

Andrea Moksnes

Great, Greater, Great(est) Britain:

The Greatness Argument in the Brexit Debate

Graduate thesis in History with Teacher Education, years 8-13

Supervisor: Kristian Steinnes

May 2022

Andrea Moksnes

Great, Greater, Great(est) Britain:

The Greatness Argument in the Brexit Debate

Graduate thesis in History with Teacher Education, years 8-13

Supervisor: Kristian Steinnes

May 2022

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Faculty of Humanities

Department of Modern History and Society



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

ABSTRACT (ENG)

Since the UK voted “no” to continued membership in the European Union, scholars have shown interest in the role of rhetoric in the Brexit debate. In this study, I have introduced the term “The Greatness Argument” (GA) to shed further light on this issue. The GA is defined as “any justification of a specific Brexit view by arguing either one or both of the following: (1) Britain is great and/or (2) Britain is different than continental Europe.” Using both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with a qualitative focus and a comparative approach, the study seeks to discover how Leave and Remain politicians used the GA to underscore their respective views. This includes a discussion regarding the argument's strengths and weaknesses, and how one campaign tried to break down the GA as presented by the other. The core sources upon which this study is based are eight speeches delivered by seven different, British politicians prior to the Brexit referendum. I argue that the presence of the GA in the analysed material demonstrates the central role British greatness played in Brexit discourse. Additionally, the Leave campaign was more successful in their use of the GA because (1) they were united in their understanding of its content and (2) Remainers failed to build an equally strong GA, leaving their perceptions of greatness vulnerable to efficient Leave attacks.

SAMMENDRAG (NO)

Siden Storbritannia stemte nei til videre medlemskap i den Europeiske Union, har forskere vist interesse for retorikkens rolle i Brexit-debatten. I denne studie har jeg introdusert termen «Storhetsargumentet» (Greatness Argument, GA) for å belyse dette ytterligere. Storhetsargumentet er definert som «enhver begrunnelse av et gitt Brexit-synspunkt basert på en eller begge av følgende argumenter: (1) Storbritannia er mektig og/eller (2) Storbritannia skiller seg fra kontinentale Europa.» Ved å bruke kritisk diskursanalyse med et kvalitativt fokus samt komparativ fremgangsmåte, undersøker denne studie hvordan Leave- og Remain-politikere brukte Storhetsargumentet for å underbygge sine respektive ståsteder. Dette omfatter en diskusjon om argumentets styrker og svakheter, samt hvordan kampanjene forsøkte å bryte ned argumentet slik det ble presentert av motparten. Primærmaterialet studiet tar utgangspunkt i er åtte taler fremført av syv ulike, britiske politikere i tidsrommet før Brexit-folkeavstemningen. Jeg konkluderer at Storhetsargumentet i det analyserte materialet viser den sentrale rollen britisk storhet spilte i Brexit-diskursen. Leave-kampanjen var også i større grad suksessfull i bruken av Storhetsargumentet ettersom (1) de var enhetlige i forståelsen av argumentets innhold og (2) Remain-politikere ikke evnet å konstruere et like sterkt argument, noe som igjen gjorde deres forståelse av storhet utsatt for effektive angrep fra Leave-politikere.

Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Existing Studies	2
1.2 Approach	3
1.3 Rhetoric	4
2.0 The Foundations of Brexit.....	7
2.1 British Imperial History.....	7
2.2 UK-EU Relations	8
3.0 The Greatness Argument in the Remain Campaign	11
3.1 The Future-Focus in Remain GA	11
3.2 Unique or European?.....	14
3.3 A Divided Force	15
4.0 The Greatness Argument in the Leave Campaign.....	18
4.1 Historical Exceptionalism	18
4.2 Different Britain	20
4.3 A United Force	22
5.0 The Greatness Argument in Comparison	24
5.1 The Reform-Issue and the GA.....	24
5.2 Traces of Empire in the GA.....	27
5.3 The GA and the Importance of an Enemy	29
6.0 Conclusions	31
6.1 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research.....	32
7.0 Bibliography	33
7.1 Primary Material (Speeches).....	33
7.2 Secondary Material.....	34

1.0 Introduction

*There are those who say we can't go at it alone. That our global influence will decline because we are small. Those are the true voices of Little England. We speak for Great Britain.*¹ (N. Farage)

*We love this country, and we want the best future for it. Ours is a great country. Not just a great country in the history books, although it surely is that. But a great country right now, with the promise of becoming even greater tomorrow.*² (D. Cameron)

On the 23rd of June 2016, Great Britain sent shockwaves through the world as it became known that the British public voted "no" to future membership in the European Union. With the remarkable narrow win of 52% of total UK votes, the Leave politicians could celebrate a successful campaign after a long and heated public debate.³ Formally leaving the well-established union on the 31st of May 2020, Great Britain entered a time where the framework for European cooperation had changed significantly.⁴ The phenomenon popularly referred to as Brexit – or Britain leaving Europe – has frequently been linked to rhetoric. Scholars as well as ordinary people have been curious as to what made the British public choose Leave in 2016. As a student of history severely preoccupied with British history and public discourse, I find the Brexit debate intriguing.

Through careful analysis of different speeches by core individuals, this assignment seeks to explore the rhetoric of the referendum debate through the lens of what I have chosen to label “The Greatness Argument” (GA). This study defines the “Greatness Argument” as “any justification of a specific Brexit view by arguing either one or both of the following: (1) Britain is great and/or (2) Britain is different than continental Europe.” The GA can be considered from historical as well as contemporary perspectives. It implies that highlighting British greatness in the past and stating British greatness as of 2016 are equal examples of the GA in action. As such, the introduction of the GA can bring new perspectives to the interaction between history, rhetoric, and Brexit.

¹ Farage 19.09.2013

² Cameron 09.05.2016

³ Cap 2016: 67

⁴ Keller & Habermann 2021: 9

The main research question in this study is: in speeches prior to the 2016-referendum; how did Leave and Remain politicians use the Greatness Argument to underscore their respective views? To explore this question, and fully comprehend the many layers of the GA, the study is carried out by focusing on three minor research questions; (1) how was the GA evident in the Remain campaign, (2) how was the GA evident in the Leave campaign and (3) how did the two campaigns seek to break down the GA as presented by the other? These smaller research-questions are reflected in chapters 3.0, 4.0 and 5.0. A theoretical framework is provided in chapter 2.0, and conclusions are provided in chapter 6.0.

Discussing and evaluating the GA in Brexit discourse has led me to various conclusions. Most noteworthy was the many ways in which politicians spoke of their country's greatness. Even though different strategies were used, the politicians nevertheless shared the same, fundamental belief that Britain should always aspire to be greater. Both Remain and Leave politicians justified their contrasting views by highlighting British greatness. However, my analysis has also demonstrated how the two campaigns used the argument dissimilarly with different level of success. I argue that the successful use of the argument in the Leave campaign, and the less successful use of the argument in the Remain campaign, contributed to the outcome of the 2016-referendum.

1.1 Existing Studies

Despite Brexit being a relatively recent event seen with historical eyes, the amount of empirical research on the manner is extensive. In this chapter, I introduce some of the key works from which much crucial knowledge have been acquired. Wenzl has written an excellent chapter analysing Brexit discourse before the referendum. She concludes that even though both campaigns appealed to Britishness, the Remain campaign was less successful in their efforts.⁵ Coutto has similarly explored the political discourse on EU-UK relations in both Westminster and in the European Parliament (EP). Using qualitative analysis and computer-assisted content analysis of sampled speeches, she demonstrates how the Leave campaign successfully appealed to feelings of anger and distrust, whilst the Remain campaign failed to connect the EU with more positive emotions.⁶ In a chapter on Brexit and rhetoric, Buckledee explored how central actors from both campaigns used personal attacks on their respective counterparts as a rhetorical strategy.⁷ Put shortly, the literature encountered in the research

⁵ Wenzl 2021

⁶ Coutto 2020: 695

⁷ Buckledee 2018: 151-162

period demonstrates a consensus where Leave rhetoric is considered to be more successful than Remain rhetoric in Brexit discourse.

Even though the works mentioned above proclaim the importance of rhetoric in Brexit discourse, Saunders argues that it is problematic how rhetoric and “imperial nostalgia” have become mainstream explanations for Brexit.⁸ By “imperial nostalgia”, Saunders refers to the “presence of the imperial past in the political questions of contemporary Britain.”⁹ According to him, the “imperial nostalgia theory” is an insufficient explanation for 2016 as it suffers from four important flaws; (1) it is polemical in character, (2) it implies that only Leave voters were receptive of imperial nostalgia, (3) it fails to distinguish between Commonwealth and Empire and (4) it confuses nostalgia with amnesia.¹⁰ With his discussion, Saunders manages to break down the constructed stereotypes of the debate, thus contributing to the literature by re-opening central Brexit issues. Saunders does, however, acknowledge the importance of rhetoric in the debate, as Coutto, Wenzl and Buckledee also do. The empirical material explored thus demonstrate the link between rhetoric and Brexit, consequently justifying the approach of this paper.

