BRITISH UNIVERSITIES IN THE BREXIT MOMENT

Political, Economic and Cultural Implications

Great Debates in Higher Education is a series of short, accessible books addressing key challenges to and issues in Higher Education, on a national and international level. These books are research informed but debate driven. They are intended to be relevant to a broad spectrum of researchers, students, and administrators in higher education, and are designed to help us unpick and assess the state of higher education systems, policies, and social and economic impacts.

Published title:

Teaching Excellence in Higher Education: Challenges, Changes and the Teaching Excellence Framework
Amanda French and Matt O'Leary

Forthcoming titles:

The Marketisation of English Higher Education: A Policy Analysis of a Risk-Based System
Colin McCaig

Cultural Journeys in Higher Education: Student Voices and Narratives
Jan Bamford and Lucy Pollard

Sexual Violence on Campus: Power-Conscious Approaches to Awareness, Prevention, and Response
Christina Linder

Higher Education, Access and Funding: The UK in International Perspective
Sheila Riddell, Sarah Minty, Elisabet Weedon, and Susan Whittaker

Refugees in Higher Education: Debate, Discourse and Practice
Jacqueline Stevenson and Sally Baker

Access to Success and Social Mobility through Higher Education: A Curate's Egg?
Stuart Billingham

BRITISH UNIVERSITIES IN THE BREXIT MOMENT

Political, Economic and Cultural Implications

BY

MIKE FINN
University of Exeter, UK

emerald
PUBLISHING

For Ro

CONTENTS

PART III

CONCLUSIONS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BEIS: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy

ECJ: European Court of Justice

EEC: European Economic Community

ERC: European Research Council

ERDF: European Regional Development Fund

Euratom: European Atomic Energy Community

HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEPI: Higher Education Policy Institute

NSS: National Student Survey

REF: Research Excellence Framework

TEF: Teaching Excellence Framework

UKRI: UK Research and Innovation

VC: Vice-Chancellor

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A VIGNETTE: 'POLITICAL PROJECTS'

The point of departure for Britain's universities from their European Union-sponsored relationships with their partners on the Continent could perhaps be located in many places, most obviously Britain's referendum on EU membership held on 23 June 2016, which saw a narrow majority of the voting British public electing to Leave.

But the beginning of the long road to the Brexit crisis for Britain's universities might be traced back still further. In 2005, a Conservative MP named David Cameron had declared his intention to stand for the party leadership following the resignation of Michael Howard. Whilst largely unheard of by the general public, Cameron was a rising star in the Conservative Party, having served as a backbencher on the Home Affairs Select Committee following his election as MP for Witney in 2001. During this period, he penned a diary column in *The Guardian* newspaper. In 2003, he became both a shadow junior minister and vice-chairman of the Conservative Party. In 2005, he helped draft the party's manifesto as head of policy co-ordination. The campaign focused on fanning the flames of public anxiety about

immigration, following the accession of the A8 countries in 2004, which was followed by a surge in immigration from those former Eastern Bloc nations. The party was accused of 'dog whistle' racism as a result. Following the defeat, Cameron became Shadow Education Secretary.

Cameron swiftly disavowed the manifesto and rebranded himself a 'liberal conservative' and a 'moderniser'. The 'Notting Hill' set which clustered around him followed New Labour's previous modernisation agenda with gusto (Finn M., 2015b, p. 35). Tony Blair had declaimed the centre ground as the place to fight and win in British politics; Cameron's agenda was to move the Conservative Party there after two successive general election campaigns where the party had run to the right, with dire results.

Cameron's background as a former PR consultant and his comparative mastery of public speaking and communications (when contrasted with his chief rival David Davis) saw him build a following. After the Conservative Party Conference in September 2005, he moved into the lead. In December, he was elected as Leader of the Conservative Party.

But that is not the whole story. Whereas Tony Blair in his 1994 campaign had sought to emphasise the legacy of his predecessor John Smith (Finn & Seldon, 2013), whilst making it clear his intention was to face down his party — as he did less than a year later over Clause IV — Cameron's journey was one of compromise. Despite three successive election defeats and a sense of crisis in Conservative politics, they had not sustained the psychological shock that Labour had in 1983 under Michael Foot; a 'never again' moment which gave grist to the mill of successive leaders — Kinnock, Smith, Blair — to remake the Labour Party in order to 'save' it.

