial confusion about who had voted to Leave is not unlike the confusion there was for years over who had voted in greatest numbers for the Nazi party in 1930s Germany. Again the middle classes were key, but again that was not realised until later. However, in 1930s Germany it was the young middle class who voted for right-wing populism, whereas now it is the old, so these are very different kinds of nationalism - and the old are possibly less frightening as they will be around for fewer years! Furthermore the Brexit vote in the UK and the later Trump victory in the USA were events that took place after years of rising inequalities in what

were, by 2016, the two most unequal larger countries of all the affluent countries of the world. Given that most people in these countries have not seen real improvements in living standards for many years we should not be so surprised when a narrow majority vote for “anything but a continuation of the status quo”.

How else could people in the UK say that they wanted something other than the life they had, apart from voting to leave? But what matters most to the elderly middle class, especially their health, is now expected to worsen. This is partly because some elderly UK emigrants to the rest of Europe will begin to return. But also because our health service will continue to be underfunded, and we will lose the care and health staff who are citizens of the European mainland.

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