1.2 Approach

To explore the Greatness Argument, I will use discourse analysis. In this study, discourse refers to the public and spoken political debate of Brexit, where the interaction between a greater context and the contemporary Brexit debate will be highlighted. More specifically, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be adapted in an attempt to reveal the many ways in which the Greatness Argument was apparent in the Brexit discourse. Furthermore, using the CDA framework will clarify how politicians aspired to shorten the distance between themselves and the listener to gain support of their political agenda.¹¹ Seemingly, CDA uses a quantitative approach to examine this question by studying linguistic material such as personal pronouns, adjectives etc. I, however, will use a qualitative approach in my analysis of the Greatness Argument. With qualitative approach, I refer to the evaluation of the quality of the argument, as well as its ability to appeal to British greatness in the fight for Brexit votes. The CDA framework is mainly central for the analysis in chapters 3.0 and 4.0, where the main goal has been to discover the use of the argument in the two campaigns.

⁸ Saunders 2020

⁹ Saunders 2020: 1140

¹⁰ Saunders 2020: 1140

¹¹ Tian & Modality 2021: 516 (I have taken elements from Tian’s representation of CDA and transferred these to my analysis.)

The core sources upon which this study is based consists of eight speeches, where the CDA is applied to each speech to learn more about the GA. The selected material was carefully elected in that they (1) represent seven different politicians with various political backgrounds and (2) that Leave and Remain politicians are equally represented. I found that a varied selection of speeches was the best strategy to display the many ways in which the GA was evident in the Brexit debate. Additionally, all speeches had specific sections, ideas or quotes that made me as a student increasingly interested in the role of greatness in the debate. I have also evaluated the credibility of the speeches to be strong, as they all have been transcribed, published, and conducted from the official websites of either Vote Leave, UKPOL or GOV.UK.¹²

Chapter 5.0 rests on the methodological framework of comparative analysis as presented by Melve.¹³ Arguably, this approach can reveal more about the larger presence of the GA in the debate. To secure a systematic analysis of the similarities and differences between the many representations of the GA in the corpus, Melve's four dimensions of comparative approach will be used. These dimensions are (1) the choice of material, (2) the choice of synchronous and/or diachronic comparison, (3) focusing on similarities and/or differences and (4) the choice of primary or secondary literature.¹⁴ These universal dimensions can be made specific for the purpose of comparing and contrasting the speeches. The material is the speeches described in the previous paragraph, representing two separate units. Additionally, the comparison is synchronic because of the given timeframe and the depth of the analysis. The primary material's similarities and differences will be considered.

1.3 Rhetoric

It is essential to account for the term rhetoric, as communication and the ability to convince are indisputably interconnected with public discourse. "Rhetoric" is rather complex to master, despite its short and simplistic definition; "argumentation seeking to convince."¹⁵ In democratic societies such as the UK, rhetoric is an important tool because people of power rely on the support from the public to win and/or maintain this power. Since this study focuses specifically on the GA, other important elements of rhetoric – such as body language and the ability to memorise – become of less importance. Nevertheless, the GA will be evaluated

¹² See 7.1 for detailed information about the online locations of the conducted speeches.

¹³ Melve & Ryymin 2018: 71-91

¹⁴ Melve & Ryymin 2018: 74

¹⁵ Kristiansen 2012: 22

based on its ability to convince the public of staying in or leaving the EU. In line with rhetorical theory, the politician most capable of mastering the word has a greater chance to win/maintain power.

Being able to evaluate the quality of the Greatness Argument requires the ability to know what generally characterizes a good argument. According to Kristiansen, people can construct great arguments if they ask themselves the fundamental questions of *what, who, why, when, where, how* and *with help from what*.¹⁶ In relation to the GA, examples of questions one can consider are “why would leaving/staying make Britain greater?”, “what or who should be blamed for Britain failing to be great?” and “should Britain become great with or without the help from the European Union?” The preferred answer to such questions thus becomes the politician’s argument. It is, however, crucial to strengthen the argument by supporting them with various evidence. Kristiansen points to four; (1) facts and statistics, (2) citations, references and/or own thoughts, (3) examples and (4) comparison.¹⁷

Because the main issue is concerned with the content of the GA, the rhetorical stages of *Inventio* (the establishment of an argument) and *Elocutio* (the language) are important to consider. *Inventio* is partially explained above, however a few more points can be made. According to Aristotle, every argument should appeal to ethos, pathos, or logos. Appeals to ethos are ethical arguments, where the speaker seeks to strengthen moral and character. Pathos are appeals to emotion, thus connecting the argument to the emotion of the individual. Arguments focusing on logic, such as efficiency and profitability, are appeals to logos.¹⁸ Following Aristotle’s doctrine, the GA cannot be regarded as successful unless it appeals to at least one of these three categories.

Elocutio is *Inventio*’s pathway from the head of the politician to the heart of the listener. Choosing the right language– whether this is the appropriate, provocative, or comforting words – is essential in determining the efficiency of the speech.¹⁹ The language must be comprehensible and structured in order for the listener to understand the politician’s thesis or main idea. Equally important is choosing a language capable of catching – and keeping – the attention of the listener. To sum up: for the GA to be successful, the politician must consider several aspects of rhetorical theory. The argument must be rooted in evidence, while still

¹⁶ Kristiansen 2012: 49

¹⁷ Kristiansen 2012: 50

¹⁸ Kristiansen 2012: 36-37

¹⁹ Kristiansen 2012: 55

Andrea Moksnes, NTNU
Spring 2022

being conveyed in a way that makes the listener willing to pay notice to what is being said. If such fundamental rhetorical principles were to be ignored or forgotten, communication would break down, and there would be no social discourse to discuss.

2.0 The Foundations of Brexit

*We ought as historians to know where we stand today in relation to the evolution of our subject.*²⁰

Hyam's quote above highlights the importance of the connection between the study of contemporary issues and their historical roots. To comprehend how the British viewed greatness and used the GA in Brexit discourse, it is necessary to account for central and relevant events in British and European history. The purpose of this chapter is to gain further insights to the attitudes and mindsets that characterized British politicians and the British public at the time of the 2016-referendum. To manage this, the assignment will account for (1) Britain's historical relation to greatness through the rise and decline of power, and (2) the historical relationship between Great Britain and continental Europe.

2.1 British Imperial History

One of the most prominent characteristics of British history is the story of empire. The Great Empire is to this day the largest to have ever existed, both in terms of size and number of people under its rule. In fact, there was a time when "little London" controlled nearly a quarter of the world's landmass.²¹ British greatness was unchallenged. The Royal Navy ruled the seven seas, and British economy thrived. British dominance, however, experienced growing competition from the 1870s as the side-effects of British laissez-faire slowly changed the international system.²² Other states, such as the newly unified Germany and the growing United States of America, rapidly consolidated themselves – consequently threatening the comfortable hegemon status the British had enjoyed for centuries.

The history of the Great Empire is in the 20th century a story of decline of power, overestimation of own capabilities and the realisation that British greatness was severely reduced. The First World War brutally demonstrated how the world was no longer Britain's puppet.²³ Despite British war-imperialism and mobilisation of Empire, the young, industrialised, and powerful Germany confirmed how Britain had lost its hegemon status.²⁴ Nevertheless, the Treaty of Versailles still demonstrated how British imperial ambitions

²⁰ Hyam 2010: 48

²¹ Sears 2014: Introduction. (Page-numbers not available due to eBook format.).

²² Legg 2014: (Page-numbers not available due to eBook format.).

²³ Reynolds 2000: 83

²⁴ Reynolds 2000: 102

prevailed.²⁵ The Second World War, however, forever revolutionised the international system and Britain's position within it.²⁶ Using Reynolds' words, the Great Empire "seemed on the verge of destruction" in 1942.²⁷ The war also demonstrated a British paradox which would later contribute to the rapid decolonization that characterized the post-war era: Britain justified the war because Germany violently occupied and took advantage of other independent nations – brutalities which can be compared to how Britain gained, controlled and used her own empire. And so the sun eventually set over the British Empire, starting with the loss of India, Palestine, and Greece.²⁸ What once were a quarter of the world was now rapidly dissolving.