Not all Conservatives, who in many cases regarded themselves as the 'natural' party of government, were as convinced that the party needed 'saving' in quite the same way. For

some parliamentarians, Cameron was a scion of the gilded aristocracy who felt himself entitled to lead. For others, his newly trumpeted liberal Conservatism wasn't really Conservatism at all — and certainly not Conservatism of the Thatcher variety.

Cameron needed to give the right of the Conservative Party something. Something that would assuage their fears that he would change the party out of all recognition. Something that would remind them that he was, at the end of the day, a Tory.

Given that the previous two election campaigns had focused attention on Britain's relationship with Europe — in 2001 William Hague's *cri de coeur* to 'save the pound', and in 2005 the 'it's not racist to talk about immigration' approach which Cameron had been involved in developing — it was natural enough that Europe should remain central to the party's concerns. Cameron knew that he was perceived to be 'weak' on Europe when contrasted with his rival Davis, a figure with impeccable Eurosceptic credentials.

So, Cameron declared that, if elected leader, he would withdraw the party from the European People's Party (EPP), the main Conservative grouping in the European Parliament (Smith, The UK's Journeys Into and Out of the EU: Destinations Unknown, 2017, p. 59). The EPP was too federalist, too Europhilic. Britain needed to stand up to Europe, and the best way to do that was to build a new alliance with other like-minded parties.

The story of David Cameron's political life has a certain poetic quality to it. 'In my beginning is my end', T. S. Eliot wrote. This was nowhere truer than in Cameron's case. With the EPP decision, a decision of note only to political anoraks and those it was intended to hit home with — Conservative members — Cameron mortgaged the future of his leadership and any potential premiership to the goodwill of the

Eurosceptic Right. Subsequently, Cameron gained a (justified) reputation as an arrogant political gambler (Kettle, 2016). As Prime Minister, Cameron would later mortgage the future of his country — again on the question of Europe — to win a general election, promising a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union if he were elected as Prime Minister of a majority Conservative administration (Smith, 2015).

Cameron was no true Eurosceptic, but as with successive British leaders, he was prepared to play that card when it suited him to appease his doubters, never imagining it would come back to haunt him. Even prior to the referendum, the EPP decision hit Cameron — and by extension, Britain — hard. Conservative MEPs' marginalisation in the European Parliament meant they had little say in the election of the new President of the European Commission in 2014. That was the first year that MEPs had been able to wield such influence. As Chris Bickerton describes, 'the main party groups … nominate their "top candidate" for the presidency … The candidate from the group that wins most seats gets the job' (Bickerton, 2016, p. 24).

The EPP won the most seats, and that meant their preferred candidate, Jean-Claude Juncker, would be president. But Britain's Conservatives no longer sat in the EPP, so they had had no say in the nomination. Cameron tried to frustrate Juncker's election, arguing that 'the authority to nominate the President of the European Commission lay with member states, not with the European Parliament. Cameron lost' (Bickerton, 2016, p. 24).

Cameron would then be compelled, as a result of a choice he had taken years previously for reasons of political calculation, to renegotiate Britain's relationship with the European Union ahead of his promised referendum with parties including a man he had publicly condemned and proclaimed as an

adversary (Watt, 2014). For all the Eurosceptic cries that the Juncker nomination had been 'undemocratic', the truth was that it was the most democratic presidential appointment in the Commission's history, with the pan-European electorate of Europe able to choose their preferred candidate through the Parliamentary elections. Televised debates were held (Bickerton, 2016).

Why does this vignette matter? Not because it seeks to ascribe 'blame', or the totality of responsibility for British universities' plight in the Brexit moment exclusively to David Cameron. Far from it. Historians use vignettes as a literary flourish, because they are illustrative. Cameron's (mis)calculations in dealing with the EPP reflect Britain's relationship with Europe more generally — a more-or-less pragmatic engagement with the European Union for largely economic rather than ideological reasons. Britons — as a whole — never bought into the project of 'ever closer union'. In the 1960s, the British government sought membership of the then-European Economic Community because the Commonwealth was clearly not viable as a market. It was pragmatism that took Britain into Europe, even as a post-war, post-imperial political culture continued to trumpet British exceptionalism (Finn M., 2016b).

But Britain's universities — and universities within and without the European Union — did think of collaboration and the networks between them in more idealistic terms. British academics in the post-war period saw greater integration with their European counterparts as essential to forestalling the threat of war and, critically, the rise of demagoguery and totalitarianism within societies (see Chapter Three, this volume). Networks with European universities were long-standing, with strong Anglo-German collaborations in particular from the nineteenth century (Ellis & Kircheberger, 2014). In the 1930s and into the early stages of the war,

Britain had received her share of academic refugees from Germany and then occupied Europe. This helped frame academic views on collaboration and networks in the post-war period, with British academics (amongst others) playing a key role in the post-war reconstruction of the German universities they had once admired so much (Phillips, 1980).

