

UK-EU Relations Beyond Brexit

Panel: *The UK In and Out of Europe: Identity, Politics and Cultures*

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Good afternoon everyone, I'm delighted to have been invited to speak with you today on the issue of politics and identity. It is a topic I am incredibly passionate about, and one I would like to see discussed more in the mainstream media. So thank you.

For me, Brexit has shone a light on the role of identity politics in our national discourse. By which I mean, it has laid bare the problems that successive Governments have consistently failed to address – communities left behind, increasing levels of inequality, over-stretched public services, the lack of affordable housing and quality social care, and an utterly disturbing rise in hate crime, to name but a few – and out of that, has united different social groups around a shared perspective: that the political establishment has failed them.

From the work I had been doing since 2009 through my True and Fair Foundation, aimed at supporting small, dynamic grassroots charities, I have seen at first-hand the pathways to deprivation in Britain and met some of the most marginalised people in our society.

What I have learned, is that when people feel cut off and adrift, and drained of hope for a better life, rather than put their faith in a political system that has let them and their families down, they emotionally withdraw. They lose the resolve and the sense of self-belief that enables them to feel a connection with those around them, and the conviction that hope and opportunity really do beckon for them and their loved ones. That's terrible for them, and a tragedy for their families, communities and our country.

Early on in the EU referendum campaign, I started to ask myself whether the vote was really going to be about the European Union at all. As I travelled around the UK, my suspicions were confirmed. I quickly realised people felt hurt. They felt alienated and isolated.

The people I spoke to didn't want to talk about the Single Market or the sovereignty of the ECJ; or hear any explanations about the consequences of staying in or leaving the EU for that matter. They weren't being coaxed towards a decision. They were just following their instinctive feelings that they should do *something*.

Britain is, and has been for some time, divided itself along economic, educational and social lines.

This was summed up in a report I read in August 2017 from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which examined specific data on the roles of poverty, place and individual characteristics driving the Leave vote. The JRF concluded that income, education and regional differences were all encouraging voters to back Leave. Why? In my view, quite simply, Brexit was the catalyst for change that united different marginalised groups together, behind a shared perspective and common purpose: to generate change.

Since the vote, I would argue that politics in the UK has become increasingly characterised and centred around identity politics. The idea that, in order to debate a given topic, we need to group people into distinct boxes – most notably on ideological grounds – in order to understand their rationale and view points, and just as equally, to dismiss them.

The result of this, quite simply, is a distraction.

We have become so intent on dealing with every facet of our country's interests through the prism of ideology, that we have sucked all the energy and attention from discussing, and dealing with, some of the most fundamental issues in our society that need addressing – such as affordable housing, quality education, proper access to reliable health and social care to ensure everyone enjoys the quality of life they deserve and the quality of life that we, as a compassionate society, pride ourselves on delivering.

Identity politics is being continually used as a tool to over-exaggerate societal discord and division when what we need to do – and this is not just about the politicians, it is about the media too – is listen to and act on the basis of them.

Act on them not to pursue your own ideological or political agendas but make no one is invisible and very one is helped.

Thank you.