The British struggled to reassess their position in the new world, as British self-conception matched the hegemon-status of the past, and not the new realities of the post-war era. Britain did, however, remain significant as the Commonwealth ensured a certain degree of influence in the period. The "new" Commonwealth was more "enlightened" and less characterized by formal restrictions, which made it easier to accept in the 20th century.²⁹ The British desire to display greatness was still heavily present if we consider Churchill's "three circles"; influence in the English-speaking world, Commonwealth, and lastly; Europe.³⁰ Nevertheless, incidents from the Cold War period brutally displayed the limits of post-war Britain. British greatness took a hit as the Suez Crisis of 1956 demonstrated two crucial things for the whole world to see: (1) Britain failed to pursue their interests independently and (2) America proved herself as the boss within the special relationship.³¹

2.2 UK-EU Relations

The British were very reluctant to joining the European integration that characterized the post-war era on the continent. This is partly explained by the British desire to play a global role in the world, as demonstrated by Churchill's three circles. Roger Liddle, former political advisor on Europe for Tony Blair (amongst others), labelled this reluctance a "missed opportunity" as continental economies flourished from the integration.³² Another explanation as to why Britain remained reluctant to European integration, was what Liddle labelled British

²⁵ Reynolds 2000: 104

²⁶ Reynolds 2000: 137

²⁷ Reynolds 2000: 154

²⁸ Reynolds 2000: 163

²⁹ Reynolds 2000: 175

³⁰ Reynolds in Burk 2003: 161-162

³¹ Reynolds 2000: 191

³² Liddle 2014: xx

“uniqueness.”³³ The UK is the only European nation to have ruled an Empire the size of a quarter of the world. Britain has ties and commitments to the old imperial colonies through the cooperation in the Commonwealth – an alternative the continental states do not have.³⁴ Additionally, the geography of Europe did, and still does, contribute to Britain having other worries, strengths and priorities compared to those of the continent.

Despite the early reluctance, Britain eventually applied for membership in the EEC in 1961 – and the foundations for Brexit were laid. According to Liddle, Macmillan never truly advocated for a political union with Europe. This because the British were not so keen on supranationalism – to cede sovereignty and authority to an organization outside the homeland. He did, however, advocate for a “free trade area” where Britain would enjoy the benefits of integration and cooperation without giving up any authority to a political body (intergovernmentalism).³⁵ These terms were not accepted by the EEC. In addition to this, the British public became increasingly Eurosceptic – that is critical to continental Europe. German hatred and French suspicion in addition to the sense of “uniqueness” complicated the “turn to Europe.”³⁶ Not joining the club, however, was also problematic as the British played a part in monitoring communism on behalf of the US. Additionally, the Brits wished to pay close attention to Germany.³⁷ After another application in 1967, new negotiations in the early 1970s and the eventual resignation of French President Charles de Gaulle – the British application was accepted.³⁸ Despite becoming a member in 1973, the UK never fully committed to Europe, something the 2016 referendum demonstrates.³⁹

The starting point of the contemporary Brexit debate was arguably 2013, when Prime Minister David Cameron in his Bloomberg speech called for a referendum deciding Britain’s future in the EU. The speech initiated deep divisions in UK politics, and the following debate affected UK-EU relations deeply.⁴⁰ The referendum left the future of Britain in the hands of millions of British men and women – many of whom uncertain as to what they were going to vote. Hence, the efforts to convince in the fight for public votes began. A heated debate

³³ Liddle 2014: xxxvii

³⁴ Liddle 2014: xxxviii

³⁵ Liddle 2014: 4-5

³⁶ Liddle 2014: 6-7

³⁷ Liddle 2014: 7-8

³⁸ Liddle 2014: 9

³⁹ Liddle 2014: 9

⁴⁰ Coutto 2020: 696

Andrea Moksnes, NTNU
Spring 2022

consisting of two opposing campaigns dominated British politics for years, and this culminated on the 23rd of June 2016, when the public voted to leave.

3.0 The Greatness Argument in the Remain Campaign

“The Remain campaign” as used in Brexit terminology refers to “the party-independent coalition of politicians campaigning for continued British membership in the EU.” Even though the public also contributed to the debate, these actors are excluded from the assignment’s definition of the campaign. The politicians represented in this analysis are David Cameron (Conservative, PM 2010-2016), Jeremy Corbyn (Labour Party) and Tim Farron (Liberal Democrat). I analyse two speeches delivered by Cameron, as he was the Prime Minister at the time of the referendum – arguably making him one of the most influential voices of the debate. Analysing four speeches, this chapter seeks to uncover more about the use of the GA by examining the following questions: (1) how did the campaign link the GA to time, (2) to what extent did Remain politicians regard Britain as different and (3) were Remain politicians consistent in their presentation of the GA?

3.1 The Future-Focus in Remain GA

The speeches analysed suggest that the Remain campaign was preoccupied with the question of how Great Britain could become even greater in the future. Hence was the Greatness Argument in this campaign characterized by how voting Remain in the referendum would ensure a greater Britain for the future. Appealing strongly to pathos, Tim Farron exemplified the “future-focus.” In a speech on the EU question, he stated how he spoke with a “97 year old chap” on the manner.⁴¹ Farron told the listener(s) that the man was not too preoccupied with Brexit, due to the fact that his age would prevent him from living with the consequences. However, Farron explained, the man said that he would be voting Remain because he’s “got grandchildren and great grandchildren.”⁴² Farron’s argumentation was clever as he managed to convey his thesis whilst portraying himself as a good man, taking the time to listen and talk to the elderly. Hence was the argument strong as it was consolidated by Farron’s character whilst at the same time appealing efficiently to the recipient’s pathos.

More importantly, Farron’s argumentation displayed the referendum as a contemporary decision affecting future generations. The politician established a contrast between the values of the elderly and the new values of the generations of tomorrow. When he said that Britain should “look forward, not back”, he implicitly suggested that the older generation’s desire to leave the union was rooted in a former greatness. The new generations of British citizens

⁴¹ Farron 11.05.2016

⁴² Farron 11.05.2016

would, according to him, be more capable of discussing the EU-question as their attitudes wasn't firmly connected to the historical past. The following quote displays Farron's future-focus and his desire to convince the public of the importance of generations:

*Liberal Democrats fought harder than anyone to give 16 and 17 year olds the vote in this referendum. The government blocked us and let those young people down. But this vote is still more about them than it is about people of my age and above.*⁴³

David Cameron appears as the politician who weighed the future-aspect of the GA most directly. Where Farron appealed to pathos to link the referendum to the future, Cameron was concerned with progression and development – signalling a more logos-centred approach. In his speeches, he stated how it was important for Britain to keep moving forward.⁴⁴ He argued how voting Remain would help Britain become “even greater tomorrow” and that a vote for Remain displayed a population “fixed firmly on the future.”⁴⁵ I argue that this argumentation is both clever and problematic. Cameron's focus on the future, and the future-focus in general, was strong because it suggested that the voter could actively participate in shaping the new, greater face of Britain. At the same time, Remain rhetoric was largely centred around the fact that a greater Britain for the future was dependent on European reform. The study will eventually turn to the latter, and address how the reform-issue damaged the quality of the GA in Remain rhetoric (chapter 5.1).

Despite the focus on greatness for the future, Remain rhetoric was also characterized by descriptions of the status quo UK as great. Farron stated how a Remain victory would help Britain become “even greater than it is now” – suggesting that Britain, as is, is already great.⁴⁶ Similarly, Cameron explained how a vote for Remain was a vote to “keep Britain strong.”⁴⁷ In the two speeches analysed, Cameron mentioned British economy – and how this is the fifth strongest in the world – four times.⁴⁸ He also highlighted the great British army, the wonderful British food, British music and theatre and the commercialised British flag.⁴⁹

⁴³ Farron 11.05.2016

⁴⁴ Cameron 02.02.2016

⁴⁵ Cameron 09.05.2016

⁴⁶ Farron 11.05.2016

⁴⁷ Cameron 09.05.2016

⁴⁸ Cameron 02.02.2016 & 09.05.2016

⁴⁹ Cameron 09.05.2016

This study argues that manifestations of an already great Britain signals a well thought through rhetorical strategy. It is the British public who were being addressed. The British are, as many other peoples, proud. Consequently, descriptions of a Britain dependent on the EU to become great could have offended the British public. The Remain campaign thus also used the Greatness Argument to boost British confidence and self-esteem. The mainstream doctrine stating that all constructive criticism should be delivered with positive messages, was in other words highly evident in the campaign. Cameron in particular did a great job in using the GA to celebrate Britain, whilst suggesting that cooperation with Europe is the best way to ensure further progression and development for the nation.