Although Michael Polanyi might not have agreed with it, many in the scientific community across Europe saw its institutions as part of the realisation of a 'republic of science' (Polanyi, 1962) which transcended national divides. European subject associations flourished independently of the EU, but the freedom of movement guaranteed by the Union deepened and strengthened collaborations across the bloc.

In this sense, British universities have always been out-of-step with their politicians on the role of European institutions. To concede a point to those critical of academics' role in the EU referendum debate, this does indeed amount to a 'political project' (Hayes, 2016), though it is not clear to the present author why that should pose a problem. Universities have, at least since the later nineteenth century, increasingly seen themselves as international institutions with a global outlook, in sharp contradistinction at times from the nationalist politics which may flourish in their host countries. When universities themselves fall prey to such politics — either through assimilation as in the 1930s in Germany or through their potential destruction as in the case of the Central European University in today's Hungary (Economist, 2017) — these are taken to be the exceptions that prove the rule that universities are fundamentally international, and internationalist.

In Britain's case, that has also meant increasingly European. From the ERASMUS student and staff transfer scheme, to participation in Horizon 2020 and its predecessors, to collaboration with European partner institutions, to

Euratom — itself one of the founder institutions of the European project (Bickerton, 2016; Hinson, 2017, p. 4) — British and other European scholars, scientists and students have been drawn ever-closer together.

For the duration of Britain's membership of the European Union, Britain's universities were more enthusiastic about it than much of the general public, a divide brought into sharp focus when those universities were on the losing side in the referendum. As Britain's universities dust themselves down and contemplate their futures in tumultuous domestic and international political landscapes, this book seeks to highlight the prior character of the relationships they had — and have — with the European Union, with a clear agenda to helping those within them shape their own futures. In age of impact, where universities are consistently expected to be 'in step' with wider society, on the question of Europe Britain's universities have not been. It does not betray anything of what follows to note that this author thinks that this is no bad thing. But it does raise questions not merely about where Britain's universities go from here in terms of their international links, but also their place in wider British society — questions that go to the heart of what universities are for, and the agendas they can, and do serve.

This book could not have been completed without incurring a significant number of debts. Of course, none of those listed below are in any way responsible for the views expressed here, but they have each helped the author in their own way. Firstly, my thanks go to Kim Chadwick, education editor at Emerald Publishing, who both suggested the volume and then provided invaluable support throughout the process. In addition, I'd like to record my gratitude to an anonymous reviewer who made several suggestions for improvement. An enormous debt is owed to my research assistant, Hope Kilmurry, whose support was first-class

throughout a necessarily-swift writing period. My former institution, the University of Warwick, was immensely supportive of me during my time as Deputy Head of the School for Cross-Faculty Studies (Liberal Arts) there, both financially through awarding me a grant to undertake work on Brexit and, yet more meaningfully, through the constant intellectual inspiration and collegial friendship given by colleagues. In particular, I should mention my friend, Gavin Schwartz-Leeper and my former head of department, Cathia Jenainati, for whom nothing was ever too much trouble. I would also like to thank my students who put up with a lot of chatter about Brexit throughout the 2016/17 academic year. They have suffered so future students don't have to!

One 'upside' of the Brexit moment and thus the writing of this book has been the collegiality of academic colleagues, many of whom I had never previously met. This include my interviewees — Professor Michael Arthur, Professor Stuart Croft, Professor Gerry McCormac, Professor Chris Husbands, Professor Simon Goldhill, Professor Robin Osborne, Professor Michael Dougan and Dr Rob Davidson all spoke to me on the record about substantive matters to do with Brexit over the past year. A significant number of academics and policymakers spoke to me off the record. I am grateful to them, and they know who they are. I am grateful too to Professor Mary Beard, who brought me into contact with the classicists, and Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve, who corresponded with me on issues of trust and expertise and allowed me early sight of her current work.

Old friends Steven Shakespeare, Gary Anderson and Lena Simic at the Institute of Advanced Futility were sources of wit, insight and enthusiasm in person and online. My friend Robin Brown discussed some of the themes here with me many times and the book undoubtedly benefited from these conversations. Tom Hunt of Newman University was kind