

Taking back control?

Summary

The UK faces many problems, and a central plank of the leave campaign was to “take back control”. But most of the issues are already under the control of the UK Government, which is responsible for most of the problems we face.

Theresa May says that Brexit means that “we” will take back control of “our laws, our money and our borders”. All three are untrue.

- Our government almost always supports EU laws. Less than half our laws are influenced in any way by the EU, and since 1999 the UK Government has voted against EU laws and regulations only 56 times out of 2592 occasions (2%).
- Brexit has already cost us money. The loss of economic growth since the referendum has already cost the UK three times as much as our annual contribution to the EU budget (£500 compared to £122 per person per year).
- The UK Government has no record of controlling immigration. It has complete control over the half of immigration into the UK which comes from non-EU countries, but non-EU immigration has always been larger than EU migration, and between 2010, when the Coalition government came to power, and 2017 the rise in net migration was exactly the same for EU and non-EU migrants (43,000 in both cases).

What do we want to control, and who do we want to do it?

Few people question that Britain faces major economic and social problems – falling living standards, poor quality jobs and unemployment, declining public services, housing shortages, a health service in trouble, low productivity and industrial decline. However, the responsibility for most of these rests with the UK Government, not the EU. Yet Brexit means giving more control to the Governments which have made the mess.

The Government has claimed that Brexit, and specifically the withdrawal agreement agreed in late 2018, will result in Britain “taking back control of our laws, money and borders”. In reality, “control” means rejecting laws which we have agreed to, spending money we have not got, and controlling our borders in ways which will damage our economy and public services, and our international reputation.

Giving back control to the Government which made the mess

Brexit means that UK governments, which have allowed the economic and social problems to develop, will have the power to make their own laws and regulations independently of the EU.

In making those laws we will not become “independent” because we will still have to consider international treaties, including the rules of the World Trade Organisation and any agreement we make with the EU, and we will have to agree how to deal with legal disputes about interpreting those laws.

Rejecting laws which we agree with

Most UK law is made by Parliament, without any influence from the EU.

Estimates of how many UK laws are influenced by the EU vary from 15-50%. The higher figure includes many very specific and technical regulations, only affecting a specific industry (e.g. “classification of padded waistcoats”, which is important to some clothing manufacturers, but not the average voter). <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/RP10-62#fullreport>

There are hardly any EU laws which the UK Government has opposed. Since 1999, the UK Government has voted against EU laws on only 56 of 2,592 occasions (2%). In some of these cases, the UK Members of the European Parliament voted against the UK Government.

The biggest area of EU legal influence is agriculture (the Common Agricultural Policy accounts for 42% of all EU laws and regulations). The interpretation and application of the rules in the UK is carried out by the UK Government. The CAP accounts for 55% of all UK farm income £4 Billion pa in total. The Government has promised to replace this during a transition period, but has made no guarantees beyond that. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/common-agricultural-policy>

Losing our money

The UK Government agreed the current level of contributions to the EU budget, using a formula agreed between the 28 Member States. Our Government has a full voice in those negotiations, and in the past negotiated a unique “rebate” for the UK, currently worth £5B.

The total cost of Brexit is currently around £30 billion a year, nearly four times our contribution to the EU budget. The costs are in reduced economic growth, the promised continuation of subsidies for agriculture, and the cost of employing additional staff (including civil servants, trade negotiators, and Border Force staff).

To put the various costs in proportion, the table shows:

- the current UK contribution to the EU budget,

- the “Brexit Dividend” proposed by the leave campaign during the referendum
- the costs of reduced economic growth since the referendum,
- the cost of the Government’s promise to continue agricultural subsidies¹.
- The cost in reduced long term economic growth of the most optimistic model of Brexit as assessed by the Treasury (the “Norway/EEA” model). Their other models (a negotiated deal or WTO terms) produce substantially higher costs
- the cost of the NHS (for comparison),

The table shows that, even before Brexit takes place, the effect of the referendum has been to lose more than the promised “Brexit Dividend”.

	Current UK net contribution to the EU budget	“Brexit Dividend” claimed by Leave campaign	Actual cost to date of reduced UK growth since referendum	Agricultural subsidy promised to farmers	Treasury most optimistic forecast	Current NHS spending
Cost pa	£8 Billion	£13 Billion	£26 Billion	£4 Billion	£20 Billion	£145 Billion
Cost per person per year	£122	£217	£500	£61	£1,100	£2,400
Cost per person per week	£2.35	£4.17	£8	£1.17	£21.15	£46
% of Government spending	1%	1.5%	3%	0.5%	3.8%	19%

The Government has also recruited 10,000 extra staff to prepare for Brexit, another 5,000 are being recruited, and there are plans for a further 5,000 if no deal Brexit goes ahead. Some of these are newly recruited, others have been diverted from other work in the civil service, delaying work on other major policy areas. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/dec/13/civil-service-seeks-staff-for-no-deal-brexit-crisis-centre> . The total cost if these are all employed would be around £700,000 a year.

We have promised £39b severance payment to the EU to meet commitments that we signed up to. Some have argued that we could simply refuse to pay, but nations, like people don’t like doing business with people and countries which agree contracts and then break them.

¹ The UK’s net contribution to the EU budget (ONS <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicsectorfinance/articles/th-eukcontributiontotheebudget/2017-10-31>).

Spending on the NHS of <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/37/UK-Government-Expenditure-2016-17.jpg>

Since the referendum the UK’s growth rate has fallen (from the fastest in the EU to the slowest). <https://www.cer.eu/insights/cost-brexit-june-2018>

Not controlling our borders

The UK government is not good at controlling migrant numbers (leaving aside whether it is desirable to do so, on which people disagree).

At present, the EU accounts for only one third of net migration into the UK. The Government imposes strict rules on non-EU migration, but this number is now at its highest for 14 years. Since the Coalition came to power in 2010, and tried to reduce numbers, the net figures for EU and non-EU have both risen by 43,000 a year. <https://www.migrationwatchuk.org/statistics-net-migration-statistics/#create-graph>

“Freedom of movement”, which allows any EU citizen (including UK ones) to move freely across the whole of the EU is not unlimited:

The UK is not in the Schengen accord, which abolished border controls among the states which signed up to it.

The UK still controls its borders, checking the identity of travellers and the purpose of visits from EU countries

The UK Government has chosen not to use the rules which exist. Under EU law, anyone who moves to another member state for work can be required to leave if they have not found work within three months.

The Government’s proposals for a new immigration policy would allow free immigration for people earning over £30,000 a year. This would bar most EU citizens working here in the NHS (nurses, care workers etc), in hotels and catering, and in agriculture and food processing. All these are areas where we already have a shortage of workers.