Interestingly, Remain politicians Corbyn and Farron chose a different approach in addressing British status quo greatness. Even though Farron described Britain as great (as demonstrated above), he also highlighted how Britain was far from perfect. In his efforts to compare Europe and the UK, he explained how both of them have “warts”, making them imperfect.⁵⁰ He also addressed how Leave campaigners painted a “romantic picture” of Britain, where the country’s flaws were completely disregarded.⁵¹ Farron went as far as stating that Great Britain is no perfect democracy.⁵² This is a bold statement. For centuries, Britain has been a main contributor in developing democracy in the world. Democracy and democratic values thus make up a central part of British identity. It is therefore not unlikely that Farron’s descriptions of the UK harmed the GA in the Remain campaign.

It seems as if Corbyn shared Farron’s views of Britain as imperfect, consequently doing the “Great” in “Great Britain” little favour. When he addressed the steel-crisis in his speech, Corbyn explained how other countries in the European Union, such as France and Italy, did a far better job than Britain in protecting their respective steel-industries.⁵³ He argued that Britain simply cannot blame Brussels for everything that does not work out in favour of the British. With this example, Corbyn managed to consolidate the EU at the expense of the homeland. I argue that Corbyn’s argumentation is of high risk, but with potential great reward. Of course, he risked offending the public when he accused the UK of blaming Europe for incidents which Britain could have avoided or solved with greater leadership. At the same

⁵⁰ Farron 11.05.2016

⁵¹ Farron 11.05.2016

⁵² Farron 11.05.2016

⁵³ Corbyn 14.04.2016

time, Corbyn could also have strengthened the case of the EU as he stated how it is not always the EU's fault that the UK sometimes fails to be great.

3.2 Unique or European?

The Remain politicians analysed in this examination seemed to have opposing views on whether Britain should be regarded as “different” from its European neighbours in the 21st century. David Cameron appeared to believe that Britain was fundamentally different from the continent, also in 2016. This is evident in both speeches, particularly in the one delivered 09.05.2016. In a description of the British people, Cameron used the adjectives “special, different, unique.” He denoted how geography has made, and continues to make, Britain different. Also, Cameron stated how Britain's current unique position in the world was a result of the nation being different.⁵⁴ Cameron's argumentation was two-sided as “difference” was displayed in British success and continental failure. For example, he argued how Britain is the only European state which has avoided invasion for “almost a thousand years.”⁵⁵ The 2016-PM's focus on a “different Britain” distinguished from the continent was also highly evident in one of the final sentences of the long speech; “we are Britain.”⁵⁶ The GA as used by David Cameron was thus characterised by firm belief in British difference.

By using the GA to highlight a great and different UK, David Cameron arguably contributed to dim down the perceptions of continued membership as a one-way ticket to becoming nothing more than “just a European” nation. Using the GA to promote a renewed, British confidence, Cameron could have contributed to making the British less intimidated by a strong European Union. In terms of getting the Leave or sceptical voter to choose Remain, this was a clever strategy. This because Cameron used the GA in a way that displayed British greatness and difference as compatible with the supranational EU. Sovereignty was one of the many big questions of the Brexit debate, and many Britons were severely upset with the fact that Brussels became increasingly powerful.⁵⁷ Highlighting a strong and special Britain by using the GA could have reassured voters that Remain politicians did not wish for Britain to become lost in Europe. I argue that this strengthened the Remain campaign because the argumentation targeted both lovers of the UK and lovers of Europe.

⁵⁴ Cameron 09.05.2016

⁵⁵ Cameron 09.05.2016

⁵⁶ Cameron 09.05.2016

⁵⁷ Saunders 2020: 1141

Whilst Cameron used the GA to reassure the voter of British uniqueness, Tim Farron did the complete opposite. In his efforts to strengthen the case of the EU, Farron focused on the many similarities between Europe and Great Britain. In fact, his speech was far less concerned with stating British greatness at all. Farron completely disapproved Cameron's idea of British uniqueness, as he highlighted how the continent shared British values and recent memory. Evidently, he said, "they're like us."⁵⁸ The Eurosceptic Brit was being directly confronted when Farron said that "Britain is a European country (...) We share Europe's history. We share Europe's future."⁵⁹ By trying to remove the perception of Britain as a different and unique nation, and undermining the GA in the process, Farron could have managed to consolidate the case of EU. This because identifying with Europe could have been a strategy to tame British Euroscepticism. Nevertheless, leaving out the GA could also have angered the public, as many Britons strongly believe that British history and tradition differ profoundly from those of the continent.

3.3 A Divided Force

The three politicians analysed had different answers to the central questions in *Inventio*, despite their common desire to fight for continued membership. Generally, the Brexit debate was characterized by blurred party-lines and politicians bringing their own, personal beliefs to the debate.⁶⁰ This assignment argues that the Remain campaign was particularly divided as a result of the politicians' different conclusions in *Inventio*. For example, there are obvious differences in how they spoke of the Union. Even though both Farron and Corbyn attempted to strengthen the Remain campaign, Farron was generally more positive and explicit in his descriptions of the Union. For example, he referred to the continent as "natural partners" for Britain.⁶¹ Corbyn, on the other hand, was more hesitant to speak warmly of the Union itself. However, he tried to strengthen the case of the EU by highlighting how it had become a British tendency to wrongfully blame the European Union for every incident that contributed to weakening Britain.⁶²

Cameron, on the other hand, saw the EU as nothing more than a tool for the British to use on their journey to become even greater in the future. In his 02.02.16 speech, Cameron said that

⁵⁸ Farron 11.05.2016

⁵⁹ Farron 11.05.2016

⁶⁰ Coutto 2020: 696

⁶¹ Farron 11.05.2016

⁶² Corbyn 14.04.2016

“membership of the EU is one of the tools – just one – which we use (...) to amplify British power and to enhance our power in the world.”⁶³ How Cameron spoke of the EU in his speeches reflects deep divisions in the GA as used in the Remain campaign. In contrast to Farron and Corbyn, Cameron displayed the Union as nothing more than a set of stairs helping Britain climb even higher. The Prime Minister of the time said how Britain should *have* – not interact or cooperate with – but *have* “the best of both worlds.”⁶⁴ The GA as presented by Cameron thus signalled that Britain was so different from and so much greater than continental Europe, that European integration should pave the way for Britain to become the greatest it can be. Similar observations to those denoted here are also highlighted by Cap.⁶⁵

Two additional examples from the conducted material can be introduced to justify the claimed division within the Remain campaign. First, British difference. As 3.2 demonstrated, Cameron defined Britain as a different and unique nation. Farron sought to undermine this British “difference” in his efforts to consolidate British ties to Europe and the European Union. Hence, what was included in the GA changed depending on which Remain politician you were listening to. Second, Corbyn’s attack on fellow pro-Remainer Cameron and his Conservative government. As the leader of the opposition in 2016, Corbyn used the question of Europe as a way of consolidating the Labour Party at the expense of the Conservatives. Throughout the speech, Corbyn conveyed his dissatisfaction with Cameron and his government. He even stated how it was the Conservative government that should be blamed for the many issues Britain was facing at the time.⁶⁶ Through a crystal clear and almost hostile Elocutio, Corbyn painted a picture where it was the Conservatives who disrupted and blocked British greatness – not the EU.

Evidently, this analysis argues that the inconsistent representation of the GA constituted a weakness of the Remain campaign. It is understandable to assume that a broader Inventio consisting of several different arguments is clever as a greater mass of the population would find an argument with which they agree. However, this was not the case for the Remain campaign. Another feature with division can be fragmentation. Fragmentation within a political campaign can harm its ability to attract voters as the opposing views within the campaign can become more evident than the common goal itself. I argue that the Remain

⁶³ Cameron 09.05.2016

⁶⁴ Cameron 02.02.2016

⁶⁵ Cap 2016: 69-70

⁶⁶ Corbyn 14.04.16

Andrea Moksnes, NTNU
Spring 2022

campaign became self-destructive as the deep divisions within the political campaign made the Remain thesis complex and fragmented.

4.0 The Greatness Argument in the Leave Campaign

The definition of the “Leave campaign” in this examination is very similar to that of the Remain campaign, with the crucial difference being that the Leave campaign wished to leave, and not remain, in the EU. As mentioned in the introduction, 52% of the public vote ensured that it was this campaign who prevailed after years of heated Brexit debate. Hence, it is of no surprise that the Leave campaign received, and still receives, the most attention in Brexit research. This part draws on an essay by Berger, where an interesting discussion regarding Medievalism and Exceptionalism in the Leave rhetoric takes place.⁶⁷ The chapter analyses four speeches by four different Leave actors – Boris Johnson (Conservative), Gisela Stuart (Leader of Leave campaign, former Labour), Nigel Farage (UKIP leader) and Michael Gove (Conservative) – in relation to the GA. Even though the speech made by Farage was held prior to the official announcement of the referendum, the Brexit debate was already present as Cameron had delivered his 2013 Bloomberg speech.⁶⁸ The following research-questions will be discussed in this chapter; (1) how did the Leave campaign link the GA to time, (2) how did the campaign see Britain as fundamentally different from the EU and (3) how consistent was the GA within the campaign?

4.1 Historical Exceptionalism

The GA as presented in the Leave campaign was very much preoccupied with stating the historical exceptionalism that Britain enjoyed in its glory days. From my research I have found multiple instances of the GA in action through historical references. In one of the first paragraphs in Michael Gove’s speech, he denoted how Britain “actually invented” democratic self-government. In the same paragraph, he continued to use the GA as he highlighted how the European adaption of the British-invented democracy ensured a “roaring success for most nations who’ve adopted it.”⁶⁹ In addition to these specific examples, the overall impression of Gove’s speech suggested that the great past of Britain should boost British confidence and self-esteem. Gove denoted how “the case for leaving is positive and optimistic” – suggesting that leaving the EU was the only way Great Britain could revive the greatness of the past.⁷⁰

Out of the four politicians analysed for this chapter, Nigel Farage is undoubtedly the politician who weighed the historical exceptionalism of Britain the most in his perception of the GA.

⁶⁷ Berger 2021

⁶⁸ Cap 2016: 67-68

⁶⁹ Gove 19.04.2016

⁷⁰ Gove 19.04.2016

Farage filled his speech with historical references to manifest how Britain has been historically better and stronger compared to her continental neighbours. He stated how “The idea of free speech was a reality in England when Europe was run by princes with tyrannical powers”, and how England historically has been regarded as the “land of liberty” where people could enjoy free thinking and the ability to act independently.⁷¹ The similarities to Gove’s speech are many. Both politicians used specific, historical examples of greatness to appeal to the individual’s pathos and strengthen the sense of British greatness. Additionally, both also agreed that British historical greatness wasn’t compatible with the current “phenomenal collapse in national self-confidence” from which 2016-UK was suffering.⁷²

Additionally, Nigel Farage appealed to specific, historical events from the Middle Ages to justify his strong demands for contemporary UK. In his essay on Medievalism and Exceptionalism in the Brexit debate, Berger denoted how Leave rhetoric was characterised by appeals to English, medieval history.⁷³ When Farage said that “The roots go back seven, eight, nine hundred years with the Common Law. Civil rights. Habeas corpus”, he highlighted central milestones in British history from which the British must take a lot of pride.⁷⁴ I, however, argue that this pride was English rather than British. A characteristic with medievalism in Brexit discourse was how it appealed to English history and English voters, and not necessarily the entire Kingdom.⁷⁵ According to Berger, central Brexiteers tried to use such rhetoric to display the Leave campaign as a “pan-British liberation movement.”⁷⁶ However, as Berger also concludes, such use of the GA evidently displayed an underlying English nationalism and euroscepticism.⁷⁷ I believe this would have been problematic if the majority of the UK wasn’t English.

Even though the historical element of the GA was less evident in Stuart and Johnson, I argue that these politicians also conveyed historical exceptionalism through their firm belief in British greatness outside the EU. Stuart quoted Cameron in her efforts to strengthen national self-confidence: “My argument is not (...) that Britain can’t succeed outside the EU. Of course we could. We’re a great country.”⁷⁸ Johnson focused on reassuring the voter that

⁷¹ Farage 19.09.2013

⁷² Farage 19.09.2013 & Gove 19.04.2016

⁷³ Berger 2021: 23

⁷⁴ Farage 19.09.2013

⁷⁵ Berger 2021: 25

⁷⁶ Berger 2021: 25

⁷⁷ Berger 2021: 25

⁷⁸ Stuart 13.04.2016

leaving would not affect British leadership in important areas such as trade, security, and foreign policy.⁷⁹ Put shortly, the historical element of the GA was also visible in Leave rhetoric through the strong belief the politicians had in Britain's ability to manage independently.

Despite the reoccurring historical exceptionalism in Leave rhetoric, the campaign also linked the GA to the present. Both Stuart and Johnson referred to Britain as the fifth biggest economy of the world,⁸⁰ and all politicians analysed expressed how the confidence of the British people did not correlate with British greatness. However, Leave campaigners were at the same time careful not to overly address the status quo as great. I argue that this was a conscious strategy as too much glorification of the contemporary situation in Britain could have contributed to fewer Leave votes. This because one's desire to act dramatically increases as the status quo is worsening.

The Leave campaign also argued how the EU would prevent Great Britain from experiencing a new exceptionalism in the future – thus connecting the GA to the nation's future as well. From the speeches, it is very clear that all politicians analysed shared this view. Stuart expressed worries about the development within the EU and suggested that being great whilst being a member state would be increasingly difficult in 2025 and 2035.⁸¹ Farage displayed continued membership in the union as a one-way ticket to becoming nothing more than a part of the “country Europe” in the future. As a contrast, the politicians also connected positive scenarios with a future without EU membership. Gove implied that getting rid of the burden of EU would mark the beginning of a “happy journey” to new exceptionalism.⁸² Stuart talked about her grandchildren, and how she wanted them to live in a great UK freed from the shackles of the EU.⁸³ In other words, the politicians used the Greatness Argument to mark a stark contrast between a future with and without membership in the European Union.

4.2 Different Britain

This examination has found that all four Leave politicians portrayed Britain as fundamentally different from continental Europe. The very essence of the Leave campaign was to convince the voter that the EU was incompatible with the capabilities, needs and desires of the island nation. In order to do so, Leavers were consistent in their efforts to highlight the differences

⁷⁹ Johnson 09.05.2016

⁸⁰ Stuart 13.04.2016 & Johnson 2016

⁸¹ Stuart 13.04.2016

⁸² Gove 19.04.2016

⁸³ Stuart 13.04.2016

between the continent and the UK in the Brexit debate. The GA of the Leave campaign was thus characterized by a firm belief in British uniqueness. The different politicians analysed, however, conveyed British difference through various rhetorical strategies.

One of these strategies was to highlight how Britain as a nation was more globally oriented compared to the continental nations. Johnson, Stuart and Gove all demonstrated this when they argued that European reaction to crisis and challenge will always be “more Europe”.⁸⁴ With “more Europe”, the politicians managed to convey two things; (1) the argumentation suggested that European response will always align with European and continental interests and (2) that these interests did not align with the global ambitions of Great Britain. Further analysis of the GA as used in the Leave campaign also demonstrates how the argumentation above was present in the speeches. Johnson stated how intergovernmentalism was the solution “at least for this country”⁸⁵ and Stuart denoted how “we are one [country] that looks out not only to Europe, but to the wider world too.”⁸⁶ I argue that such use of the GA was efficient for the Leave campaign as it displayed British difference by highlighting the global ambitions of the homeland whilst displaying the EU as a primary continental-centred union.

Another strategy of portraying the UK as different can be found in Johnson’s appeals to loyalty and pride. In his speech, the later PM talked about Schuman day and how the elites had decided that the birthday of the founder of the EU should be properly marked in Great Britain. He questioned the celebration of the day when he said “Do we feel loyalty to that flag [the EU-flag]? Do our hearts pitter-patter as we watch it flutter over public buildings? On the contrary. The British share with other EU populations a growing sense of alienation (...)”⁸⁷ In contrast to other strategies, this example demonstrates how Johnson stimulated feelings of alienation without mentioning beneficial outcomes of leaving the EU (such as economy or sovereignty). Through pathos, Johnson managed to establish a sense of British unity where the Union had no natural position. The rhetorical questions also demonstrate the pan-British self-perception that characterized the Leave campaign, as Johnson suggested how *no* British man or woman felt proud of or loyal to the EU.

From the analysis, this examination has found that Farage was the Leave politician who spoke the loudest of British difference in the Brexit debate. Compared to his fellow Leavers, Farage

⁸⁴ Gove 19.04.2016, Johnson 09.05.2016, & Stuart 13.04.2016

⁸⁵ Johnson 09.05.2016

⁸⁶ Stuart 13.04.2016

⁸⁷ Johnson 09.05.2016

justified much of his argumentation in the historical exceptionalism of Great Britain. The two aspects of the GA as defined in 1.0 thus interconnect with each other in Farage's rhetorical strategy. Similarly to Gove, Johnson and Stuart, Farage also emphasized the global ambitions of Britain to highlight contrasting ambitions. In his description of the UK, he said how the nation is "Open to the world. The opposite of insular."⁸⁸ Here, he displayed British greatness whilst implying that the EU did not share these qualities. Wenzl highlighted how historical narratives of difference was used to legitimize why the UK and the EU are not compatible.⁸⁹ This is very noticeable in the following quote, where Farage – with a simple, clear and brutal Elocutio – conveyed how he saw Britain as different in terms of her geography, history, institutions and mindset:

*Because the fact is we just don't belong in the European Union. Britain is different. Our geography puts us apart. Our history puts us apart. Our institutions produced by that history puts us apart. We think differently. We behave differently.*⁹⁰

4.3 A United Force

The analysis of Leave speeches has revealed that the Leave campaign was characterized by unity in Inventio and shared perceptions of the Greatness Argument. All politicians were preoccupied with including historical exceptionalism in the GA, though some more directly than others. Gove and Farage were especially prominent in their efforts to convey this exceptionalism, as they frequently highlighted specific examples from the British past. Even though Johnson and Stuart mentioned specific incidents to a lesser degree, they still conveyed historical exceptionalism as their firm belief in the British ability to manage independently was rooted in a great, British past. The Leave campaign also used historical exceptionalism to establish a contrast to contemporary UK and the UK in the future. By reminding the public of what the nation has been capable of in the past, directly or indirectly, the campaign could have contributed to establish a new standard for British greatness in the eyes of the public.

Additionally, the campaign displayed a clear consensus in their firm belief in British difference. Through portraying the European Union as fundamentally different from the island nation, the politicians managed to highlight British qualities and ambition whilst at the same time stating how the EU failed to meet the standards of the UK. The politicians,

⁸⁸ Farage 19.09.2013

⁸⁹ Wenzl 2021: 100

⁹⁰ Farage 19.09.2013

however, chose different strategies as to how the difference between the two was presented. A wider range of strategies did not compromise the unity of the campaign, however. In fact, I argue that a wider range of strategies on the manner could have been efficient for the Leave campaign. This because it may have opened for a wider range of the public to find something about the Union with which they could distance themselves from.

Considering that the Brexit debate was party independent, I find the rhetorical consensus within the Leave campaign rather impressive. This examination has only analysed four speeches, and it may have been that other speeches could have demonstrated disagreements within the campaign. I do, however, believe that the wider consensus of the campaign was deliberate as leaving the union was the most dramatic choice out of two alternatives presented on the 23rd of June 2016. Speaking in general terms, it is fair to assume that bold choices require more convincing compared to “safer” choices. In the case of Brexit, leaving was the bold choice as history clearly displayed how irregular it was for member states to leave the project of European integration. In addition to the GA being of similar nature within the campaign, the analysed politicians also referenced and mentioned other Leave politicians in their speeches, consequently consolidating the unity of the campaign even further. For example, Johnson spoke of how he admired fellow Leavers such as Gisela Stuart and David Owen.⁹¹ This assignment argues that the unity of the GA within the Leave campaign functioned as a reassurance for the voter, consequently making them less fearful of voting “no.”

⁹¹ Johnson 09.05.2016

5.0 The Greatness Argument in Comparison

To gain further insights as to how the Greatness Argument was present in Brexit discourse, I will now discuss the GA from a comparative perspective. As demonstrated in chapter 3.0 and 4.0, building a strong GA was of importance for both campaigns. This, however, did not mean that the two campaigns accepted the GA as presented by the other. In fact, the analysed speeches have demonstrated how the GA of one campaign became a rhetorical target for the other. This chapter seeks to highlight strengths and weaknesses with the Greatness Argument, as well as demonstrate how the two campaigns tried to break down each other's perceptions of how Britain could become even greater. Three questions will guide this examination; (1) how did the reform-issue interfere with the GA in the Brexit debate, (2) to what extent were traces of Empire evident in the GA and Brexit discourse and (3) was the presence of an enemy important for the GA to succeed?

5.1 The Reform-Issue and the GA

The very cornerstone of the Greatness Argument within the Remain campaign was the firm belief that Britain would be greater in a *reformed* Europe. My emphasis on “reformed” is not coincidental. In fact, I argue that this eight-letter word damaged the Remain campaign simply because it raised more questions than it answered. Both campaigns agreed that the political, social, and economic situation characterizing Britain in 2016 was beneath British standards. Where Leavers wished to wave Europe good-bye, Remainers advocated for continued membership with the premise of reforming the EU. The demand for reform in the European Union is evident in all Remain speeches analysed. Corbyn said that Europe needed to change, and that Britain should “Remain – and reform – in Europe.”⁹² Farron talked about a new face of Europe, and stated how it was essential for Britain to contribute in reforming the Union.⁹³ Cameron, on the other hand, argued how the process of reform had already started, as he had been to Brussels and negotiated with the EU of behalf of the British. According to him, the solutions to the problematic UK-EU relation was under construction.⁹⁴

Despite that the call for reform characterised the entire campaign, Remain politicians failed miserably in explaining what reform entailed. In his 02.02.16 speech, David Cameron systematically introduced and explained what he considered to be the four main issues with

⁹² Corbyn 14.04.2016

⁹³ Farron 11.05.2016

⁹⁴ Cameron 02.02.2016 & 09.05.2016

the contemporary EU: sovereignty, trade, currency, and immigration.⁹⁵ Doing so, Cameron acknowledged how the Union hemmed Britain. Thus, it became of greater importance for the Prime Minister of the time to convince the public that reform was possible. In his efforts to do so, Cameron simply referred to a distant document he *thought* contained sufficient reassurance for future reform.⁹⁶ However, this did little to convince and reassure. It was therefore not beneficial for the Remain campaign that some of the harshest critiques to Cameron's reform came from fellow pro-Remainer Corbyn; "But we also need to make the case for reform in Europe – the reform David Cameron's government has no interest in, but plenty of others across Europe do."⁹⁷ The combination of the campaign's acknowledgement of EU weaknesses and the complex descriptions of reform could have left the voter with the impression that future British greatness evidently was in the hands of Brussels.

As a result of this reform-issue, it was highly important for Remainers to succeed with their GA. The reform-issue displayed a situation where British greatness was dependent on change in Europe. Consequently, Remain politicians were preoccupied with reassuring the voter that Britain had the necessary means to ensure this reform. According to them, Britain had the power to both ensure change, and lead the development towards an institution more suited to the "British way." Using Cameron's words, it was absolutely vital for "Britain to be driving [the] reform."⁹⁸ Farron highlighted how it was impossible to shape the future of the EU without remaining a member,⁹⁹ and Corbyn addressed how one "cannot build a greater world unless you engage with it."¹⁰⁰ The connection between the reform-issue and the Greatness Argument is especially evident in this dilemma presented by Cameron; "either we [Britain] influence Europe, or it influences us."¹⁰¹

Another consequence of the reform-issue was how it left Remain descriptions of the European Union two-sided. Evidently, the three Remain politicians advocated for an institution with which they were dissatisfied. This affected Remain descriptions of the Union. Wenzl found how pro-Remainers were careful not to overly support the European Club in their speeches.¹⁰² This examination has detected very similar tendencies. At one hand, issues regarding the

⁹⁵ Cameron 02.02.2016

⁹⁶ Cameron 02.02.2016

⁹⁷ Corbyn 14.04.2016

⁹⁸ Cameron 02.02.2016

⁹⁹ Farron 11.05.2016

¹⁰⁰ Corbyn 14.04.2016

¹⁰¹ Cameron 09.05.2016

¹⁰² Wenzl 2021: 697

Union were expressed. Farron admitted that the EU struggled with handling crisis,¹⁰³ and Corbyn confessed how he was “critical of many decisions taken by the EU.”¹⁰⁴ At the other hand, the EU was portrayed very positively. For example, Corbyn said how he believed the EU has been vital for jobs and dealing with 21st century problems such as the environmental challenges of the future.¹⁰⁵ Cameron revealed some positive attitudes when he reminded the listener of how the EU helped bring peace to Europe and the world.¹⁰⁶ Put shortly, the reform-issue and positive attitudes to the EU were not mutually exclusive in the Brexit debate.

Reform being a premise for greatness made the Remain campaign vulnerable to attacks from the Leave campaign. In addition to using the GA to consolidate their view, Leavers broke down the GA as presented by Remainers when they argued how European reform was impossible. This is especially evident in the speeches by Stuart and Johnson. The latter quoted Cameron and his desire for “far reaching change” to establish a contrast between this desire and the actual terms and conditions Cameron achieved with his negotiations in Brussels.¹⁰⁷ Johnson continued to challenge the idea of European reform in his speech when he said the following:

*We have proved to ourselves time and again that we cannot change the direction. We cannot change the pace. We cannot interrupt the steady erosion of democracy, and given that we do not accept the destination it is time to tell our friends and partners, in a spirit of the utmost cordiality, that we wish to forge a new relationship based on free trade and intragovernmental cooperation.*¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, it was Gisela Stuart who challenged the premise of reform the most. Stuart began her speech by establishing a strong ethos as she told how she spent considerable time in Brussels arguing Britain’s case leading up to the Lisbon treaty.¹⁰⁹ Based on her own experiences, the politician claimed that the European Union was “incapable of changing” – consequently shattering one of the crucial elements of the Remain campaign’s GA in the very first sentences of her speech.¹¹⁰ Stuart also used historical examples to consolidate her views

¹⁰³ Farron 11.05.2016

¹⁰⁴ Corbyn 14.04.2016

¹⁰⁵ Corbyn 14.04.2016

¹⁰⁶ Cameron 09.05.2016

¹⁰⁷ Johnson 09.05.2016

¹⁰⁸ Johnson 09.05.2016

¹⁰⁹ Stuart 13.04.2016

¹¹⁰ Stuart 13.04.2016

when she stated how “Europe did not reform after 1975, or after the 2003 convention. And it is not going to now.”¹¹¹ Put shortly, Leave politicians took advantage of a crucial flaw within the Remain campaign – systematically breaking down a fundamental premise of the GA as presented by the Remain campaign.

5.2 Traces of Empire in the GA

*Some may regret that Britain is no longer the imperial power that it was generations ago, sovereign over India and much of Africa. (...) And let's face it. The past wasn't all that glorious, (...) and – let's be honest – the empire didn't do much for the sovereignty of those countries that we occupied...*¹¹²

As this quote by Tim Farron demonstrates, the imperial history of the United Kingdom was highly present in Brexit discourse. In this example, he used Britain's imperial history to break down what he considered to be central perceptions of greatness within the Leave campaign. Contributing to the establishment of Leave stereotypes, the politician displayed the Leave advocate as a person looking proudly back at a time when Britain enjoyed far greater influence and power compared to British influence and power in the 21st century. Farron distanced himself from the imperial past when he denoted how the Empire caused much distress for the occupied countries. As already mentioned, Leavers were motivated by the increasing control Brussels gained over the island nation. Farron thus displayed an interesting paradox which could have contributed to harming the credibility of the Leave politician: the people who took pride in the Empire wished to leave the EU because they found it fundamentally wrong that a distant government should make decisions affecting Britain.

In contrast to the quote by Farron, imperial nostalgia (as defined by Saunders, see 1.1) was generally more implicit. I find this unsurprising as the values and qualities appreciated in the 21st century are very different from what was regarded as admirable when Britain “ruled the world”. Speaking of violent occupations and the exploitation of less developed nations would hardly strengthen the GA of the campaigns. This does not mean, however, that appeals to the imperial past was kept to a minimum in Brexit discourse. In fact, Saunders highlights a poll conducted by YouGov in 2014, where 59% of the polled considered themselves proud of the Empire.¹¹³ These numbers display a population susceptible of appeals linking empire to

¹¹¹ Stuart 13.04.2016

¹¹² Farron 11.05.2016

¹¹³ Saunders 2020: 1143. Poll managed by YouGove in 2014.

greatness. Saunders highlighted how the word “global” and the appeals to Britain’s global ambitions functioned as a substitute for “imperial” in Brexit rhetoric.¹¹⁴ By using this strategy, Brexit politicians managed to appeal to empire without being labelled supporters of an ancient and heavy-handed regime.

Considering both direct and more implicit appeals to empire, this analysis has found that both campaigns used the British Empire to strengthen their GA. In contrast to Farron, Cameron apparently took great pride in the imperial past.¹¹⁵ He stated how Britain was “a great country in the history books” and expressed gratitude when he spoke of British forebears and parents/grandparents.¹¹⁶ Cameron’s love for empire was also visible through his focus on the global role and reach of Britain.¹¹⁷ Despite Cameron being the only Remain politician seemingly proud of the British Empire, the Remain campaign nevertheless displayed a form of imperial nostalgia as the desire to lead and remain influential characterized the entire campaign. Connecting the greatness of empire and the desire to remain within the Union, Remainers managed to break down the belief that the two desires were mutually exclusive.

Traces of empire were both better camouflaged and more usual and consistent in Leave rhetoric. The focus on historical exceptionalism should be seen in connection with appeals to empire. The proud past was something the campaign aspired to regain. Because Britain operated independently when most powerful, leaving the Union thus became a logical step in British renewal. Johnson and Gove presented what I consider an obvious example of imperial nostalgia when they spoke of how Brexit would cause the liberation of an entire continent.¹¹⁸ According to them, Britain leaving the Union would set an example for the other member states to follow. Britain should lead and inspire, making the difficult decisions so that weaker and less confident states could follow the British example. That Leavers considered this a British responsibility, displayed how the Leave politician’s mindset was similar to the British mindset when Germany threatened European democracy: as the greatest nation in Europe, it naturally us – the British – who should liberate Europe and protect her values.

It is worth discussing whether appeals like the above should be considered as examples of imperial nostalgia or reflections of a nation legitimately concerned of its capabilities to function as a self-governing democracy. It is not unreasonable for a nation to strive for greater

¹¹⁴ Saunders 2020: 1144

¹¹⁵ Also denoted by Saunders 2020: 1143

¹¹⁶ Cameron 09.05.16

¹¹⁷ Cameron 09.05.16

¹¹⁸ Johnson 09.05.2016 & Gove 19.04.2016

trading agreements, better economy or more sovereignty. Yet, the debate was far more than appeals to logos. I argue that Britain's imperial past was visible through the British desire to achieve more from their cooperation with Europe. Additionally, the Leave campaign's deep belief in the British people and the Remain campaign's confidence in managing a European reform demonstrated a nation affected by its imperial past – "glorious or inglorious."¹¹⁹ As Saunders concluded in his article on the manner; "The ghosts of empire hang heavy over British political culture (...)",¹²⁰ and British politicians displayed these ghosts in the Brexit debate.

5.3 The GA and the Importance of an Enemy

The Leave campaign's effort to make the European Union an enemy strengthened their GA as it presented the public with scapegoat for the current lack of British greatness. Both Viala-Gaudefroy and Ross & Bhatia have written informative works elaborating on how the construction of an enemy can contribute to success in social discourse.¹²¹ When a subject finds another subject to regard as an enemy, a contrast between oneself and the "evil other" is established: the other is seen as the root to all problems, and oneself represents the good.¹²²

The analysed material demonstrated how all Leavers portrayed the EU as a British enemy by using hostile language. Farage left no room for interpretation when he said that the livelihoods of British politicians are regulated "by a Frenchman who is no friend of ours."¹²³ In addition to weakening the case of the EU, Farage probably also intended to remind the British of the historically hostile relationship between the UK and France. Gove spoke of how Britain has become "hostages to their [the EU's] agenda",¹²⁴ and Johnson associated UK-EU relations with words like "embarrassingly", "powerlessness", "humiliation" and "suicide rate."¹²⁵ Stuart spoke of how the UK must free themselves from "the shackles" of the EU to escape "an organisation that only serves its own interests."¹²⁶

The Remain campaign, on the other hand, did not have a similar, defined enemy in their speeches, thus losing a rewarding element in public discourse. It can appear as if the Remain

¹¹⁹ Farron 11.05.2016

¹²⁰ Saunders 2020: 1165

¹²¹ Viala-Gaudefroy 2020 & Ross & Bhatia 2021. This material regarded American Presidency discourse (Viala-Gaudefroy) and UKIP campaign posters (Ross & Bhatia), however its main principles are transferrable

¹²² Viala-Gaudefroy 2020: 3

¹²³ Farage 19.09.2013

¹²⁴ Gove 19.04.2016

¹²⁵ Johnson 09.05.2016

¹²⁶ Stuart 13.04.2016

campaign found an enemy in the Leave campaign as a compensation for the absence of a defined enemy. For example, Cameron suggested that the Leave campaign would lead the UK into darkness as they had no plan for Britain if Brexit were to succeed.¹²⁷ Johnson also accused the Remain campaign for labelling Leavers as “Little Englander[s]” and anti-European.¹²⁸ Unfortunately for Remainers, Leavers did a great job in fighting these allegations as they frequently highlighted the distinction between the EU and the continent. For example, Johnson said “We [the British] will be able to love our fellow Europeans, marry them, live with them, share the joy of discovering our different cultures and languages (...)”¹²⁹ Stuart, on the other hand, referred to her background as a European refugee to challenge the anti-European label.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Cameron 09.05.2016

¹²⁸ Johnson 09.05.2016

¹²⁹ Johnson 09.05.2016

¹³⁰ Stuart 13.04.2016

6.0 Conclusions

In the introduction to this study, I posed the following question: “in speeches prior to the 2016-referendum; how did Leave and Remain politicians use the Greatness Argument to underscore their respective views?” By adding “The Greatness Argument” to the already broad terminology of Brexit literature, I have revealed different ways in which British greatness was evident in public discourse prior to the Brexit referendum the 23rd of June 2016. Through the approach of a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in chapters 3.0 and 4.0, the study demonstrated how politicians saw and used the GA differently. Even though Remainers agreed that greatness for the future included the EU, their perceptions of greatness and difference varied. Corbyn and Farron dared to criticise the homeland. Cameron, on the other hand, focused on what made contemporary Britain great. In their efforts to strengthen the case of the EU, Corbyn and Farron highlighted similarities, whereas Cameron focused on Britain’s special status. The latter was also unique in his instrumental descriptions of the EU. Leavers were far more united in their perceptions of the GA. Focusing on historical exceptionalism, the campaign managed to strengthen the case of leaving by creating a contrast between the greatness of the past and the status quo of contemporary UK. Farage was especially prominent in this through his appeals to English medievalism. Leave politicians also highlighted British difference to demonstrate why they saw the EU and the UK as incompatible. Far more careful in their glorification of 2016-UK, Leavers managed to create a sense of urgency, where the British were encouraged to trust British greatness and vote Leave. Furthermore, the comparative analysis of the GA in chapter 5.0 shows how the two campaigns interfered with each other’s perceptions of British greatness. The reform-issue demonstrated a significant weakness with Remain GA. Even though Cameron argued that he had secured reform through negotiation and cooperation with the Union, Corbyn stated how this was far from sufficient change and Leavers argued how European reform was impossible. I argue that the very foundation of Remain GA was weakly built as British greatness evidently required reforming an organization outside Britain. The analysis also highlighted the various traces of empire in the GA. Both campaigns were the subject of imperial nostalgia, and each campaign displayed a desire to become greater. The focus on British global reach and global ambition revealed how the Leave campaign used appeals to empire more regularly compared to its counterpart. The presence of an enemy was also significant for the GA in Brexit discourse. I argue that the Leave campaign’s effort to create an enemy of the EU provided

them with a rhetorical advantage. Even though the Remain campaign tried to establish hostile attitudes to Leavers by labelling them as “Little Englanders” or anti-European, Leave politicians managed to discard such allegations by highlighting the division between the EU and Europe.

Based on the analysed material, I conclude that the Greatness Argument was present at many levels of the Brexit debate, thus having an impact on the result of the 2016 referendum. Not only was the argument used to consolidate the case of leaving/remaining, but it was also a weapon to damage the argumentation of the opposing campaign. The evidence from this study largely corresponds with that of existing studies, as I conclude that the Leave campaign’s use of the GA was more successful compared to the GA in the Remain campaign. In the end, the British public decided to vote Leave – displaying the belief that Britain could reclaim greatness if the nation managed to break free from the shackles of the European Union.

6.1 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Due to the given framework of this study, I had to limit the number of analysed speeches. A greater corpus could have revealed new characteristics of the GA or challenged some of the general findings in this study. Yet, the study has analysed and discussed material from various, central British politicians. The speeches are in this way representative for the Brexit debate. Also, I believe the introduction of the “Greatness Argument” can be helpful for further research, as it can contribute to reveal the many ways British greatness is apparent in British political discourse. In this study, I have focused on the politician’s use of the argument, and less on how the British public processed the GA. Hence, I encourage scholars to investigate how the British public viewed the GA through the methodology of interviews. I believe this could further display British attitudes to British historical and contemporary greatness. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that rhetoric plays an active part in the decision-making in modern democracies. Therefore, scholars should continue to investigate the various ways in which politicians use rhetoric to convince the public to support their political agenda.

7.0 Bibliography

7.1 Primary Material (Speeches)

- Cameron, D. (02.02.2016). *2016 Speech on EU Reform* [Speech transcript]. Speech delivered at Siemens in Wiltshire. UKPOL Political Speech Archive.
<https://www.ukpol.co.uk/david-cameron-2016-speech-on-eu-reform/>
- Cameron, D. (09.05.2016). *PM speech on the UK's strength and security in the EU* [Speech transcript]. Speech delivered at Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street.
GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-the-uks-strength-and-security-in-the-eu-9-may-2016>
- Corbyn, J. (14.04.2016). *2016 Speech on the EU* [Speech transcript]. Speech delivered at the Senate House. UKPOL Political Speech Archive. <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/jeremy-corbyn-2016-speech-on-the-eu/>
- Farage, N. (19.09.2013). *2013 Speech to UKIP Conference* [Speech transcript]. Exact location not accounted for. UKPOL Political Speech Archive. <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/nigel-farage-2013-speech-to-ukip-conference/>
- Farron, T. (11.05.2016). *2016 Speech on the EU* [Speech transcript]. Exact location not accounted for. UKPOL Political Speech Archive. <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/nigel-farage-2013-speech-to-ukip-conference/>
- Gove, M. (19.04.2016). *2016 Speech on the EU (The Facts of Life say Leave: Why Britain and Europe Will Be Better Off After We Vote Leave)* [Speech transcript]. Exact location not accounted for. UKPOL Political Speech Archive.
<https://www.ukpol.co.uk/michael-gove-2016-speech-on-the-eu/>
- Johnson, B. (09.05.2016). *The liberal cosmopolitan case to Vote Leave* [Speech transcript]. Speech delivered at Vote Leave Headquarters. Official Vote Leave Website.
http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/boris_johnson_the_liberal_cosmopolitan_case_to_vote_leave.html
- Stuart, G. (13.04.2016). *Gisela Stuart exposes the risks of staying in the EU* [Speech transcript]. Speech delivered at Vote Leave Headquarters. Official Vote Leave Website.
http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/gisela_stuart_exposes_the_risks_of_staying_in_the_eu.html

7.2 Secondary Material

- Berger, M. D. (2021). 2016 and All That: Medievalism and Exceptionalism in Brexit Britain. In D. Keller & I. Habermann (Eds.), *Brexit and Beyond: Nation and Identity* (Vol. 39, pp. 23-39). Narr Francke Attempto Verlag.
- Buckledee, S. (2018). *The language of Brexit : how Britain talked its way out of the European Union*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Cap, P. (2016). *The Language of Fear: Communicating Threat in Public Discourse*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Coutto, T. (2020). Half-full or half-empty? Framing of UK-EU relations during the Brexit referendum campaign. *Journal of European Integration: The politicisation of permanent crisis in Europe*, 42(5), 695-713.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1792465>
- Hyam, R. (2010). *Understanding the British empire*. Cambridge University Press.
- Keller, D., Habermann, Ina. (2021). *Brexit and Beyond: Nation and Identity*.(Vol. 39). Narr Francke Attempto Verlag.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2889115&site=ehost-live>
- Kristiansen, H.-I. (2012). *Retorikkåndboken* (4. utg. ed.). Forlag1.
- Legg, S. (2014). Trade and Capital: The Other Empire. In S. W. Sears (Ed.), *The British Empire*. New Word City, Inc.
- Liddle, R. (2014). *The Europe dilemma : Britain and the drama of EU integration* (First edition. ed.). I.B. Tauris.
- Melve, L., & Ryymin, T. (2018). *Historikerens arbeidsmåter*. Universitetsforl.
- Reynolds, D. (2000). *Britannia overruled : British policy and world power in the twentieth century* (2nd ed.). Longman.
- Reynolds, D. (2003). Britain and the world since 1945: narratives of decline or transformation? In K. Burk (Ed.), *The British Isles Since 1945* (pp. 157-182). Oxford University Press.
- Ross, A. S., & Bhatia, A. (2021). "Ruled Britannia": Metaphorical Construction of the EU as Enemy in UKIP Campaign Posters. *The international journal of press/politics*, 26(1), 188-209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220935812>

- Saunders, R. (2020). Brexit and Empire: 'Global Britain' and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia. *Journal of imperial and Commonwealth history*, 48(6), 1140-1174.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2020.1848403>
- Sears, S. W. (2014). *The British Empire*. New Word City, Inc.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1735646&site=ehost-live>
- Tian, L., & Modality, B. (2021). Critical discourse analysis of political discourse — a case study of trump's tv speech. *Theory and practice in language studies*, 11(5), 516-520.
<https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1105.08>
- Viala-Gaudefroy, J. (2020). The Evil Savage Other as Enemy in Modern U.S. Presidential Discourse. *Angles*, 10(10). <https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.498>
- Wenzl, N. (2021). "The United Kingdom is a different state": Conservative MPs' Appeals to Britishness before the EU Rererendum. In D. Keller & I. Habermann (Eds.), *Brexit and Beyond: Nation and Identity* (Vol. 39, pp. 99-120). Narr Francke Attempto Verlag.

